

like that.”

“Huh. Weird.” Hackenbush sat smoking, mulling it over.

“Paula Dreisler is the office manager there,” Kodaly said at last. “She asked for you.”

“Oh, is that where she landed,” Hackenbush drawled just a little too coolly. “She hates me for replacing her as the best singer in town.” Then she choked on the smoke she was exhaling.

“Good thing she didn’t call you for your modesty, Hackenbush.”

“She quit.”

“She quit the clubs for a steady money job.”

“She chickened out.”

“Unlike you, she had a kid to support. She didn’t ask to be a widow.”

“Ah, thanks, Anna. I like feeling like a heel.”

“Only when you are one.” Kodaly stubbed out her cigarette and leaned over her desk. “Look, Mabel, take this job. It will accomplish many things for many people. You’ll make me a hero, you’ll rescue the poor devil that’s there now, you’ll help Paula out and fuck knows you need the money. So check your ego for a while and go make eleven bucks an hour.” She leaned back and opened the file again. “And just think, dearie, the sooner you make enough to get your car fixed, the sooner you can return to being the best singer in town. Before somebody usurps your crown.”

“Fuck you, Anna.” Hackenbush laughed for the first time that day. “Where is this place?”

“Catty corner from Otis on Wilshire.”

“Well, at least I can drink at La Fonda on my lunch hour if necessary.” She jotted the address in her notebook. “It’s a law firm? I’m not a legal secretary.”

“You’re not getting paid to be one,” Anna said, shoving time cards at her. “They just need somebody smart, reliable and with nerves of steel. You choose to live in Lincoln Heights, you drive an old, old VW and you fight drunks twice your size; that qualifies you on the nerves of steel part.”

“I live in Lincoln Heights because it’s what I can afford,

same reason I drive old VWs,” Hackenbush said. “I only fight giant drunks under extreme duress.”

Anna waved it off; she’d heard it before. “Speaking of money, do you need some cash for lunch and bus fare?”

“No thanks, I’ve got my share of last night’s tip jar.”

“An advance?”

“Not now, I’ve got a check coming from the club.” Hackenbush looked out at the rain. “Now that I’m a pedestrian, I could use an umbrella.”

Kodaly handed her a stubby black one and wished her luck.

“Well, I can always use that.” Hackenbush waved at her and headed for the eastbound bus. She could start this job just in time for lunch.

On superficial acquaintance it was hard to know whether Hackenbush wore big, black horn-rim glasses to hide the fact there was a pretty lady under there, or to obscure the fact that there wasn’t.

Dreisler was pondering this after Kodaly called to give her the good news. Well, it was good news. Withers Junior’s secretary had quit in a fit of pique and they were short-handed. This meant the office was in chaos. It wasn’t so much Hackenbush’s office skills Dreisler needed, it was the lady’s commanding, no-bullshit bandleader presence to keep the office in line until a new secretary could be hired. The last applicant had fled when Withers Senior chased the temp before this one through the office in his wheelchair. That Dreisler’s nineteen-year-old son, Bobby, had been pushing Withers Senior’s chariot jumped up the office manager’s anxiety, too. This was a good job; she’d even deal with a poseur siren like Hackenbush to keep it.

It was good news, of sorts, when Bobby came home far too late the previous night and told his mother that the Lotus Room was trashed and Hackenbush out of work. Little Bobby’s crush on Hackenbush was worrying for Dreisler, but economic necessity won out and she resigned herself to throwing them together (where she could keep an eye on them). Additionally, it might be sobering for Bobby to see his

goddess under fluorescent lights eight hours a day, and thus Hackenbush's sojourn at Withers and Sons might be doubly beneficial. So, in the swirl of chaos Withers and Sons had become, she was pondering the glasses question for the nth time when the object of her meditation walked in like she owned the joint. "Ah," Paula thought, rising from the reception desk to greet her, "how positively Hackenbush."

"So glad you could make it, Hackenbush."

"So glad it was here to make, Dreisler," Hackenbush drawled. "I thought you were the office manager, not the receptionist."

"I cover where I'm needed, Mabel," Paula said, leading her down the hallway.

Linda Lim practically fell at Hackenbush's feet when the singers strolled up to her desk. Linda was a sculptor and more acclimated to the silence of her studio. The Withers and Sons madhouse had nearly done in her delicate sensibilities over the past week. "Oh, thank God, Mabel," she said, "I nearly died of joy when Anna called and—" She cut herself off seeing Dreisler's stern face.

"Now, now, Linda," Dreisler murmured. "We don't want to frighten Hackenbush, do we?"

"No, of course not," Linda said firmly and equally firmly added that she'd do anything, anything at all, to get out of there so Hackenbush could take over.

Dreisler said nothing and, even though it was only Thursday, paid her for the whole week. It certainly wasn't Linda's fault she couldn't manage these incorrigible guys. Now, if she could have used her stone hammer on them...hm, well, it just didn't bear thinking about.

"Helluvan artist," Hackenbush said, watching Linda bolt for the elevator. "Her last show simply knocked me sideways."

"I saw the catalogue," Dreisler said. "Very impressive."

"So, why am I here, Paula?"

"Temporary Insanity didn't have any out of work lion tamers," Dreisler admitted. "You're as close as I could get."

