



Prologue

"Got your basic cleaner in forty-gallon drums." Arthur grunted as he grabbed one and rolled it toward the stainless steel cart. "Bad stuff. Bad." He shook his head and gave the drum another twirl, held it against his substantial thigh and looked at the kid. "This is going to clean up any of the gunk you're gonna find, and you're gonna find some real gunk, kid, 'specially over there in that building that looks like a sausage. That's where you're headed, 'kay?"

"Absolutely. No problem. I can handle anything. You want me to do the windows, too?"

Arthur rolled his eyes. This kid was green as green could be. "You see any windows in that building?"

Arthur grunted again and twirled the drum hand over hand. The drum toppled when he let it go and rumbled as it settled down. Arthur glanced over his shoulder and saw the kid's anxious face. This kid was okay. A real go-getter. Arthur liked to help that kind along 'cause he didn't see many of 'em.

"You know this place gives you help on tuition for school if you want to do more than push a broom." Arthur lifted the top and sniffed the green crystals like a gourmet, dumped some into a small, plastic-lidded jar, and attached it to the side of the kid's metal cart. He opened a smaller can and sniffed again. He jerked his head. "This one's strong. You wear gloves when you get to them sinks, okay?"

"Okay. Sure. Whatever you say. I want to do it right." The black-haired kid took his place behind the cart. It was almost as big as he was. "I know about the tuition. The benefits are real good, too. My sister works here. She started at the bottom, too. Now she's an analyst over in the space division. Tysco's been real good to her. Me, I'm going to do better than that. You just wait and see."

Arthur slapped the kid on the back. "I wouldn't doubt I'll be seeing you in a suit one of these days. Just remember to treat the bottom folk like me good when you get up there on top."

"You bet. You bet, Arthur. I'm going to be the best, but I'll never forget all this."

Arthur gave him one of those old, evil eye warning looks that was filled with admiration. "You ain't there yet, kid. Till you're some big manager, you don't forget all what you gotta do here."

"No problem. I got it straight. Dust the desks and the chairs, empty the wastepaper baskets, don't take anything from the desks or open the drawers. Dust the sills on the windows dividing the manager's offices from the main room. I get a break after two hours. I do the bathrooms next. Then breakfast after the next two hours. Then you're going to take me over to the cafeteria and we're going to dress that down before the office workers get here."

"You got it, my man." Arthur put his hand up. The kid high-fived him and beamed. "See you in four, back here. First breakfast's on me."

They went their separate ways, the kid humming. He dusted with a flourish and waved at someone vacuuming way down a hall; but, for the most part, he was alone and happy to be that way.

Tysco was a wonderful place. While he worked, the kid checked out the drawings on the walls that showed the stuff Tysco manufactured. Stuff that helped feed people, stuff that helped educate people. The stuff that helped kill people he didn't think about. That was in a whole other section, and special people cleaned over there. Besides, it was depressing to think a company this big, a company that would pay him to go to school, a company that had a credit union, could do anything that wasn't good and helpful and excellent. There was the space division, too, and that was exciting. Maybe when he'd paid his dues and learned enough, he'd work in the space division like Verna. He'd make things that reached up to the stars. That would suit him. His ma always said he reached for the stars.

Invigorated by the vision of his future, undaunted by the tasks that lay before him, the kid didn't even stop for his first break. Someday he'd run the whole place and someone would give a speech about how he'd been one hell of a janitor.

Gently he swiped at a wedding picture on the last desk in the row and adjusted it just so. More pictures were stuck to bulletin boards. A big pink bow had been left on a table. The calendars with funny sayings on them were all turned to the next day. The kid smiled at these testaments to the human face of this big, now dark place. People were happy and busy here, and he wanted to be a part of it all.

Stuffing his rag in the back pocket of his bright orange jumpsuit, the kid whistled and headed across the hall to the bathrooms. He couldn't remember which container held the floor cleaner and which was for the toilets and sinks. Making his first executive decision, he poured the crystals from the smaller pail into the sink and turned his face away just in case the stuff blew up or something. It sure smelled like it should. When nothing happened, the kid smiled, replaced the canister and pulled on the huge gloves that were meant for larger hands than his.

