

Inside Room 913

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CHAPTER ONE

“You’re fired.”

Eighteen-year-old Cynthia Holt felt the sting of the words as violently as if they had been forcibly shouted at her across the room. Yet, the man had spoken calmly.

The young girl stared back at him, not defiantly, but with a sure confidence. She wouldn’t argue, wouldn’t try to convince him to reconsider.

Neither would she hang her head. She refused to be intimidated. While she was usually friendly, easy-going and accommodating—she wasn’t weak. And definitely not a pushover.

From the start, losing her job had been a possibility. She had understood that and accepted it. Given the chance, she’d do it again, even knowing the outcome—an outcome that could potentially have detrimental consequences. It likely meant she’d be moving back in with her father.

Not that such a thing was bad, necessarily. As dads go, he was great. Although they’d never been that close, he’d been a loving and caring father and they’d always gotten along. And after her mother had passed away six months ago, they had seemed to bond a little more. So, it wouldn’t be horrible or anything.

It was just the idea. The fact that she’d have to admit to him, and to herself, she hadn’t made it on her own. Of course, he wouldn’t say that, wouldn’t even think it. But she would.

Besides, she wasn’t sure she could handle moving back, living in the house where she had grown up, now that her mother was gone. It would just be too painful; too many memories there.

Her mind quickly returning to the present, and suddenly remembering she’d just been fired, Cynthia nodded slightly. Still looking at her former boss with a steady gaze, she finally answered with a simple, “Okay.”

Moving home wouldn’t be the end of the world, she decided. It might be tough but she could deal with it. Knowing it was only temporary would help. Once she’d found another job and saved up enough money, she could try striking out on her own again.

Still, she’d rather not have to go through with that—although she wasn’t sure why it mattered really. As an antiques dealer, her dad had always spent a good deal of time away from home, so he likely wouldn’t be around a lot. Such was the nature of his business. Currently, he had traveled to the Island of Crete, his first trip out of the country since the funeral for Cynthia’s mother.

Despite the misgivings and her pervasive anxiety, she smiled inwardly, recalling how she’d arrived at this moment. Being fired from her first real job certainly hadn’t been her intent. She’d only wanted to help and had given in to a strange sense of both compassion and curiosity. Mostly curiosity at first, she realized, remembering her first day at work.

She had shown up at Parkview Manor—the local retirement home in downtown Ridgeville—as scheduled, at 7:30 Monday morning. Feeling edgy and nervous about

starting a new job, she walked unhurriedly into the building, stalling, trying to calm the butterflies in her stomach—to no avail. The queasy feeling only intensified as the secretary ushered her into the private office of Mrs. Kirkwood, her new boss.

The secretary, Diera Daniels, suggested she have a seat. “Mrs. Kirkwood, will be with you shortly.”

Then the door closed.

Cynthia sat uncomfortably in a stiff-backed chair, all alone in the inauspicious office waiting patiently for Mrs. Kirkwood to appear. After twenty minutes of sitting there alone, dutifully biding her time, her patience had all but seeped away. At least her agitation was no longer due to the anxiety of starting a new job, she thought.

The young girl took in the scene of the dimly lit room for the umpteenth time, shaking her head in wonder at the lack of modern decor. Other than the brand new computer, which looked wholly out of place on the antique desk, it seemed as if she had taken a giant step back in time when she’d walked through the door.

Dark paneling covered the walls; wide walnut-stained boards provided an old-style trim. The high ceiling had been painted a deep shade of brown, but the cobwebs and generous coating of dust did serve to lighten it up a bit.

A couple of black and white portraits hung precariously on the dull wall above the metal filing cabinets. A man and a woman. There were no nameplates to identify them and Cynthia briefly wondered who they were. Important people at one time, she supposed.

Turning her eyes back to the massive wooden desk, she smiled, seeing an ancient looking typewriter. *Do people still use those?* The heavy-duty metal paper cutter and bulky three-hole punch said the office had not yet fully been introduced to the modern world.

The place reminded her of some old movie set with its shadowy interior and lack of contemporary design. The popping and ticking of the early nineteenth century radiator-style heaters, added an eerie mood to the room. Cynthia stared in wide-eyed wonder; she had never seen those in person. Their constant hit and miss tick-tick noise lent a further ominous quality to the room. At least it was warm, so they must be working.

