

Louise Warner  
1536 South Ingalls  
Lakewood, Colorado 80232  
Phone/FAX (303) 922-1370

Email [louiseinbloom@yahoo.com](mailto:louiseinbloom@yahoo.com)  
Web site <http://louisewriting.tripod.com>

Sonya's Firm

Copyright 2011 Louise Warner All Rights Reserved

Copyright 2011 Louise Warner All Rights Reserved

## CHAPTER

### 1

The paneled doors of Kottrin & Woody Attorneys at Law opened into a wonderland of airborne poison. The urge to brush off wisps that clung to Sonya's face went unheeded. She figured doing that would only drive them into her lips, embed them under her eyelids. She plugged her passages and, to protect her eyes, squinted through a thicket of lashes. Greeting whomever it was that she passed in the hall was impossible. So be it. Talking would fetch her a mouthful.

She slammed into her office, blasted a tissue, and dusted her face. The door was an imperfect defense. Already, the desk had been

stricken, her stack of files a furry column. An impulse to protest caught her, but she was determined to wriggle away. Even if it was illegal for them to rip out the ceilings this way, sniveling publicly about it would only reacquaint her with unemployment. And she needed a job. Desperately.

She eased a folder from the middle of the pile, throwing off a white cloud. Her chair's backward roll munched four channels of debris from the carpet. With the edge of the file, she squeegeed filament from the desk. It fell into a haystack which she leveled with a pass of her foot. A question clawed its way up the back of her neck. What kind of employer would subject his workers to a known danger?

Not everyone is up to date about workplace safety, she counseled the rebel within. Even the Chair of GASS, the Group Against Secondhand Smoking, lacked the latest data. Last month, the group's board asked her to use her legal skills to see if The Law of Work Hazards 1979, hot off the press, helped the cause. It didn't. The jury was still out on secondhand smoke. But in the case of asbestos, the verdict was certain. Experts reported that the stuff, which had burrowed into the lungs of countless miners and festered there until their tissues went wild with cancer, was definitely hazardous.

Would this peril hasten her demise? The collision between her ribs and the top drawer snapped her into attention to the assignment at hand. Forget about asbestos, she remonstrated. Without this job there'll be no money for food, and that's a health risk, too.

She ushered herself over the work cliff labeled "Mortensen, Adolph Re: Blue Lake Country Club". Mr. M, as the client referred to himself, was not a kindred spirit, but his problems were a gold mine for the firm. "I have more thrift stores than the Salvation Army," Mortensen had told her, his voice shooting from a face the size of a hubcap. An unlit cigar bobbed from teeth that were as brown as his face was crimson. "Sweetheart, you're looking at a pioneer in the used clothing business."

The endearment, like the ubiquitous toxins, had of necessity been written off. What did the women's movement know? "There's nothing I can do about being called a sweetie." She spread the file. "Not if I want a job."

Mortensen's bio was skewered to the flap. "He hawked second hand belts and purses from his father's pushcart on the Lower East Side as a child. At fourteen, he convinced his father to sell used shoes. That led to hats, and eventually clothing. The first store was opened when Mr. M was twenty. The items came from estates, individuals and institutions, and were resold."

"Often at twice the price we paid," Mortensen had scrawled beside the press piece. "Sometimes we sell rubbish we've procured for free. Tremendously profitable, to say the least. I have been able to make a living, support a family and enjoy a good life. I get a new Cadillac every three years, and I have a summer house on Fire Island."

Sonya's yawn was interrupted by a knock.

"Come in."

"Hah Sonya, Ah wuz jist wundrin if yu'all were done with the Mortensen fahl."

It was Kathey, frosted hair flying out in frozen wisps, lipstick and eye makeup perfectly framing her classic, if a bit angular, features. She was anything but dowdy, but for some reason she reminded Sonya of the women who peddled crocheted dish towels at church bazaars. Maybe it was the tone of voice. Reality was that Kathey's deferential persona and spiked heels were a perfectly fashioned disguise for a superb intellect.

"Sure Kathey, here. I've got plenty of other work."

"Stressed out as usual, huh?"

"Is there any other way to handle all this?" Sonya gestured at the files awaiting action.

She turned, then as if to steady herself, snatched the doorknob. "Well since you asked ... I went to a great conference last weekend." The plantation dialect swelled like a sponge in water. "It was called Contentment through Self Authentication. You know - CSA? I'm going back next weekend, too."

The acronym rang Sonya's bells. "It's the modern messiah," a man had whooped at an Eating Addicts Anonymous meeting.

Sonya had unloaded her viewpoint on him. "To me, it's just the latest in a long line of seminars attended by people willing to hand over their savings if it means they'll only have to forfeit a single weekend to solve their life problems. Twelve step programs like EAA are a bargain in comparison, and they're available around the clock."

His ecstasy had collapsed into a black hole.

Better to sit on her bias this time. Mental health required long term effort, and not everyone made the time. Anyway Kathey didn't appear to be addicted to food, or to anything else. Better CSA for Kathey than nothing. "And what does this conference cost?"

"One thousand five hundred dollars, but it's worth it!"

A couple of weekends of mass group therapy at a thousand bucks a crack wouldn't have stood a chance of disentangling my skein, Sonya thought. A quick calculation was all she needed. \$1.00 an EAA meeting times two meetings a week, times five years ... \$500.00, maybe more, since kicking the junk food habit had required a meeting every day in the beginning. But that kind of economy would be wasted on Kathey. Her triple lambskin — J.D., M.B.A. and C.P.A. — roped in a high salary. And she derived a hefty percentage from the securities offerings she masterminded.