Ten minutes later he looked back on a gleaming row of porcelain sentinels.

"Good job." He patted himself on the back, and then pushed open the stall door of the first john.

One, two, three. Only six more to go. The kid was sure no one had ever done such a fine job.

Grinning, he whacked open the fourth door, and that was when his jaw dropped. He stepped back, embarrassed beyond belief. There was a guy on the throne. A guy in a suit on

the john. Oh Lord, a manager doing his business! The kid stumbled back until his butt was up against one of the newly cleaned sinks.

"I'm sorry. It's my first day. I didn't think anybody would be here...." The kid was sweating; his mind was going a mile a minute. "I'll get out of here till you're done. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I really, really am...." He leaned forward as he started to walk out. But when he passed that stall, the one where the guy was doing his business, it dawned on him that it was awful quiet in there. Not like embarrassed quiet. Not like rude quiet. Quiet like scary quiet. "Sir? Hey, sir? Are you all right?"

He touched the door. It swung open again. The kid blinked, then froze. The stall door swung gently back with a mild little clunk and bounced against the locking mechanism. The kid swallowed. The place was way too hot. He was sweating bad. He called once more.

"Sir?"

Mechanically, the kid pushed open the door once more. He didn't bother to push it again. The man in the suit—the man sitting up so weird on the toilet—was dead.

"What kind of craziness is this, to try to fix something that isn't broken? You're not broken, and I'm not going to let anyone—not anyone in Los Angeles or Washington—try to fix you."

The thunderous applause made Carl Walsh feel like a god, but no one would ever have known it by his expression. Humble, a tad surprised, a bit delighted was how he looked. It was the expression of a man who was just saying what everyone else knew. He was one of the gang. He was just hanging out with the rank and file. He was a politician.

Today, the street corner where he planted himself was the Beverly Wilshire and the folks who'd stopped by for a chat were the three hundred members of the court reporters' union. Carl had been briefed on their concerns, tweaked the speech someone else had written for him, then convinced this group that he had what it took to fight Washington now that he'd conquered City Hall. Not that Washington had a damn thing to do with their problems, but it made them feel important to think that.

He called to them through the last spattering of applause.

"I know you feel like you're alone and you don't like being told you're expendable. I understand that, because I'm there every day. I'm responsible for sorting out the many voices in the city the way you are responsible for sorting out the voices in the courtroom. No machine can do what I do, and no machine can do what you do!"

This time he let passion come into his voice and was rewarded with whoops and hollers of ecstasy. He'd pushed all the right buttons without breaking a sweat. The courts were pushing for electronic recording. If that happened, the reporters would be out of a job forever. Court reporters made a lot of money. The judges didn't. There were more reporters than judges. Reporters could give more to his campaign coffers, and there were more of them to cast a vote. So, Carl Walsh talked to the court reporters' union, not the judges association.

"I'm asking for your support now, at the beginning of my campaign, not the end. You're not an afterthought. You, above all, know how important it is to keep the human touch in the business of lawmaking. Make me your senator from California and I'll keep the humanity in politics. Thank you for having me. Thank you for your support."

The woman at the head table was up and shaking his hand. He was looking her in the eye when he pulled her close and turned to face a camera that was suddenly pointed their way. She was in seventh heaven. He couldn't remember her name. Only the most important names, dates, and details were kept in his head; and at this moment, he was scanning the crowd to confirm that no one on the A-list was present. Buoyed by the good words, the pats on the back, Carl was grinning when he was pulled forward.

"Mr. Walsh." Another woman was tugging on his arm. "This is Mr. Pullet. He heads the division."

"Happy to meet you. What a great turnout." Walsh shook the man's hand heartily. "I can't thank you enough."

Carl led the man away, escaping the dais and his hostess in one swift move. With a few well-chosen words, a guy-to-guy slap on the back, Carl lost Mr. Pullet and fell into step with his two bodyguards. Carl could barely remember their names either, even though his life rested in their hands. They would follow him to the ends of the earth. Right now he just wanted them to walk him to the facilities.

