

ONE

Howard Dennis sprinted into the secretarial area, heaved his trial bag in my direction, and gasped, “I could kill her” before hustling toward the kitchen.

Thanks to my recent promotion to first executive assistant at the law firm of Parker, Dennis, a personal injury mill in southern New Jersey, I was unfazed. The thing about first executive assistants is they hear things the same way hairstylists and priests hear things. I’d heard Howard say that before, usually in reference to judges who didn’t recognize his brilliance. He’d never meant it then and I was pretty sure he didn’t mean it now. But I couldn’t be positive, since Howard had changed in the fifteen hours since I’d last seen him. For one thing, he’d started an exercise program. I’d never seen him do anything more strenuous than lifting a legal pad and here he was throwing Hail Marys and doing wind sprints.

“Howard Dennis, don’t you dare walk away from me!” a female voice screeched.

Howard froze with his hand on the kitchen door.

I froze with his trial bag in my lap. “Is that—”

“Who else would it be?” Howard’s face had gone red and his lips were white from holding in all that blue language.

Kay Culverson slashed into the room in full-on hissy fit mode. Kay was six feet of obnoxiousness in a five foot body, notorious in the legal community after being featured in a New Jersey Law Journal article about plaintiffs to avoid, complete with bullet points and commentary by a local psychologist. She was the host of Dishing with Kay, a cable show with local distribution -- local meaning approximately twelve households, with a viewership of half that -- which didn’t stop Kay from seeing herself as bound for a daytime Emmy.

“Why did you let that judge dismiss my case?” she demanded. “That no-talent Ginger Holt assaulted me!”

Howard stood there, panting and sweating and probably wishing he’d been fast enough to escape to his office. “She didn’t assault you, Kay. She tripped over your feet walking off the set.”

I sneaked a peek at her feet. They looked like paddles on her anorexic frame.

“Well, what about the stage manager? He knew my mark was wet. I could have slipped and broken my neck during the open!”

A glimmer of hope lit Howard’s eyes. “But you didn’t,” he said, a little sadly.

Kay propped her spindly hands on her bony hips. “Still,” she said. “I deserve more respect. I am the star of *Dishing*. At least until my agent finds me a project suited to my talent in live theater.” She flung her arms out, knocking the out-box off my desk, which didn’t matter since it was empty anyway. “I think you killed Jenna Sue Bonnie Ann, and I can prove it,” she declared with a dramatic eyelash flutter and the worst Southern accent north of the Mason-Dixon Line. “I had your grits tested by—“

I scrambled across the floor to retrieve my out-box, smothering laughter in my collar while being careful to avoid her paddle-feet.

“That’s enough,” Howard cut in. His cheeks had moved beyond red to purple. He was a color wheel on the verge of cardiac arrest. “You need to accept that I can’t guarantee favorable verdicts.”

Kay’s arms snapped back to her sides. That did it for me. The out-box was on its own. I fled to the safety of the kitchen, where I distanced myself from the fracas by pressing my ear to the

door so I could hear it more clearly. “I’m still waiting for the *first* favorable verdict,” she snapped. “Despite what your wife claims, you’re not a very good lawyer.”

Howard’s s wife was the former Ellen Shaughnessy, sorority sister to Kay Culverson, present yin to Howard’s yang, locking Howard and Kay in an inexorable litigious dance. Also, Howard was terrified of the fallout if Kay decided to use her show to bad-mouth the firm.

“Then I suggest,” Howard suggested, “that you find someone else and we’ll go our separate ways.”

“I would,” Kay said, “except the world is full of bloodsuckers hiding behind a law degree. You’re awful, but at least you’re honest.”

“Fine.” Howard’s voice was thin and tight, much like I’d always envisioned my thighs. I had the thin part down; I was built like a twelve-year-old boy, without the shape. I also had the muscle tone of a jellyfish, despite tens of hours of yoga annually. “I have to get back to work, then.”

“Good. Settled. I’ll expect you for tomorrow’s taping.”

That was another thing. Although my personal brush with the law had brought in so much new business that Howard and Wally were now forced to work eight-hour days, there could never be enough torts in Howard’s trial bag. So when Kay insisted on dragging Howard to her tapings at Butternut Studio to protect her constitutional right to short-sighted ignorance, Howard went to assure himself that his legal prowess glowed sufficiently in the eyes of any potential new clients. Also to add three more billable hours to Kay’s ledger. But he insisted on taking along a witness, and that was usually me.

As bad as it was to have to listen to Kay, it was worse to go to Butternut Studio to do it. The studio was in Pine Run, another of the neighboring nugget-sized towns that effective policing

had passed by, on the second story of a two-story building that had once housed an off-track betting operation on the ground floor until a disgruntled and newly impoverished client set fire to the place. The grounds were well tended and the building did the best it could in a low rent district. It had even once offered valet parking, until the valets had begun stealing the cars, so now visitors and tenants took their chances with self-parking and naive optimism.

“One more thing,” Kay said. “I need your team of investigators to look into my makeup girl, Cindy. I have headaches and fatigue every time she does my face. I think she’s adding something to my foundation.”

I shook my head. Howard didn’t have a team of investigators. He had one paralegal, Donna Warren, who was as intrepid as a baby rabbit. And I’d spent enough time at Butternut to know that Cindy Waterford Hanson was a gem in the box of rocks that was Kay’s staff. She was a single mom who’d been with the show since the start despite the impossible task of making Kay look like a human being.