"I'm not in a position to underwrite that kind of thing," Sonya said. Kathey's bracelet blazed in the afternoon sun. "That's not what they told me at graduation, of course. 'Never before has the field of law held so much promise,' the Chancellor said. 'Never have salaries been so high.' Hah." She dared not pronounce the awful truth, that she was on her fourth employer in the three years since law school, and had never mustered more than \$15,000 a year.

"Pardon? I'm not sure I ..."

"I can't afford it."

"No?" Kathey's ruffled collar caught an earring as she jerked a

side chair. "Oops." She settled in, her red fingertips crackling embers against the tangled gold hoop.

"Can I help with that?"

"I'll get it, sugar." As soon as the fabric sprang free, her focus shifted to the papers she had spread across her lap like an unappetizing breakfast tray.

"Would you close the door please? Asbestos isn't my favorite pollutant."

"Why Sonya, asbestos is on the periodic table." Her eyelashes were the wings of a black moth. "I studied chemistry, of course. It's as natural as can be." She pressed the doorknob, trapping a white tassel in the jam.

"Yeah, but asbestos is a natural hazard."

"Aren't you a health freak ... nuts and fruits and stuff like that?"

"Definitely."

Kathey's painted ovals reaped the snowy strands on her red suede shoes, wafting each into the trash.

Banging outside redirected Sonya's attention. Garbage collectors saluted each waiting can, tipping the contents into a truck completely stuccoed with sludge. Striped aprons undulated with the men's laughter. The muscular frames and young faces of the power lifters moved down the street like a band of high school seniors. These were the football jocks of ten years ago that never gave Sonya, too studious to be popular, a second look. One hunk did an Irish jig off

the curb. I'd be delighted too, she mused, if I was earning as much as you, with health insurance, a generous pension, and who knows what else thrown into the package. "For all my degrees, I'm still buying my own health insurance," Sonya murmured.

"Hmm?"

I am absolutely amazed to have no employment benefits at this firm. "Nothing."

Kathey peeled the last fiber from her shoe.

"Those nails ... How can you type, or do whatever?"

She smiled blankly. "It's difficult. But you have to sacrifice to be beautiful."

Sacrifice? I'm an expert. But people like me who didn't get all A's in law school, who don't have three degrees ... People like me beg for jobs so we can stay current on student loan payments. The dream of happy, prosperous lawyering that lured me through the struggle is in tatters. A muscle in her neck jumped. Her hand massaged the imaginary stab.

Kathey watched with concern. "Ouch."

"Sorry, I thought I was bitten – a bee or a flea or something."

"There ain't nothing like that in here. But I can understand why you'd feel that way." She snickered. "With all the men around, us girls're bound to get bit."

The odd humor cracked Sonya's wall of distrust. "The three years since law school have been the worst years of my life." Was it safe to confide that her search for work after law school had ended,



because she had run out of money, with a paralegal position? Maybe Kathey would have some insight into why her envious coworkers were successful in their campaign to toss her out. "Before law, I was the star. The smartest. The most promising." What a relief it would be to find someone to commiserate with about the humiliation, to help Sonya understand how to make the transition from overqualified grunt to prosperous professional, to give her perspective on why she lacked the ability to distinguish a good job from a zoo. Would Kathey know why the cosmos allowed Sonya, faced with mounting debt, to accept the lowball salary offered by Jerman, Winegraub & Kelvor, work like crazy, and get fired for rebuffing Winegraub's advances? And as a finale to this festering confession, maybe Kathey could reassure her that she wasn't the sludge she thought she was for being nixed from the trashy job at County Traffic Court.

"Law hasn't made me much money. And there've been so many painful experiences." She searched for a sign that she should pour her heart out.

Kathey folded a page over a stuck piece of asbestos. "Oh really?" In a flash of clattering gold, her hand stifled a yawn.

The dam that held Sonya's angst resealed. "It's certainly not what I expected."

"I guess I've always attracted money. It just comes to me. I don't hardly have to do anything."

"Why not?"

She shrugged.

"Your degrees?"

"Money got me those, sugar."

They were on opposite sides of a gulf.

Kathey left the chair. "Well, I'm not sure it's in here but I'll take it anyway."

"What are you looking for?"

"Is there anything from Mr. Woody in this file?"

"No. You know, he's only been here once or twice since I was hired. I thought he and Cotton were partners."

Kathey sighed. "He's on a long vacation. He takes a lot of those."

"It must be nice."

"Get off it and take a vacation if you want one, Sonya. You're such a down in the mouth."

"I didn't used to be ..."

"Look, if you need this back," she interrupted, waving the file, "it'll be on my file cabinet."

"Okay." Kathey flounced out; asbestos drifted in.

CHAPTER

2

The motor in Sonya's head cranked out the master doubt she could not share. So far her long hours of hard work, not to mention her spirited personality, had not pleased her employers. Could she carve herself into someone else, reconstitute her nature?

How can I be confident about this job when I know if I lose it, all possibility of future employment will be obliterated by the fact that I've been fired four times in three years?

The mortal wounds her law career had dealt were swathed in torn bandages. There was nothing to do but work, and have faith that this

time, this employer would reward instead of punish her for being her.

She eyed the stack of files like a pole vaulter gauging the bar. A red sticker on one of the folders signaled that a hearing had been set. She wrested it from the manila tower and tasted the tragic history. Benjamin Vargas had been tripped up by a girl who told him she was sterile and convinced him a condom was as useless during sex with her as wearing a hat. Nine months later, a baby was born. "Please get me out of this mess," he dispatched to the firm after he was slapped with a Petition in Child Support.

Law school dogma erupted from the recesses of her memory. "If a baby is born of sexual intercourse, both parties have to pay," the Family Law professor had warned. "Period."