On his way, he gave the high sign to two men who were headed his way and picked up his pace. Life was glorious. The spring in his step was meant to propel him into fast-forward; instead, he collided with a man coming out of the restroom. The bodyguards reached for the mayor; the mayor grabbed the man, and everyone righted everyone else.

"Sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going. Stupid of me, really."

"Sure, 't isn't a problem. No problem at all," the other man assured him, and then they looked at each other.

"Gerry O'Doul!" The mayor laughed; and even he, seasoned politician that he was, couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "How are you?"

I thought you were dead.

"Well, well. Look who I've run in to. Mr. Mayor, is it?" Gerry chuckled.

I'm glad you're so predictable.

His gentle voice, the last whisper of an Irish brogue that Carl Walsh's father swore—with grudging admiration—was put on for the jury, hadn't changed. It was the only thing about Gerry O'Doul that hadn't. "What's this I hear about your leaving us for Washington? We'll be calling you senator then, I suppose."

"I sure hope so." Carl smiled broadly. Gerry, still kicking, took Carl back to a time when he'd proudly watched his father and dreamed of the wondrous things he would do when he grew up. Carl sighed. Never in a million years had he dreamed he would do some of the things he had. The business of the city had class in Gerry's time; Gerry still had it. Carl knew he did not.

"Wouldn't your father be proud of you! Why I remember when we used to stand against one another in court—me at the defense table, he the prosecutor. We made fine enemies, we did."

"You think I could ever forget? I was weaned on those stories. We had many a dinner where the name Gerry O'Doul was taken in vain." Carl chuckled. "My dad used to talk about you often before he died."

Gerry leaned closer to Carl. Memories were such a lovely connection, so useful. Gerry was happy to see that he could still connect with the handsome, more practically connected, Carl Walsh.

"Did he, now? So long ago, 'twas. So many are gone now. Things change so quickly, don't they, Carl? One minute you're surrounded by great friends and great enemies; the next, you're alone."

Gerry's eyes misted. Carl Walsh reached out and put his hand on the old man's shoulder. Something flashed. A photo op. Carl thought there was something sad about that. Gerry turned into the flash even though the intent was to capture Carl doing his thing. It went off again, and Gerry didn't miss a beat. He brought back the misties for an encore. "So he talked about me? That's lovely, sure 'tis."

"Absolutely."

The crowd around Carl had diminished, but people still hung on the periphery of his space in an ill-defined circle, waiting for his ear. There was a ringing. A portable phone was handed to Carl. He took it, simultaneously nudging Gerry along with him to the semi-privacy of the anteroom. "Scuse me a second." He listened. Gerry waited patiently, reading the signs of a happy man and noticing that Carl was trying very hard not to appear too happy. He couldn't have chosen a better time to bump into his old friend's son.

"Good news?" Gerry asked the minute the phone was folded.

"The best." Carl nodded, no longer beaming. "First term, city budget was down by three percent." Strangely, Carl didn't look Gerry in the eye. How surprisingly modest he was.

"If that isn't wonderful! That's what it's all about, making a difference."

"I'm going all the way no matter what, Gerry." Carl seemed to be talking to himself, but Gerry wasn't quite ready to be discarded. He put his hand on the younger man's arm.

"Success is powerful, Carl. Just remember, it doesn't always bring what you expect," Gerry warned.

"Then again, sometimes it does," Carl bantered back. He rejuvenated himself with that thought. "Listen, I've got to..." He held his hands toward the men's room.

"Of course. So ungracious of me." Gerry laughed and took a step back.

"Don't rush off. I've got a half hour or so before my next appointment; we'll have some coffee."

"No, no, no. I'm running, too, I'll have you know." Gerry was as proud as punch but kept a tight rein on his excitement "I'm taking on a new associate. O'Doul & Associates is going to be back in business, Carl."

"That's great. Got the old fire lit again, huh?" Carl shook Gerry's hand heartily. "Well, you just let me know what's happening. Maybe I can ride your coattails, get some good press standing next to Gerry O'Doul."

"Be happy to oblige, Mr. Mayor. Happy, indeed. I'd be especially proud if we could be seen shaking hands on a bit of the city business before you're off to conquer Washington."