“Maybe it’s lead poisoning,” Howard said cheerfully. “That can happen when you chew scenery.”

“Aren’t you amusing.” Kay remained stone-faced.

The back door opened and Missy Clark came in, looking perfect as always in a pencil skirt and silk shirt, an oversized bag hanging from an arm already weighted down by a sparkling diamond tennis bracelet. Missy was my opposite number in secretarial skills and in every other way. Where I was clumsy, she was graceful. Where I was clueless, she was savvy. Where I was frizzy, she was smooth.

When she saw me crouching at the door, her expression didn’t change. “Who is it this time?”

I scrunched up my nose. “Kay Culverson.”

She put her bag on the table and joined me. “What’s her problem now?”

“Plain nastiness.” I nodded at the diamond bracelet. “New?”

She smiled. “Braxton gave it to me last night.”

“You two are back together?” Braxton Malloy was a pharmacist Missy had been dating circa the death of one of the firm’s founding partners. For a while I’d suspected her because of that relationship, but then Braxton had faded into Dean and Dean into Shawn and I’d realized Missy didn’t have the attention span to plan a murder.

She shrugged. “He gives me diamond bracelets.”

“And that’s not all,” Kay droned on. “Strange things are happening at the studio.”

“Such as?” Howard’s voice was weary.

“The light was out in my office on Friday. I couldn’t see a thing. Anyone could have been hiding there in the dark.”

“Bulbs burn out, Kay,” Howard said, still weary but with a dash of irritated.

“And there was a little bottle of Clorox left by the coffeemaker. *Clorox*.”

“Cleaning people make mistakes, Kay,” Howard said, again weary and irritated with a pinch of impatient added.

“Well, those kind of mistakes kill people,” Kay snapped. “*I* think it was a threat. Someone is after me. I just know it.”

What *I* knew was that Kay was a Grade A kook. If anyone had been out to kill her, it would have been the viewers, after the first episode of *Dishing with Kay*.

Howard sighed. “Maybe everyone’s in on it together.”

“Don’t be flippant,” Kay snapped. “That would never happen. I don’t tolerate fraternization.”

No kidding.

The back door opened and an armful of files and a laptop crept in followed by the firm's paralegal, Donna Warren. She froze when she spotted us. "She's here?"

I nodded. "Gutting Howard because the judge tossed her case."

"I'm not surprised." Donna tiptoed across the room to join us. We shifted a little to make room. "That case was groundless. There isn't a jury in the state who would award her anything. Just listen to her."

"And look at her feet," Missy said. "Ever see those things? You can't trust a woman with feet that big. She must shop in the men's shoes department."

"What does foot size have to do with anything?" Donna asked.

"Are you kidding?" Missy said. "They say the size of a man's feet is a good indication—"

Janice Iannacone stormed through the door jingling her car keys, which was as close to a good mood as Janice ever got. As the firm's bookkeeper, she managed to keep its cauldron of lawsuits funded and bubbling along through financial chicanery if not easy camaraderie with her coworkers.

She was halfway across the room before she noticed us. "Oh, no."

Donna put a finger to her lips. "Kay Culverson," she whispered.

"Of course it's Kay Culverson. Who else would it be." Janice clomped over to stand behind me, hunched like a gargoyle. We shifted a little more so she could get off the back of my shirt. She stayed there anyway. "Case got dismissed?"

"Donna's not surprised," Missy told her.

"It was groundless," Donna said.

"Get off my shirt," I said.

“That woman is impossible.” Janice shook her head. “I don’t know how Howard puts up with her.”

I rolled my eyes. I’d made that very same comment to Missy about *her*.

“Maybe she just needs a little love,” Donna said.

Missy grinned. “Maybe she just needs a little—“

“Get *off* my *shirt*,” I hissed. Janice slid an inch to the right, which didn’t take her off my shirt but did stamp her cloven footprint on a different area.

“Who’s going to Butternut this week?” Donna asked. She’d had to go once, when I’d contracted the Head Cold from Hell, and she still had flashbacks about it.

I looked at Missy. “You ought to go. You can handle her.”

“I can,” she said. “I choose not to.”

I looked at Janice. “You could go.”

She lifted her nose. “Be serious. A secretary goes with Howard. I’m not a secretary.”

“I’m not a secretary, either,” I told her. “I’m first executive assistant.”

She snorted. “Right.”

The back door opened and Howard’s associate, Wally Randall, came in holding a monogrammed briefcase, wearing a navy suit and red power tie. His hair was slicked back. His sunglasses were in place. He looked like a fifteen year old playing lawyer.

When he saw us standing, squatting and bending across the room, he paused to take off his sunglasses with the snap of his wrist, the way really cool people do on television. He probably practiced that move in the mirror. “I’m sure there’s a good reason that the entire support staff is doing performance art.”

“Kay Culverson,” Missy said.

“And Howard,” Donna added.

“And a cast of thousands,” Janice snapped.

Wally was many things, but stout of heart wasn’t one of them. In a flash, his facade of sophistication fell away to reveal his inner lily liver. You’d think he’d leap to the defense of the firm’s senior partner, but no. He clutched his briefcase to his chest, fidgeted a little, broke out in a sweat, mumbled “I have to – I think I forgot –“ and turned and fled.

We looked at each other.

“Baby,” Donna said.

“Wuss,” Missy said.

“Coward,” Janice said.

“Will you *please* get off my shirt!” I said.