"If my recollection is right," she murmured, "you're doomed, Mr. Vargas. Getting duped isn't a shield." She doubted the Court would allow as much as a peep from him about the woman's deception. "Irrelevant to the issue of support," the judge would say. Vargas' only hope would be to claim the mother was sleeping with other guys while she was with him. Then he could get the court to mandate a genetic work-up which, if he was extremely lucky, would show he wasn't the daddy. Closet promiscuity was a long shot, but it was something. She dialed.

"Juvenile clerk's office."

"How much for a paternity test?"

"Number of children?"

"One."

"Number of alleged fathers?"

"One."

"\$1,750.00."

The financial statement Vargas filled out for Melvin O'Flannery, the lawyer who had quit the firm before Sonya was hired, indicated his gross salary was \$180/week. A handwritten memo was clipped to the sorry figures. It said, "Retainer for representation came from his parents."

"May I speak to Ben Vargas?"

"You got him."

"This is Sonya at Kottrin & Woody. You sound sleepy."

"I work two jobs. One's a swing shift. But I've gotta get up."

"I have some questions. Are you awake enough?"

"I'm fine."

"Has your income changed since you first came in here? You did a financial statement, but I don't think there was anything in it about two jobs."

"No. This night thing is for my friend. He just opened a bar and he can't pay me nothing yet."

"Well, I need to talk to you about your testimony."

"Okay."

"What do you earn?"

"I take home \$142.40."

"Can you afford a paternity test?"

"How much?"

"One thousand ..."

"You've gotta be kidding. I can't even afford a pair of shoes. I only get by because I have this lousy apartment and I don't eat much."

"I understand."

She imagined his place was like one she was in when she was a paralegal. "I need you to review the release and sign it," she had said to the geezer who opened the door.

He gestured toward a grimy folding chair, its padding a dot-to-dot of cigarette burns. At her refusal to sit, he beckoned her to follow him, but she resisted the desolate kitchen. He thrust the papers toward the tablet shaped refrigerator and swung it open like a flimsy screen door. "Something to drink?"

Except for a can of soda pop and a bottle of beer, the snowy cavern was empty.

Before that, her exposure to the have-nots of the world, like Ben Vargas, had been minimal. "Getting by must be very difficult. That's why this firm wants to help."

"Good."

"What do you do?"

"I work in the mail room at Severa's Office Supplies."

"Earning?"

"\$4.40 an hour."

"Can you get something that pays better?"

"I'm always on the lookout."

"Did you graduate high school?"

"No."

"It'll definitely be a hardship for you to come up with the kind of money you need for a genetic test. But you need to get one. It's your only way out. And I hope you won't have to pay for it."

"Me too."

"You never know what the judge'll do, though, so start thinking about how you can come up with \$1,750.00, not to mention monthly support."

He laughed. "I haven't seen that much money at one time my whole life."

"The hearing is Thursday at 10:30 A.M. Do you have the address?"

"Yeah." Worry sawed his groan. "Am I going to end up supporting a kid I never wanted?"

"It's possible."

"For eighteen years?"

"Twenty-one."

He choked.

Was he crying? "I don't blame you for being upset." A puff of white floated toward the carpet. "If it's any consolation, the mother's her own victim."

"I don't get what you mean." Desperation scraped through the line.

"She figured having your kid would get you to love her but it didn't." His whimper threw mist into her eyes. "See you Thursday."

She rested the receiver. Her words were small comfort, but they were more than he would have bagged from any of her colleagues.

The plight of the young Vargas family, including the baby's mother, was a knife in her heart. This was, she realized soon after law school, what made her different from other lawyers. Most disdained their clients, called them "morons" and "dirtballs" to distance themselves from the pain. Not Sonya. But compassion had not earned her a single bonus point with those cold country clubbers. Was it bad lawyering to sympathize? The concept tensed her neck and upper spine. She sent soothing messages to her body, hoping to break the spasm. Her head curled toward the desk. As soon as the laminate brushed her cheek, the door flew open and she snapped herself up like an army recruit. Ribbons of angel hair fell around Norman C. Kottrin, known to all as Cotton, as he ventured onto her turf.

He sealed the hall behind him. "Can I sit down?"

"Of course." His chair skipped toward the desk. She plugged the moment with words. "What needs to be done with Mr. M?"

"Who?"

"The second hand store guy."

"Oh."

She assured herself that she was imagining the hot rays she felt him send to her chest.

"What about it?"

"Some people blocked his application for membership in the Blue Lake Country Club. It's the fourth time he's been rejected, and he's



really angry. The club is only a mile from his house so it's the one he wants to get into. 'I'm rich but I don't get any respect,' he told me. He thinks the high society types don't like his glass storefronts and low class clientele. He claims they all shop at thrift stores, but they won't admit it." Another tuft lounged on Cotton's styled, side parted, gray at the temples brown hair. "You've got a few pieces of ..."

He whisked them off. "Antitrust."

"Huh? Oh. I've never done an antitrust case ..."

"Look it up."

"Okay. Kathey's got the file, now. Do you know why?"

"Uh-uh."

"I'll get to it as soon as I can," she said.

He flicked a tendril from his sleeve.

"Are you sure it's Antitrust?" His laser eyes chased her gaze, which devoured the desk in a desperate attempt to find something other than him to look at. "I should know. I took it in law school. It was my favorite class."

He nodded.

"I'd better do some research."

"No you don't. He doesn't want to spend money on research. Prepare a complaint and sign it."