"Gerry, you never change. My dad always said once you set your sights on something you were dangerously tenacious. He also said you were so smooth when you saw an opening that nobody saw the bite coming."

"Your father was a smart man. I'll ask for only a moment, Mr. Mayor, to try to convince you O'Doul & Associates is as fit as a fiddle and ready to perform. You've got the business. Last I read, it was almost thirty-six police officers alone who were being sued by the citizens of your fiscally well-run city."

Carl Walsh cocked a wry grin, knowing it was useless to try to deflect Gerry's advances. Sidestepping had never worked with his father either.

"Call my office for an appointment. But I'm not promising. Shay, Sylvester & Harrington is still the city's firm of record. I'd hate to get on Richard's wrong side even for you, Gerry."

"I wouldn't either." Gerry's voice lost some of its sparkle; his eyes darkened just a shade. He recovered nicely. "Besides, I'm a little long in the tooth to cause Richard any trouble. He might even find it amusing that I'm mentioning this at all. Crumbs is what I'm looking for, Carl. If you don't ask, you'll never know what you might have had." He raised his hand, the signet ring he'd worn since the day he graduated from law school flashing as they parted company. Gerry shot back a last reminder, "Crumbs is all, Carl."

Gerry walked sprightly out of the Beverly Wilshire alone, a small, content smile on his face. There was change in the wind. A second chance had come his way, and Carl Walsh had a big 2 emblazoned on his forehead. Poor boy didn't have a clue what was about to hit him.

Behind him, Carl was watching. Gerry O'Doul had a spring in his step that a man half his age would envy. Carl allowed himself one small sound that he thought underscored the surprising pleasure he felt at seeing Gerry and being reminded of his father. Actually, it sounded more like a noise to ward off an evil spirit. Carl Walsh felt as if someone had just walked over his grave. The phone rang again. He flipped it open and turned away from Gerry O'Doul's retreating figure.

"Yes?" He listened. "Of course. Of course, I'm thrilled." He listened a bit longer and responded in the way he knew his caller wanted him to. "I can't thank you enough. We're a great team. Nothing can stop us now. The election is in the bag."

Carl flipped the phone closed, thought of the man on the other end, and wished he were more like Gerry O'Doul.

Then Carl Walsh changed his mind and thanked his lucky stars he wasn't.

"Your three o'clock is here, Mr. Jacobsen."

"Show him in."

Richard Jacobsen laid his fine hands on the desk, his eyes darting over his office. Everything was in order: There was good news to tell; the future looked bright; the billing statements were on target, and, of course, the relationship with this particular client could not be paralleled.

The door opened.

Richard rose to greet the handsome young man with dark hair and the look of someone on the way up. Richard had always admired that look. He only wished he had it as a young man. He could have gone so much further, so much quicker. But what was a little time? Richard, a firm believer in fate, knew that it was better this way. The look of success might have made him stand out sooner, but his history, and those he had fatefully encountered in the last few years, put him light-years ahead of his more comely peers. Money, power, prestige. Richard Jacobsen had all this city had to offer; and soon, he would make the country his business. She had always wanted this for him, and he appreciated her sacrifices that had brought him to this point. Luckily, the young man coming through the door wanted quite a bit, too. He was willing to do just about anything to get what he wanted, and that benefited Richard quite nicely. Unfortunately, neither this man, nor the

woman who gave her life to him, understood what drove Richard Jacobsen. His lips tipped up just a tad. Even he, humorless as he was, thought that was quite amusing. They would be so amazed—or would it be appalled—to know what passion drove him.

"So nice to see you. And right on time."

"I'm glad to be here. Have you spoken to our friend?"

"Yes. Everything is on schedule. He's elated."

"Fine. Fine."

The younger man walked straight up to Richard Jacobsen. They met beside his desk, looking at each other the way men will who understand their power over one another. They were both very clear on that.

"I haven't been able to find anything in the office regarding the problem we had this morning. I searched everywhere."

"Not to worry. Everything's been taken care of." The younger man didn't look convinced. Richard put his hand on his shoulders and said sincerely, "I promise. You needn't worry. I needn't worry. There's nothing that can change what's already been done, but you'll never have to think about it again."