Checking her phone, she was relieved to see she did have cell service. And the Internet too—although, not Wi-Fi. But judging from the looks of the place, she dared not complain too much.

She was glad the rest of the building, the part where she would be spending her time, had seen some renovations in the last half of a century. While it wasn’t a picture of modern architecture, and could definitely stand some additional remodeling, by no means did it appear as lonely and foreboding as the office where she currently sat.

In contrast, outside, the grounds were almost breathtaking. On the way in, she’d noticed the flowers and other plants, shrubbery and trees, and was impressed by how perfect and pristine it all looked. Whoever was in charge of the landscaping obviously knew their stuff. Someday, when she had nothing better to do, she’d have to take a walk through the gardens.

Hearing muffled voices coming from the reception area, Cynthia stiffened slightly, smoothing her blouse and brushing back her hair with a flip of her hand. This nervousness was all so silly. She had no reason to be uptight. She’d already made it through two interviews and had met Mrs. Kirkwood on both occasions.

While the lady's style was a bit abrasive and she came off as downright rude now and then, Cynthia didn't foresee any problems working for her. Yet, she could feel the air becoming noticeably hotter. She wished now the heaters were not working quite so well.

The door swung open abruptly as the stern looking Mrs. Kirkwood, entered the office. "Good morning," she said in a rather brusque manner. "Are you ready to go to work?"

"I am," Cynthia replied confidently, though at that very moment, she felt anything but confident. She still didn't even know what the job entailed. Not exactly, anyway. The ad, to which she had responded, merely stated, "To aid and assist numerous tenants with various daily needs, and run errands." Such an open-ended and generic description left a lot of room for speculation. She found herself wishing that she had paid more attention when her mother had talked about this place.

Going to work here had been her Mom's idea. Cynthia hadn't been too excited at the prospect. She smiled to herself, thinking of one of the many conversations they'd had on the issue.

"I think you ought to apply at Parkview," her mom said in answer to the daily mention by Cynthia that she really needed a job.

"Mom!" Cynthia protested, rolling her eyes.

"You would like it. I know you would. I worked there for about a year before you were born."

"I know, but maybe I don't want to work where my mother did," Cynthia retorted a little haughtily. "Did you ever think of that?"

"No one says you have to work there forever," her Mom calmly answered. "But, you need something. And it's a great job."

"If it was so great, why did you quit?" Cynthia snapped.

"Well, I was pregnant with you and just decided I should quit to raise my daughter. I think I made a good choice."

Recalling the conversation, Cynthia cringed, feeling bad for having treated her mom disrespectfully.

Such conversations had eventually led to her answering the ad in the paper and applying for the job. Now that her mother had passed on, it seemed only right to honor her memory by giving it a shot. And so, here she was.

Mrs. Kirkwood placed a well-worn leather satchel on a half empty metal shelf and then took a seat behind the desk, facing her newest employee. Cynthia cringed at the piercing gaze of the older woman. Trying not to show her uneasiness, she politely waited for her boss to speak.

After a prolonged moment of silence, Mrs. Kirkwood said, "I suppose you're wondering what you will be doing here at Parkview Manor?"

Cynthia nodded. "Yes."

"Most people ask during the interview," the woman said with a slightly disapproving tone. "You didn't. Why not?"

"I need a job," Cynthia replied simply, relaxing a little now that the ice had been broken.

"I see." Mrs. Kirkwood's tone was gentler now, softer, almost friendly. Nodding, she added, "I'll give you a quick rundown. As you know, we operate a unique facility here at Parkview. It's more than a typical retirement home. A better description would be an

assisted living center that doubles as a hotel. In the old days, Parkview was a sanitarium; strictly a place where patients with mental disorders were kept shielded away from the public, both for their safety as well as the safety of others. Unfortunately, in those days it was also quite common to use those patients as test subjects for a variety of experiments—under the pretense of treatment.”

Cynthia listened attentively. She had heard of such places and their inhumane practices. Most did not have a good reputation. She had no idea that Parkview Manor had once been one of them. She fervently hoped they didn’t still engage in any questionable “treatments.” A lobotomy was not presently high on her bucket list.