Panic nipped at her. Filing a complaint without research risked a court declaration that the claims were groundless, and an order that the opposing side's attorney's fees should be assessed against her

personally. The terror provoked by his suggestion threatened to choke off her air supply when suddenly, a whiff of his aftershave blasted its way to her trachea. Her cough sent fibers flying. If Mortensen got wind of the shortage of groundwork and there was a misstep, he could easily go after her too.

Fear that she was about to lose her job again rearranged her reality. For \$15,000.00 a year he wants me to cast my ethics to the wind. "I can't sign something like that," she said, softly to disguise the bitter apprehension. "Can you?"

He pursed his mouth.

Her stomach was a mass of marbles. The curve of his hands around each other contracted, squeezing his symbol of nuptial devotion, a ring of platinum hearts.

He had seemed so attractive – drowning in dynamism in fact – the day he interviewed her. His lips, once full to her hopeful eyes, were now so pocked with dehydration that they barely covered his teeth. His disregard for standards was an omen that this firm was another hornets' nest.

The truth flashed. He does his misdeeds through employees like me who're desperate to please him. That's why O'Flannery quit. She instructed the turbulence in her face to behave, and met with some success until he brought his chair nearer, sending a second volley of exuberant cologne molecules her way.

Her coughing only charged him with more energy. Like a sunrise, a smile dawned, sanding the edges of his demeanor. His heels burrowed

through the carpet as his mouth readied itself for a different realm of discourse. Like ivory lily pads, his fingers unfurled on gabardine knees. The deep, insistent voice vibrated between her legs. "You are so different from any other woman I've ever met. I came in here to ask you to go to Reno with me. I think we could have a great time. I can explain all this Antitrust stuff to you there." Sheets of lust flapped like flags. "I can help you."

In desperation, she considered the possibility. He thinks I'm special, recognizes my talent. If he falls in love with me, I won't have to worry about my job. Poverty is so tiresome. I'm weary of pinching pennies.

His hand slid to her desk, waiting.

This is the way to travel for free, make more money, become a partner, screamed the new thought, now a rolling whitecap.

It was her stomach that reacted first when her palm sank into the outstretched bog of flesh. The fusion was cold and wet. A spurt of acid began to rend her in half. This is not the way to be released from privation, a voice whispered. I can't repel every career opportunity, she rippled back. His hair will be just as mussed when he wakes up next to me as any other man's. And he'll caress me, say my name, buy me ...

He waved a white curlicue from his temple.

"Do you think all this asbestos is dangerous?" The question fled her lips, which were impotent against the barrage. "I've read that you're not supposed to inhale it. It causes cancer or something."

His eyes bored through her. "... Sara ... Reno ... I want you." Somewhere in the formulation of his non sequitur he had lost her name.

Sonya's chuckle burst like an ocean spray, pasting him to the back of his chair. Her decision rang like church bells. Giving him a piece of myself will make my life worthless. "I'm busy this weekend." The lie rolled out.

"How about next weekend?"

"I'm in my friend's wedding. I'm a bridesmaid in fact." And I need money for the dress and haven't been able to scrape it together because you half-wit sleazes pay me shit for salary.

He rocketed from the chair. "Well, I can see where this is all going. I'd appreciate it if you would start looking for another job."

It was the same dagger as before, stuck into the same laceration, drawing still more blood. In different forms and contexts, by every employer since she'd become a professional, she'd been mangled. This time would probably be fatal. Her face was an open wound. She tried to shield it from his malevolence, aiming it instead at the poison litter on the floor. Her dream of employment was not to be. It had only taken two months for her to get canned for reasons unrelated to her ability. The other jobs had been mere layovers as well.

Staying with an employer had never been a problem until she'd started breathing what lawyers breathed.

The lump in her throat was about to explode. Cry if you need to, she said silently to the throng of tears. It's okay to cry. But the urge slipped away, dammed by shame and pride, as Cotton smashed out

the door. A swarm of asbestos fluttered in protest, wending its way around her office until the bigger pieces sank into the rug, and the lesser fell slowly, carefully, into her lap.

She chugged a tissue from her purse to daub her nose, casting a stray filament into the air which caught a corner of one of her framed honors. She tore the hankie, using the dry half to brush the toxin off the college diploma so 'Sonya Powell, Bachelor of Arts, Summa cum laude' would shine unobstructed. Next to it hung the massive plaque that marked the end of the insufferable law school years. Her wrist found comfort on its sea of cold glass. Distinctions following her name on this honor were conspicuously missing. 'Juris Doctor' was enough, or so she had once believed.

Her fist fastened itself to the New York and New Jersey bar admission plaques, glass sandwiches of gilt and ribbons. At the induction ceremonies, she had been escorted to the stage by radiance; elation greeted her back at her seat. These enthusiastic escorts had been spawned from omnivorous certainty that she was destined for success, that her triumphs would rid her of the foreboding brought on by sadistic law professors, that the years of rigorous study would pay off. On both occasions, when her name was called for licensure, she posited that the humiliations of law school were not indicators of what it would be like to engage in the profession. Promise and celebration will be the hallmarks of my future as a working lawyer. Thank goodness the practice of law will be a world away from merely learning about it, the ingenue reflected.

Now her aspirations were sopped with sorrow. As far as a job in law was concerned, it was all over. She was out of hope. From the desk drawer she wrested the only things she could think of to cushion the next voyage. Strangled feet popped out of pumps, expanding into the softness of her sneakers like a letter carrier in a La-Z-Boy™. The hall was quiet, the construction workers on break. Her head was lead, her stomach upside down as the elevator took her away. Outside, she gulped air, greedy for a clear spring zephyr that might sweep away her pain.

New York masses packed the sidewalks. The street was the only space left. She dodged cars and busses until Third Avenue, where she found a pocket in the stream going south. The crowd split off as she hit the plaza, its stone a bed of sparkling light.