"Didn't anyone ever tell you never to say never?" the young man asked peevishly.

"No," Richard answered quietly. In his business he saw lots of people upset over lots of things. He knew what to do. The hand on the man's shoulder was surprisingly tight. Richard slipped it down toward the elbow. He held on a moment, then, with the gentlest of pressure, led the man across the huge office. "You'll want to freshen up."

"Yes, that would be good," the young man said. He didn't look well at all. Richard felt terrible that he hadn't noticed the moment he came in. That had been terribly inconsiderate.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I have it all. Right here." He patted his breast pocket, and Richard thought it was dangerous to carry something so important so casually.

"All right. I'll wait. I've blocked off the afternoon for you."

The young man looked over his shoulder. He smiled for the first time. It was shaky, but a smile nonetheless.

"It won't take that long. It never does."

"There's always a first time," Richard answered quietly as the other man walked toward Richard's private bathroom.

It was only after the door had shut that Richard remembered her picture was still there. He wished he'd remembered to put it away.

Richard was, after all, a very, very private person.

"Dorty & Breyer, how may I help you? Miss Cotter? Yes, I believe she's here. Just a moment, and I'll connect you." She pushed the hold button and zoomed around the reception desk.

"You didn't fool anyone," Cherie called, but Kathleen barely gave her a glance. By the time Kathleen was in her chair, Cherie was kneeling on her credenza, her arms dangling over the top of the carpeted wall that partitioned their cubicles. She tapped Kathleen's head with a pen. "You can't disguise that voice of yours. No way."

Kathleen brushed at her hair. Cherie tapped again when Kathleen pushed the line that was lighted.

"Kathleen Cotter, may I help you?" Her voice was back to normal. Sweet and girlish in pitch, professional in tone. The caller didn't seem to sense her duplicity. Kathleen listened intently, then hung up without another word. Cherie waved a hand, hoping to catch Kathleen's peripheral vision.

"Earth to Kathleen. Who was it? I hope it was a murderer. We need something to perk this place up. I don't have anything fun to do."

"No, it wasn't a new client. It wasn't anyone. I mean it was someone. He wanted to know if I was going to be busy Saturday night."

Cherie tapped Kathleen's head again and laughed, but it didn't sound as if she were happy. "You've been holding out on me. I didn't know you'd started dating again."

"I haven't, and what that caller had in mind wouldn't be called dating anyway. He just saw me on the commercial that's all. Will you stop it." Kathleen brushed away Cherie's pen and stood up so fast the other woman almost lost her balance. By the time Kathleen was standing in the opening of Cherie's cubicle, the other woman was settled on the credenza, her legs dangling, her arms crossed. "You know, you've been getting very strange over the last few months. We're attorneys, Cherie, not children. I really think you should start acting like you take your profession seriously."

"Oh, you mean like pretending you're the secretary then running to your chair and pretending to be a lawyer."

"I am a lawyer." Kathleen raised her chin proudly. "Dorty & Breyer may not be a fancy firm—"

"It's the McDonald's of the law, Kathleen. We're legal bimbos." Cherie grabbed her cigarettes without taking her eyes off Kathleen.

"It's a general law practice and the people who come here need us. They haven't anywhere else to go. You should be proud of that. I know I am."

"Oh, yeah, so proud you're going to leave. You're going to go to Beverly Hills, la-de-da." Cherie lit her cigarette and inhaled deeply, letting her statement slap Kathleen in the face. They'd never been best of friends outside the office, but inside they clung to one another. There was no one else except Jay Dorty, and neither of them would want to cling to him.

"You've been going through my desk." Kathleen's red lips pulled tight. It wasn't anger that flared, but disappointment. She never indulged in the former without the latter, and the former usually crept up on her late at night when there was no one to yell at.

"I wasn't snooping. I was in your desk looking for something and I just happened to see that letter. I mean, wow, what can I say? Beverly Hills and everything. Geez, you start fixing yourself up a little bit here and there, and suddenly you're not good enough for this place. You're even too good for Riverside. You went all the way to the top."