Mrs. Kirkwood continued. “When society evolved beyond the use of torture, under the guise of therapy, Parkview Sanitarium, as it was called then, quickly shifted to a more conventional mental-care facility. A few years later, the board of directors decided to step away completely from the mental illness issues and focus instead on assisted living. Eventually, due to economic demands, Parkview Manor became a hybrid, a cross between an assisted living facility and a hotel. I took over as director of operations a few years later.”

Cynthia nodded. Why she needed to know any of this was beyond her but she saw no reason to interrupt.

“These days,” Mrs. Kirkwood was saying, “the lines between hotel guests and those tenants who require assistance quite often tend to blur. Your job will be to meet the needs of all guests. Not medically in any way, we have a nursing staff for that, but daily living needs. You might be sent to pick up something from the store, to mail a package, or maybe help someone find their glasses—whatever they require. Some days, they may want nothing more than a little company, someone to talk with them. Think of the job as a candy striper in a hospital, minus the ridiculous uniform of course.”

Smiling, and feeling more comfortable now, Cynthia said, “So basically, I’m here to be a friend?”

“Yes, exactly,” Mrs. Kirkwood said. “But keep in mind we have over a hundred residents and only one aide on duty at any given time. Don’t become so involved with any one resident that you neglect the needs of others.”

“Whew!” Cynthia breathed. “A hundred residents? That’s a lot of people for just one person to cover.”

Smiling, Mrs. Kirkwood said, “Not all of them require assistance. Some do not even want it. You’ll learn which ones need what. And which ones to avoid.”

Cynthia nodded, thinking that if only half of them needed her help she would still be overwhelmed.

“As we discussed during your interview, you will be working the eight to five shift, Monday through Friday.”

Cynthia nodded. How she lucked out to get those hours, with weekends off, was a mystery. But she would definitely take it!

“Janet, our only full time aide, is leaving us the middle of this week. You’ll be taking her place. The other two aides, Emily and Leah, only want to work part time,” explained Mrs. Kirkwood.

Well that answered that! Cynthia thought. From what she had heard so far, concerning the schedule and what Mrs. Kirkwood had described as her duties, this was shaping up to be a great job. The perfect job!

“Oh, and we do have a fully staffed kitchen,” Mrs. Kirkwood added. “We provide three meals a day if the residents want them. You will be required to deliver the food trays for the lunch meal, and of course, pick them up afterward. The kitchen staff takes care of the other two meals.”

“Okay.”

“If you’re ready then, we’ll get you started. I’ll have you tag along with one of the aides each day, starting with Janet today. Follow her and don’t be afraid to ask a lot of questions. Soon enough, you’ll be on your own.”

“Okay,” Cynthia said again.

“Miss Daniels, my secretary, whom you have already met, has some papers you’ll need to fill out; personal and contact information, tax forms, and some other required documents. She’ll provide you with copies of everything along with an employee handbook—just a few common sense rules for you to look over. You’ll need to read them and then sign and date at the bottom.”

Nodding her head, Cynthia resisted the urge to say “Okay” again.

“One rule that’s not on the list,” Mrs. Kirkwood noted, “but one you need to be aware of, is to never bother the resident in Room 913. You are to have no dealings or conversation with him. And do not, under any circumstances, go into the room. No interaction at all other than to deliver lunch.”

Cynthia was inquisitive by nature. Always had been. So much so that her friends used to call her Nancy Drew. She was always looking to solve a mystery, sometimes where none existed. This time however, it did seem something out of the ordinary was up. Her curiosity was instantly triggered by the strange mention of Room 913.

The special rule was intriguing to say the least. The fact it was unwritten, yet important enough Mrs. Kirkwood felt compelled to make a point of it, made it all the more perplexing. If it mattered that much, why not include the requirement with the rest of the rules?

Her interest piqued, Cynthia knew she would have to find out more about this guy in Room 913. Later. Not wanting to announce her intentions, she knew better than to question Mrs. Kirkwood. There would be others to ask.

“And no discussion about Room 913 or the tenant is allowed among the employees,” Mrs. Kirkwood further warned.

Well, so much for that idea, Cynthia thought. No one ever wanted to make it easy on her.