"This brilliant day is the same day as before," she chided her despondency.

"But when will my life be pretty again?" asked the ingenue. "Like it was before law school?" The double doors yielded to a place of greatness and quiet. Alone among the millions, she took the last pew, far enough from the religious symbols for her to ignore their artifice, put her head in her hands, and cried.

## CHAPTER

## 3

Like a sunset on the sidewalk, pinks, yellows and blues glowed past the giant pane. Inside the store, perfume and new vinyl tickled her nostrils. Gowns in plastic pouches made daylight stars. Dresses, grouped by species, shade and color, clung like pennants to walls too laden to support them.

She drank the pastel pageant. She'd have to eat even leaner fare than she was pinching out of her uncertain salary now to afford the pricey frock. Sardines, apples and water would have to be the staples that filled this bridesmaid's tank. Oh well, at least thrift insured

that her weight would continue its decline. Finally she could pull her size off the rack.

"I'm with the Terry Vella wedding. I need a 12 of the blue lace she picked out."

"Same size as my wife." A hook at the end of a rod snagged a hanger and sailed it down. His smile revealed a checkerboard of gold and silver.

"I was a size 16 not that long ago."

"Would've had to special order that." He caressed the patch of sky on the counter like a priest with a vestment. Under glass, jewelry glinted.

"I'll never be able to wear it again after the wedding, I guess." Her melancholy at that, and the fact that she couldn't afford to accessorize, mixed with gloat as she hugged the prize.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"And the dressing room?"

"Far corner."

Trepidation about impending poverty dissolved in the haze of powder blue that tumbled over her head. Princess contours flattered her small breasts; the skirt fluttered against her. Ringlets, wrought by towel drying her waves, were the royal crown.

Debt was a small price to pay for a night in fairyland, she thought, undressing. The garment retreated behind its bag and she waltzed out with it, but the ring of the cash register suspended her rhapsody. Another woman, co-star of a different fete, handed the man



a wad of money and sashayed out the door, dwarfed by her box of textile magic.

"Do you take a charge?" Sonya's dread masqueraded as cheer.

"MasterCard, Visa, American Express."

His hands held the card like a bowl of soup. The smiting of her resistance by smooth landing of the receipt and the way he laid the pen in her grip put her in a universe where grocery money was insignificant compared to the fun of free spending.

She hadn't seen the price tag.

"Your Joan Hancock please."

The act took place under general anesthesia.

He split the slip like race ribbons. Her take was a yellow rectangle, his blue.

Without peeking she stowed the evidence, making it possible, for as long she could stand it, to pretend money didn't matter. Then, arms pinned to the back and folded in three, the dress nestled in tissue paper that spilled from a carrier, tabs slotted and handle attached.

Operation complete.

"Are you a lawyer?"

Her daydream wilted. "How do you know?"

"Terry said something about an attorney ..." His fingers covered hers as the bundle transferred. "You must have worked very hard."

She wriggled away. Don't be jumpy, she admonished, he's probably just trying to be friendly. I should tell him something about myself

— then maybe he'll throw in a bracelet. "I was always considered a brilliant student." So where are my brains when it comes to employment; after all this education, I can't afford a dress. "But since law school, I've been stupid."

"Oh I doubt that."

I've even landed my third attorney job in a row with no future. "Yes ...". The counter kept her from reeling at the insight.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just stressed."

Suddenly he was a kettle of energy. His moustache, a third eyebrow, bucked; lips twitched; eyes blinked. He zeroed in on her, like Cotton had, except with this man she was not tethered like a dog to its owner. Should I encourage him? If he likes me, maybe he'll give me a discount on the dress. Past his face was a crowd of trophies on a shelf. "Are you a soccer player?"

"Bowling. World class bowling."

"I didn't know there were bowling alleys around here."

"We go to Brooklyn." A bronze pedestal forsook its perch; he examined it like one would a cantaloupe. "Would you like to come and watch me some time?" He traced the edges of the engraving, "John Tilillio, Bolero Bowling Bowlathon Winner, 1978."

"Uh ..."

"My wife and I have an open relationship."

"I don't think so." She twirled out the door. "Thanks."

"Wait."

She sprinted into the crowd. Another day, another proposition from a married man. And why had she parted with a bounty of money for a dress when she was a step away from indigence? She read the receipt. \$169.46. No way could she spare that. The sidewalk bit her feet. Eyes drooped against tears. Someone jostled her into a lamppost. She clicked on. You've cried enough. Do something for yourself, and do it fast.

The newsstand was a technicolor garden from which she seized a New York Times. The proprietor ripped the dollar from her, replacing it with change that she spirited, without apology, into her purse. "Thanks!"

Features between the beard and his eyeglasses huddled behind a wall of suspicion.

She fled New York for her lobby. On the rubber plants' leaves someone had written "dust me". Beyond was the courtyard, hidden from all but the roar of traffic. The elevator grunted to three. Past the doors, colors melting their equidistance, she cruised. Every apartment she'd seen was the same – a blank wall facing a fireplace; two windows opposite a refrigerator, stove, kitchen sink and cabinets. The simplicity was oddly satisfying. This was the only upper east side apartment she could afford, and she was lucky to have it.

She retook the enclave, bright and clean. Opening the newspaper darkened the space. Want ads under Attorney and Lawyer showed only one entry, and it made her want to spit on her degree: "Go getter, aggressive, needed for growing law office – Samuel Pingston and

Associates." By now the euphemism was familiar — "aggressive" meant twelve hour days, eight hour Saturdays and half of many Sundays as well.