Cherie sniffed. She took another drag, tossed back her head, raised her chin, and exhaled loudly. Kathleen had seen the tough girls in high school act like this. She hated women who acted like they were better than everyone else when everyone else could see they weren't. Funny thing, though, all those everyones were usually intimidated by those girls. That was the funny thing.

Cherie, tired of looking at the cloud of gray smoke above her, swung her head back and let her lids lie low over her eyes. "Are you going? 'Cause if you expect a going-away party, I can't afford it."

It sounded like an accusation, as if Kathleen were contemplating murder.

Kathleen sighed and plopped herself in Cherie's chair, crossed her legs, and considered the other woman. One arm was crooked to hold her cigarette up; the other was crossed over an androgynous chest. Her color-stripped hair was pulled back in a short ponytail. Cherie wouldn't look Kathleen in the eye. She probably thought Kathleen wasn't worth the effort.

"I was going to tell you about it when I decided what to do. Really I was." In truth, Kathleen had thought of sneaking out in the middle of the night just to spare Cherie's feelings. After all, news like this would be like announcing she'd won the lottery just when Cherie showed her the dollar she'd found in the gutter. "I was just waiting for the right time."

"Well, when was the right time going to be? I mean, when were you going to drop this on me? When we had a couple of new clients and this office needed both of us? When my car broke down and I didn't have enough money to repair it and needed a ride in? When my ex called to let me know that he'd found another perfect woman? Get real, Kathleen. This isn't the kind of news I would want to hear, now is it?" Another drag. The chin went higher. "I thought you were my friend."

"I *am* your friend, Cherie." That wasn't exactly true, but Kathleen didn't want to disappoint her. She tried again. "I mean I'm your friend but that kind of thing goes both ways, you know. I could just as easily ask why you're not happy for me? I think a real friend would be excited for the other one, don't you?"

Kathleen uncrossed her legs and considered her black patent pumps, on sale because there wasn't much call for Italian square-toed, high-heeled pumps in Banning, California. Kathleen had bought them just because they were beautiful and different. There was nothing Kathleen loved more than something that looked beautiful, something with color and form, something other than the desert and a sickroom and a mother who could only speak about disappointment and despair. Listening to Cherie, Kathleen remembered so well the words that had made her long for a change of scenery. They were words that had changed things around until Kathleen felt everything not quite right was her fault. Her mother had the knack. Cherie had the knack. Kathleen had had enough.

"I'm thirty. I've never been out of Banning except to go shopping at the outlets near Palm Springs and to go with my parents for a weekend in Las Vegas when I was eleven. I went to law school just down the road in Riverside. I've never been challenged except to see how patient I could be waiting for my time to live. I've tried very hard to be kind to everyone; in fact, I've bent over backward to be kind to everyone.

"Now, given all that, you can see why I didn't rush to you with this incredible news. I'm very patient; I was trying to be kind so I wouldn't hurt your feelings by leaving you here, and I was trying to be cautious because I know I'm ripe for disappointment. I know what this place is and, until this moment, I wasn't sure I could leave it behind. Dorty & Breyer is predictable and safe. I could probably work here until I retired or died. There's a lot to be said for that."

Finally, Kathleen paused for breath. That was more than she'd ever said about herself at one time in all her years. She felt better already.

"On the other hand, I could go to Beverly Hills to work with an uncle I haven't seen in fifteen years, a man whom I admired greatly and who disappeared without a word to me...a man neither of my parents would talk about in all those years. I don't know what I feel about him because I've never been the kind of person to hate. I'm not even sure I carry a grudge. But I do know what I think about his offer to have me work for him. It's an opportunity no one else is going to give me because I come from Banning and I'm thirty and I didn't have enough guts to grab for the brass ring before this. And all you've done by trying to make me feel guilty for wanting to go, and for having the chance to go, is to make my decision for me. I think it's the best thing that happened to me, thank you very much. I'm going to leave here and not look back."

"Well, then, I guess that shows what your home counts for," Cherie said. "Guess that shows what it means to live your whole life in a place that you can just leave it in a snap. Guess that shows what your commitments count for, doesn't it? I mean what are you going to do with your caseload?"

