

FRIDAY, JULY 29

“What the hell, Howard?”

Four o'clock on a Friday afternoon. That's when Howard always fired people. In twenty-seven years with Parker Publishing, I'd seen him do it any number of times. And now he was doing it to me.

When Howard calls you into his office late on a Friday, it's never good news, but I'd thought this summons was most likely about some great idea he'd suddenly had over lunch that involved my working all weekend while he was out playing golf. In fact, he was still wearing his lunch on his tie. Red sauce today, on a pink tie his wife Ruth must have picked out for him. Creole? Italian? Howard likes his lunches with Important People, often at famous old restaurants in the French Quarter: a corporate executive, a state senator, someone from the mayor's office. He's still hoping to have lunch with the mayor himself one day.

“Now, Maggie, let's not get all upset about this. You knew this was coming.”

“No, I didn't. What's going on?”

“Things just haven't been going well lately. Advertisers are telling us the magazine is getting stale. Same old same old. It needs a fresh approach.”

“I'm open to making changes. We've made them before. There's certainly no need for this drastic move. Especially since this is the first I've heard of it.”

“Now, you know that's not true. We've talked about this.” He shook his head. “Frankly, you've gotten into a rut, doing the same pieces over and over. New Orleans Now! isn't Now. It's Yesterday. The magazine needs new blood.”

“Code word for somebody younger?”

“Don't try to put words in my mouth. It's time for us to part ways. We both need to seek new horizons.”

“Is that what you call firing your hardest-working employee after twenty-seven years?”

He smiled a fake smile, one I'd seen before when he was delivering bad news. He opened a file folder on his desk, removed a sheet of paper filled with legal-looking text in small type, and slid it across the desk toward me. “We need your signature on this. It's a very fair offer.”

I skimmed it quickly. It was an offer of severance. Not a lot of money considering my years of service, but Howard always was a cheap son of a bitch. The offer was contingent upon my stating that I was resigning of my own will and that I wouldn't seek unemployment compensation or take legal action against the company. Or work for a competitor for the next two years, the term “competitor” not being defined.

“I'll have to have my lawyer take a look at this.” He knew damn good and well I meant George. There have been

many times over the years when it's served me well to be married to a lawyer. And I knew the last thing Howard wanted was for me to show this paper to him.

"Now, Maggie, we don't have to get contentious about this. We've been friends for a long time. Let's be civil and not get into any adversarial positions."

"Adversarial positions? Howard, you're firing me out of the blue after I've worked here for nearly thirty years. I'd say that's pretty adversarial."

"This is a very generous offer. We need your answer now."

I slipped my cell phone out of my pocket. "Okay, I'll call George right now and read it to him."

"Maggie, let's keep the lawyers out of this, shall we?"

"Hell, Howard, your lawyers drew this damn thing up, so don't give me that crap."

"I'm sorry you're reacting this way. I had hoped we could end on a better note." He took the paper back and tucked it into a file. For a moment I wondered if he would forge my signature on the document. I wouldn't put it past him.

He stood up and gestured toward the door. "Kevin will help you clear out your desk. Goodbye, Maggie." He didn't offer to shake my hand. I wouldn't have, anyway. His was probably still sticky with red sauce.

I had the humiliation of having the mail clerk stand over me while I frantically collected my personal belongings in a couple of empty copier paper boxes. For the record, Kevin looked pretty humiliated himself. The whole office was watching. Finally Amy, my assistant editor, came over, not looking me in the eye, and carried one of the boxes out to my car for me.

And that was it: out the front door of the converted shotgun double house that served as the office of Parker Publishing Company, into the blast furnace of a midsummer Friday afternoon in New Orleans. I screeched my red Mustang out of the unpaved parking lot, spraying gravel like buckshot against the side of Howard's black Mercedes, and slammed into a gap between two cars in rush hour traffic on South Carrollton Avenue. My dramatic exit slowed immediately to a bumper-to-bumper crawl, and my last Friday afternoon drive home from work turned out to be pretty much like any other.

It was a bad dream come to life. From the time I started working there, I was always afraid of being fired. The publishing industry in New Orleans is tiny. I'd given up a career in the magazine business in New York City to come home and get married. I didn't regret the choice, but it meant I had few options to do the kind of work I loved. Howard and Ruth own Parker Publishing, and they pretty much do as they please as far as their employees are

concerned. Louisiana is a right-to-work state, and you really don't have a lot of recourse if your boss just decides one day that he wants you gone. Federal employment laws against discrimination for being married or having a baby? There are ways around them. I've seen it.

There's always a lot of screaming coming from his office at the back of the building, the sound of a fist slammed on a desk. Howard's favorite line is "Goddammit, because I said so, that's why!" There is no negotiation. There is no listening on his part, only on yours. I've seen some people fight back. I've seen some storm out the door. I've seen some beg for their jobs. Howard never takes anyone back.

I got home before George did. My usual Friday evening beverage is a glass of Chardonnay, but this wasn't a Chardonnay evening. I dropped two ice cubes in a glass and poured a generous amount of bourbon over them. Tucking the bottle under my arm, I carried my drink and an ice bucket out to the glassed-in sun porch at the back of the house. Setting the bottle and the ice bucket down on the drink cart, I dropped onto the flowered cushion of the chaise with a small grunt.

"I'm not suicidal," I muttered. "I'm homicidal."

I was well into my second drink when George got home. He'd already ditched his jacket and tie and unbuttoned his collar. "Hot as hell out there. Almost makes you wish for a hurricane to come along and cool things off." He took one look at my glass and the bottle on the cart and said, "Rough day?"

"They fired me. Kicked me out the door like a dead cockroach."

"What?"

"Yup. They need fresh blood. Sounds like they want someone younger."

"Oh, Maggie, I'm so sorry."

I burst into tears. "You're a lawyer," I said. "Sue the bastards. Age discrimination. Put the fear of God into them."

"You know I'm not a labor lawyer." George is a founding partner in a firm that practices maritime law. In a port city the size of New Orleans, there's never a shortage of work.

"No, but you must know somebody."

"I'll look into it. But you know that taking legal action is a big step. Word gets around, and maybe nobody else will hire you for fear you'll sue them too. Meanwhile, your case could drag on for years in the courts. You might never see a dime."

George was always being pragmatic, something I both hated and loved about him. I didn't need pragmatic right now. I needed support. "I'm three years from getting my full pension. They've screwed me."

He sighed. "All these years you've complained to me

about how badly they treated you. I'm really sorry this has happened, but I can't say I'm surprised." He went over to the drink cart and picked up the bottle of twelve-year-old single malt Scotch from the lower shelf. It was George's private splurge. He fixed his drink and sat down beside me as I continued to rant.

"How am I going to tell Caroline? I was working there before she was born. She's going to Syracuse because I did. She wants to be a journalist too."

He took a sip of his drink. "She's twenty-one. Full of her own life. This probably won't mean much to her."

"Thanks a lot," I hissed. My career is in shreds. Doesn't anybody care?