She hoisted the typewriter and rounded up a sheet of bond. "Dear Sir or Madam." Correction film jimmied behind the platen; "or Madam" disappeared. There were never any women at the helm. "I am an aggressive attorney with skill in litigation. I am interested in a position with your firm. Please review my experience and let me know if you would like to set up an interview." The decision not to update her resume was a snap; adding Kottrin & Woody to her list of employers would do nothing but tarnish her tarnish.

Among the envelopes were business cards for each partner at Jerman, Winegraub & Kelvor. She kept them to use when she sued the group, an increasingly unlikely event because by the time she'd accumulated the money to hire a lawyer, the statute of limitations would be long expired. Too, the articles she'd read painted a grim picture; impugning the word and character of partners in a respected firm was nearly impossible.

Fingers crept over the lettering, Fester S. Winegraub. She could still hear him snivel, buck teeth and eyebrow-less forehead aimed at her. "Would you like to go to lunch with me?"

Resistance packed the back of her neck like cotton batting. Behind her ears and below her throat was a mess of disgust, ingratiation, anger and most definitely, fear. "I can't today, Mr. Winegraub."

The job interview had been an accurate harbinger, but it was her only prospect and she was behind on rent. "At this firm, you'll have the opportunity to learn business law," the goat mumbled, slouching behind a desk that reached end to end of his office. "That's something you can't do on your own."

"Oh yes, I agree."

While smiling at the wall, he maneuvered a side chair around the desk and trapped her. Then, legs pasted to hers, he said, "Of course, the most important part of one's work is the satisfaction one gets from it, don't you think?"

She nodded. The only movement she could manage was a slow twist, which she maintained in an effort to loosen the seal.

"You're full of energy, aren't you?"

Ask him what that has to do with my qualifications. Better not. I want this job. She nodded, her smile a mask.

"Well, we want energy around here." His pink eyes admired her as his hands, flags in the wind, made rounds ever closer to her chest. The studs on his wedding band were too grimy to sparkle under the fluorescents.

"I need this job, Mr. Winegraub. I've been trying to get on as an attorney since law school." Higher Power, please give me this job. "All I've been doing since graduation is paralegal work. I want experience as an attorney."

"Well, Jerman, Winegraub & Kelvor is willing to give you some." The chair bumped back, ripping free the bond.

She took the retreat as a sign of good will. In time, things will work out here, she counseled. They will see what a fine lawyer I am and they'll want me to be happy and they'll treat me with respect.

His head, a flesh light bulb, hovered over his desk, which was alarmingly free of chaos. "Welcome to the firm." A hand extended, dangling like a leaf in autumn.

"Thank you, Sir. I am very pleased to have this opportunity." Whatever the danger signs, it was a banner day. Their palms joined. She had arrived.

CHAPTER

4

Lunch time vacuumed the firm of people. Her suit and pumps were happily relinquished for the other uniform, shorts, sneakers, socks. Around the blocks she went until she was wrapped in sweat.

Winegraub staked a place in reception so he could get an eyeful on re-entry. "Lunch?"

The first refusal had been the easiest. "I can't. You gave me the Sarl Brokerage file and I need to get to work on it."

He acquiesced, but interest was far from dead. "Come to lunch with me today," he said the next time, fixed on her thighs. "You can

work afterwards."

"I can't, Mr. Winegraub. I get home at eight as it is."

"Call me Jerry, and come with me Sonya."

Fangs circled her face. Deference was the only avenue if she wanted to keep the job, so after a few times she capitulated, but only for coffee. The rendezvous went both worse and better than she expected. No matter how quickly she walked, he was faster. Within a building, through a revolving door, across a lobby and into a coffee shop, walls stained by pollution or grease or both, she tagged a chair across from him, shielding herself with silence. Winegraub sucked the air like a newborn does milk, slurping in sync with the tinkling of his name bracelet, which rang with every sliver of wallpaper his fingernail picked off the plaster.

Dunking the tea bag occupied her until, wild with disgust at the noises and the man, she embarked on a binge of chatter on the esthetics of fluorescent versus incandescent lighting, whether New Jersey owns Ellis Island and other subjects in which she had little interest.

"If my wife knew we were having lunch, she'd kill me," he rasped, interrupting her explication of the relative merits of wet versus dry rug cleaning methods. "She'd think we were being naughty, but far from it." He rose to go.

"I've gotta dash too," she said, hoping their failure to communicate had discouraged him.

She was wrong. "I'd like to eat lunch with you today," he said,



cornering her after a run.

She squeegeed her brow. "I'm on a strict diet."

"Which one?"

"Uhh. Kind of a slimming one."

"I'm on that too."

"Yes but I used to eat too much so I have to eat really special food now."

"What kind?"

"Very, very healthy food."

"We can bring lunch to the park. I'll get takeout."

No way, she thought, resolve hardening. Dates with a married guy, not to mention a boss, would lead her down a bad path. Anyway, she was doing an exceptional job and would surely be rewarded for it whether she agreed or not.

After several rebuffs, he said, "You're looking for trouble, Missy," and stormed away.

A note in her inbox instructed her to stop into his office.

"You're not making the firm enough money," he said, lust extinguished. "I can't justify your retention."

"I'm a recent graduate, Mr. Winegraub. Don't forget, I've never been an attorney before. This firm is a great place to work, but I need some time to learn."

He smirked. "Lest there be any misunderstanding, I will repeat. You're fired. If you file unemployment you won't get a good reference, but if you don't you'll get nice comments."

She drowned in bewilderment at this, another smudge on her picture of life as a lawyer.

Again in the job search stream, she stocked up on oatmeal and beans, splurging only on postage for the river of resumes.