Kathleen was already halfway down the hall. "I wouldn't walk out on the firm."

"You think you're going on an adventure?" Cherie called and Kathleen stopped for a moment. "You're not. Just remember I'm the one that said that. They'll chew you up and spit you out, Kathleen Cotter. I don't care how much you think you've learned from those dumb magazines. They'll see right through you. They will. I don't care if you graduated top of your class. It was still a second-rate school. You won't be able to handle anything bigger than a thirty-dollar divorce. They'll know that the minute you open your mouth."

Cherie laughed until Kathleen turned her head. She didn't bother to look at Cherie; she just stood there, her face in profile. Cherie stopped laughing just in time to hear Kathleen's voice, hurt and suddenly hard.

"At least I'll have tried. And another thing, I won't hate you for trying to make me feel bad about it...so that puts me two steps ahead right there."

There didn't seem to be anything more to say. Much as Kathleen wanted to apologize, to beg forgiveness for putting herself before others the way her mother had always insisted she do, this time she wasn't going to. This was the beginning of a new life—her life—finally. She was going to take a chance and grab this opportunity, unless, of course, she got there and her uncle came to his senses.

By the time she'd reached the only office with a real door, Kathleen considered the notion that Beverly Hills would roll up its sidewalks the minute she appeared, the way Cherie said. Then again, they might love her. Kathleen threw back her shoulders and put her hand on her hip. She was as good as anyone in her situation could be and she worked hard. There was always that. Holding the good thoughts, Kathleen raised her fist and knocked on Jay Dorthy's door.

"Come."

Jay was hunched over his desk, a bad imitation of an imitation heirloom that served its purpose beautifully. It was as big and intimidating as the balding man seated behind it. But now Jay and Breyer and Dorthy were over. She was Kathleen Cotter, soon to be associated with the firm of O'Doul & Associates. She wouldn't be intimidated by anyone. Still, she faltered a bit when Jay slid his eyes up briefly. He never made eye contact.

"Mr. Dorthy?"

"Yes?"

He had been laboring over a letter. He did that a lot, yet she never saw a stack of mail waiting for the postman. Once she had offered to take his correspondence to the post office. He hadn't spoken to her for a week. That's when Cherie had become her friend, ushering her out of the office and explaining what was what. Dorty's name was on the door; they labored for Dorty; it was useless to try to be friends with a man who had invented an imaginary partner. Kathleen had taken her words to heart, yet secretly longed for some sort of connection, professional-to-professional. Now, before she made it, she was going to sever it. Kathleen hated leaving something so important undone.

"Jay." Kathleen cleared her throat and changed her tact. She was headed west, to Beverly Hills; she might as well start acting like someone who would do that. "Jay, I have something to tell you. I'm leaving Dorty & Breyer."

She waited. The pen wasn't scratching anymore. Slowly, Jay Dorty sat back. His eyes slid from the top of her blond head to the middle of her knees. The desk hid her ankles or he would have traveled the whole route. He looked downright surprised; and when he looked her in the eye again, he actually looked sad. Kathleen answered him with an equally sympathetic look, and then remembered what she was about.

"I want you to know how much I've enjoyed working here. Not only did I learn a lot handling all those personal injury cases and divorces, but I was honored when you asked me to be your spokesperson on your cable commercial." She smiled, closed-mouthed. It made her eyes crinkle mischievously. When he didn't smile back, she recomposed herself. "But, Jay, I've got an offer and it's big. I'm going to work in Beverly Hills."

Jay Dorty put his hands over his eyes and bowed his head. Kathleen felt horrible. It had been wrong to come on so strong; her voice softened, but the message was clear. "I'd like to leave as soon as possible, but I'll stay as long as you need me. As long as my clients need me."

Jay dropped his hand. His eyes were red rimmed, but there were no tears. He took a great deep breath through his great broad nose.

"No problem. Take off whenever. Cherie can pick up the slack."

He was scribbling again.

Kathleen smiled wanly.

That hurt.

When she left his office, she had no idea that Jay Dorty was regretting her departure. There was no one, after all, who left a room the way Kathleen Cotter did.

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