"How bad is it?"

"Oh, not that bad. This firm makes a pile off its

corporate clients so there's either a lot of work or it's really slow. And when it's slow, like now, the lawyers get bored and, ah, feisty." Dreisler pulled up the client base and codes on the computer. "These guys are a little strange, but generous if you do good work."

"Strange, like, how?"

Hearing her son returning with sandwiches for the office lunch, Dreisler angled her body so he wouldn't see Hackenbush when he went by. That would have to wait; Dreisler wanted to get Hackenbush up to speed as quickly as she could. "Well, Charles Withers Senior has been in a wheelchair since before I came here," she said. "He no longer goes to court, but he's still sharp as a tack."

"And a shark?"

"Pretty much all of them are sharks."

"How many is all and how many do I work for?"

"Three. Withers Senior, Withers Junior and Withers Other, also known as Frank," Dreisler said. "You work for Withers Junior, but help us all out when you've got downtime. It's either feast or famine with Withers Junior. You'll either be dying of boredom or dying of overwork. We pay overtime and if you can calm this joint down, I'll try to get you a bonus."

"You're my hero, Paula," Hackenbush said, offering Dreisler a cigarette, lighting it and lighting one for herself. "What the fuck is a 'Withers Other'?" she asked, picking a piece of tobacco off her tongue.

"Younger, half-brother, to Junior," Dreisler paused to inhale deeply, relishing a decent, straightforward smoke for a change. "A nice guy, does more of the boring law; liaison with the patent lawyers, trademarks, wills, labor board actions, employee lawsuits against our clients—that kind of stuff."

"All law is boring to me so I'll take your word for it," Hackenbush said, rooting around the desk for an ashtray. She came up with nothing but a coffee cup so they flicked their ashes into that.

"Thanks." Dreisler tapped the ash off her smoke and noticed a few more gray hairs in Hackenbush's dark brown

mop that hadn't been there last time she'd seen her. "But I'm sure I have more and time goes by for all of us, even Hackenbush," she thought, mechanically explaining the hours and office guidelines to Hackenbush.

"Doctor Hackenbush."

Tones of awe. Bobby's voice. It was an act of pure will for Dreisler not to throw herself protectively between her cub and the diva. Or at least not claw at Hackenbush's face.

"Hiya, kid, howareya?" Hackenbush recognized him, but damn if she could haul up his name. "What are you doing here? Did the restaurant close, too?"

"Restaurant?" Dreisler asked.

"Yeah, kid buses tables at the Storm Hill restaurant and hangs near the bar on his breaks," Hackenbush said, picking out one of the remaining sandwiches proffered and declining Bobby's offer to run out and get her anything, ANYTHING, she wanted.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's as close as I can get to *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra*." Bobby winked at Hackenbush, who winked back. "I work here days."

"Oh, how nice," Hackenbush said. "Paula Dreisler's a helluva singer. You should dig up some of her old records sometime."

"Oh, I know. She's my mom."

"NO!"

"Yes!"

"NO!"

"Yes. Bobby, you have things to do," Dreisler cut off whatever her son was going to say.

"See you, Bobby," Hackenbush said, filing the name away for future use. "Let's do lunch," she added with a wink. "So that's your son, Paula," she said when he was gone. "He's cute."

"No, he's not," Dreisler snarled.

"Okay, he's not cute." Hackenbush examined her sandwich. "Does lunch usually come with this gig?"

"Not always. Withers Junior finished the prelims on a merger today and was feeling big and generous." Dreisler

handed her a stack of tiny Dictaphone tapes. “You can start with these. I’ll introduce you around the office when everyone’s digesting their lunch and suitably mellow.” She exited on Hackenbush’s polite laugh and went to the mailroom, also known as Bobbyville.

Dreisler approached her son, who was approaching his ham on rye. “Bobby, how long have you been bussing tables at the Storm Hill?”

“Almost a year. Wang the bartender helped me get the job.”

“I see.” Dreisler leaned on the copy machine. “Why?”

“He got tired of tossing me out of the bar,” Bobby said around bites. “He was worried about the liquor license.”

“And all this just to be near Hackenbush.” Dreisler shook her head sadly.

“Be near her singing, ma. Y’ever heard her sing?”

“Once or twice.”

“She lights up the room.”

“Does she?”

“And I’ve been stealing her phrasing. You like the way I play *Stardust* these days; that’s the Hackenbush influence,” he said over his shoulder as he went out to collect files.

There was truth in this, Dreisler had to admit. Over the past year Bobby had gone from a competent guitarist to an inspired one. That this was due to Hackenbush made her wince, but oh well, the Hackenbush ought to be good for something other than annoyance factor.

Transcription from Dictaphone was one of the few typing tasks Hackenbush almost enjoyed. One had to stay focused on the work and the hours simply melted away. And when one gets paid by the hour, one wants them to melt away.

However, there’s no accounting for interruptions. Especially when they hover, expectantly, in the peripheral vision. Only waiters have mastered selective tunnel vision. Poor Hackenbush was merely a musician, used to noticing cues from other musicians and the odd conductor here and there, and had no control over her peripheral vision. She was doomed to look up, and look up she did.