A call came for an interview that landed her next job along the professional road to nowhere. Across the Hudson, a town flooded with traffic offenders and prostitutes needed ten more prosecutors. The office was beyond depressing. In this catacomb, a splintered desk was an honor, wood being the only naturally occurring material. Every word, no matter how hushed, found its way around metal and shag into anonymous ears. On average, each attorney, selected from the dregs of law graduates, handled four hundred cases a week. And all but three lawyers in the squad of fifty were male.

The boss, Simon Steadymaster, weighed, in optimistic terms, three hundred pounds. His cigars, turds that farted out the door of his tarred office, were lit one from the next. Soon it was obvious why she was assigned to a desk was so near the smoke fountain. "You have pretty legs," he called as she rattled through files, giving each a thirty second review.

The pollution cursed her with headaches, but she needed a paycheck and so prayed for tolerance. I can handle this. As long as he doesn't ask me to lunch, I'll stay. But her temples throbbed, blowing her once solid concentration full of holes. She peeked into the grotto. "Mr. Steadymaster, I'm allergic to your cigars."

He recoiled and collected. "That's too bad, honey," he said,

sucking the torpedo and regurgitating the result. "Eat shit."

The pink slip came on the cusp of the expiration of civil service probation. The unemployment office rejected her claim for benefits because Steadymaster claimed there were valid grounds for termination: "Sonya Powell is abrasive. She can't deal with the public."

Meanwhile, back at the job search starting line, she answered every ad and called everyone she knew, downplaying her track record as a reject. Credit card advances helped with food; temp jobs paid for rent and student loan payments. She worked as a file clerk at minimum wage for the businesspeople she hoped to one day represent.

The offer from Kottrin & Woody, though modest, moored her craft. And now again, after only a few months in harbor, she was adrift, battered.

Oh well, she thought, licking the envelope as she might her wounds, at least it doesn't matter if I get fired from the next job. There's no difference between four short stays with employers and five of them.

"Samuel Pingston," she said to the envelope, "I hope you want me, because I sure as hell need you."

She collapsed the newspaper, restoring sunlight. Today's dearth of ads meant one application would be all today. It was a blessing and a curse to have to find something else to do. The bayonets from her past backed away as she combined a mail run with an Eating Addicts Anonymous meeting.

Saturday's sidewalks drowned in people. The undertow swept her

past windows of clothes she could not afford. She survived the squall of dead flesh from subway bums and breezed past century-old restaurants, their basement pantries reeking of ferment through cellar doors. A delicatessen, decked in neon, "Eat here - Take out," hustled an endless supply of humans. One patron, clutching his version of the best Sunday breakfast Saturday could conjure, lumbered past, nearly throwing Sonya down. She came to rest atop the steps of an open larder in time to see a ball of hair scurry across the mold. The fortitude New York City living demanded erased sensory memory; she lurched onward.

There was no outward sign of life at the meeting place. Paint fell in chunks from the door and window frames. Newspaper curtains shielded the panes. No matter. The humans inside were mood alterers, and she needed her fix. The smell of coffee swaddled a prayerful silence. Thankful that here no religious icon adorned the walls, she joined her comrades to contemplate the recovery miracle.

As people wandered in, she meditated on the unknown power. How would the force she did not know help her leap the latest hurdle? At four the moderator launched an oration Sonya knew backwards.

"I'm Vera, and I'm an eating addict. Eating Addicts Anonymous is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other so they may solve their common problem. The only requirement for EAA membership is a desire to overcome addiction to eating. There are no membership dues or fees. You may, but are not required, to make a contribution when we pass the basket. EAA demands

no belief in God, but suggests that you be open to the possibility that somewhere inside or outside you, there is a power that works on your behalf, whether it be goodness, love or whatever else you wish to call it. We refer to this power as the Higher Power. It is accessed by asking for guidance, even though, especially at first, we have little understanding of it. Welcome to the EAA journey."

The circle of chairs expanded for late arrivals.

"Are there any newcomers who would like to introduce themselves?"

A girl, hair in perfect braids, clothes out of the L.L. Bean catalog, and smirk thick with pimples said, "I'm Gretel and I'm here because my therapist told me to come."

"Welcome."

"I was hoping to be able to ask you for a topic," Vera continued, "but I'm having such a terrible time that I'm going to suggest that we talk about something I hate to bring up. It's my problem with money. I've been around the program for a very long time, and yet I can't get rid of my money obsession. Sometimes I come to EAA just to escape from shopping."

Concordant nods.

"I can usually afford what I need, but still I'm always worried about having enough. I fall into self pity when I can't get something I want. I can barely go 24 hours without making a purchase I can't afford. This insanity is interfering with my life and it's almost as bad as the food." A tissue veiled her sob. "I guess that's all I have to say on that. The topic is money, but feel free to talk about

whatever else you came here to share. Let's count off into three groups so we each get a turn. I'm one."

She was a sculpture of pain. Numbers assigned, she waved, skin swinging from her biceps. "Twos go into the room downstairs. Threes next door. Ones here." Her arms dove to her lap.

Sonya's fellow Threes had only just melted into wooden folding chairs when a man, coat threadbare, hem of his slacks partly down, cleared his throat. "I'm Robert, an Eating Addict. I've been unemployed eight months. I worked in a factory for sixteen years. Computers replaced me. I'm too old to find another job. We had to sell our house and move in with my parents. My wife was a homemaker for twelve years, and now she works as a cab driver. She hates it. I'm considering getting a job washing dishes."

Gretel suppressed a grimace.