“When you are finished with the paperwork, have Miss Daniels page Janet and you’ll be all set.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Thank you. And I hope you enjoy your time at Parkview Manor.” The woman’s tone clearly indicated their conference was over.

Standing, Cynthia took another look around the darkened room, and shuddered, glad to be leaving. She tried to not let the dismay show on her face and thought she’d kept it disguised, but Mrs. Kirkwood noticed.

“I keep my office the way it used to be, to remind me of what went on here in the past. Such dreadful acts shouldn’t be forgotten.”

“It does look rather dreadful,” Cynthia agreed.

Stepping out of the poorly lit room, into the secretary's office, the bright lights caused her to squint. Blinking several times, she finally moved away from the doorway toward Miss Daniels' desk. "Mrs. Kirkwood said you had some papers for me to fill out?"

"Yes, right here," the woman answered cheerfully, handing Cynthia a small sheaf of papers. Quickly, she went over each one in the stack, explaining its purpose. "If I went through them too fast or if you have any questions just let me know. You can use the desk over there." She pointed across the room.

"Thanks," Cynthia said, taking the papers and helping herself to a pen from the holder on the secretary's desk.

Half an hour later, finished with the forms, she returned. The secretary quickly made copies of each, handing them to Cynthia. "There you are."

"Thanks, Miss Daniels," Cynthia said, thinking she was beginning to sound like a broken record.

"You can call me Diera," said the secretary. "Miss Daniels sounds so proper, so formal."

Cynthia smiled. "Sorry, I'll try to remember that." Then she frowned slightly, "Oh, I guess I should have said something sooner, but Mrs. Kirkwood also wanted you to page Janet. I'm supposed to tag along with her today."

"Ooh, lucky you," Diera said, rolling her eyes.

Cynthia gave her an anxious look. "Should I be worried?"

"Oh no," the secretary laughed, reaching for the intercom. "Janet's just a little... talkative, that's all."

Relief showed on Cynthia's face. "Talking, I can handle."

"Maybe," the woman said with a mysterious tone, but didn't elaborate.

The two of them chatted pleasantly as they waited for Janet to show up. While Cynthia's inherent curiosity urged her to ask Diera about the strange rules regarding Room 913, she was hesitant to bring it up until she learned whom she could trust.

When Janet showed up, a full ten minutes later, no one had to announce her arrival. "Hi," a bubbly voice gushed from behind.

Cynthia turned to answer but didn't have a chance to say anything. And she quickly discovered that "talkative" was a vast understatement when it came to describing Miss Janet.

"You must be the new girl. Mrs. Kirkwood said I would have someone to train today but I forgot all about it when I got to work and just started doing my thing. Then, when Diera paged me I remembered, but I was all the way up on the eighth floor and the elevators here are so slow."

Stopping her rambling briefly, to catch her breath, Janet turned to the secretary. "So are you going to introduce us?" Then instantly looking back toward Cynthia, she said, "Oh, never mind, we can manage. I'm Janet."

"Um yeah, I figured that out," Cynthia laughed. "My name is Cynthia."

"Oh, what a pretty name. I had a cat named Cynthia once. I didn't name her, my parents did. It was back when I was a baby. They loved the name, they said." She looked puzzled then. "I don't know why they didn't name me Cynthia if they liked the name so much. But then, I guess my cat would have been called Janet, huh? That would have just been weird. So, anyway, are you ready?"

“Sure,” Cynthia said, feeling almost out of breath, just listening.

As Janet took off walking down the hall, the talking didn’t stop. “Okay. I thought I’d start over, like I just got to work, even though I’ve been here an hour, almost two hours actually. That way you can see what I do from start to finish. Actually, we don’t really need to train you. This isn’t a hard job. And it doesn’t require any special skills or anything. You just do whatever the tenants ask. I think Mrs. Kirkwood just likes to have us introduce any new employees to the residents. It’s more for their sake than yours, probably. You know, so they aren’t scared or whatever. Most of them are kind of old.”

Cynthia glanced back at Diera and raised her eyebrows, making a face. The secretary just smiled.

Hurrying down the hall, trying to catch up with her new partner, who was still talking a mile a minute, Cynthia sighed and shook her head. This promised to be quite an interesting, and very long, day.

End of Excerpt