"But through all this, I have not been self destructing. Abstinence is the greatest achievement of my life. I never thought I could go through anything without doughnuts and cookies. I'm becoming a thin man, yet I haven't been thin since I was eighteen, and I'm fifty-eight. I'm facing the demons I used to run away from." Fists drove across his eyelids. "I've never had it before but I'm sure someday, sometime, I'll find peace and comfort in my work, whatever it is." Fingers twisted the air. "Maybe I need to start a business or something." His head rolled back. "Whatever happens, I know I'll be okay."

His dignity survived adversity and mine will too, thought Sonya.

Three years ago, addiction was knocking me against a wall in a hell of gorging and starving. The problems I have now are nothing in comparison.

A face under a bouffant awning came to life. "I'm Della, a compulsive overeater. Spending money is as much of a high as eating for me." She gripped the table. "I'm sick of stuffing myself, but I do it anyway. My husband says I ate less before I started coming to EAA than I do now. I don't know. I'm not sure if meetings are helping me or not."

Gretel's acne puckered around her smile.

"I'm Nina. Unemployed too." Her chair creaked with every gesture, of which there were many. "I use my free time to work on my food problem. I'm learning a lot about myself. I'm poor, but I'm okay for today. My rent is paid for this month. I'm not hungry. And I'm certainly not malnourished." She came off the seat rather than compete with the chair; stilling her hands was out of the question. "And I don't have to spend myself into feeling alive. I used to have that addiction. There's a program called MAA, Money Addicts Anonymous that helps people with that, by the way." She sat.

After the squeak, Sonya said, "It's only been a few years since I crammed myself with food till I couldn't move. EAA reminds me that there is hope as long as I'm not hurting myself."

Yawning, Gretel collected her things.

"I'm far from skinny, but a lot of weight has come off, and I'm adjusting to life without sedating myself with food. It's taking

longer than I thought, and there are times when it seems like EAA makes my problems worse."

Chair folded and stowed, Gretel headed for the door.

"But EAA expresses collective truth, and as long as I come around here, I'm bound to pick up on some of it."

Nina's chair hawed as she rose to catch the girl before she left.

"Recovery requires that I learn some things that I really don't want to know. Fear rushes in where thoughts of food and weight used to block its way. To stay well I have to allow pain to surface. But as long as I'm occupied with reality, I don't struggle with obsession. If I face my feelings, and comfort myself about them, I don't use food as a punishment or a reward."

The truants converged at the coat rack. "We hope you'll try a few meetings before deciding if you like our program or not," said Nina.

"Okay." With a detour around the blockade, Gretel made a quick exit.

"I get caught up in other stuff, now. Money, my work. I've been invited to leave my job," said Sonya.

Nina settled into a different chair.

"But getting canned isn't nearly as bad as the way I chew on my problems for hours on end." Sonya unleashed a sob. "So every day I look for work. That's all I can do." A box of tissues arrived in her lap.

After the meeting, Robert took Sonya's hand. "Sonya, what you



said helped me so much. Thanks."

"Hey, you helped me too." His touch was kind and sure. "If you can survive unemployment with kids and a family, so can I." Thank you, Higher Power, for letting me help another person.

At the closing, Vera flapped at the book before her. "This is one of my favorite passages. It's from Daily Meditations. 'As I go out into the world from this meeting, let me realize that in life, when I think I've lost my way, it may be that I have discovered a new path. And I can't always tell from the trees around me whether I am deep in the forest, or only fifty feet from the edge.' Thanks for coming, everyone."

Sonya's surged like a bulb after a brown out. I'm going to be fine. Awful jobs have come my way for a reason. She couldn't wait for dessert, the first ingredient of which was a phone call.

"Hello," Tilly said.

"Hi Gramma."

"Who is this?"

"Gramma, turn down the television so we can talk."

"Sonya! Hi honey. Hold on a minute."

Sonya could imagine the apartment, its every surface strewn with envelopes torn in half for notes, letters and messages that Tilly jotted whenever the spirit moved her. "Why buy pads if you can use what has already come in the mail?" Tilly had once said, clearing a TV tray of white leaves so she could serve Sonya a dish of sour cream and bananas. Her lipstick crept up creases that pursed with pride. Fat

wooden blinds darkened the paper meadow. "During the depression, we didn't have pretty new stationery to write on all the time. We had to be ingenious."

When the television quieted, Tilly was back. "Are you all right Sonya honey?"

"Yeah. My boss just asked me to leave my job. It's the third time this has happened to me, Gramma."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. If you worked for me I'd keep you. I think you're terrific."

"Gramma, how did you get into business when you did? I can't seem to fit in anywhere."

"Through Grandpa, of course. In those days most women didn't do anything on their own. When he died, I took over. Of course, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to sell hats." She sighed. "It has been tough for you, hasn't it?"

Sonya braced as the arrow of love penetrated deep into its target. "How are you Gramma?"

"How do you think? I'm an old woman. Everything hurts. But tonight I'm going to watch Lawrence Welk, and I'm looking forward to that."

"I love you Gramma."

"I love you mommela."

"Gramma, life is hard."

"You need some money?"

"Yeah but not from you."

"Good 'cause I don't have any."

"I know."

"Life is hard, Gramma."

"I know honey."

Love poured over her. "Bye Gramma."

"Bye honey. Listen, don't worry about jobs. They come and go."

A smile massaged Sonya's face. Gramma always knew the right thing to say. "I love you Gramma."

"I love you, mommela."

I am full, she thought. Chocolate is naught. She voiced a kiss before letting the conversation go.

The room was thick with dusk. Yellow pages beckoned from the closet; she fetched the volume and opened to "Headhunters." A lamp blew off the shadows. She reeled an envelope into the typewriter and tapped her way into the night.