

in a downtown rag house than at Chanel.

It wasn't raining, but she kept Anna's umbrella handy as she bopped over to Griffin and Ave 28, where it did start to rain. She took the RTD into Chinatown where she hopped a DASH bus, for variety, down to Wilshire and then another RTD west to MacArthur Park. It was two fares instead of one and a bus transfer, but seemed a little faster to her. She'd try different routes, just to break up the monotony and so as not to have too much time to think about why she was riding the fucking bus at all. Even if she could afford to rent a car, she'd have to go to Enterprise, who, bless them, took cash deposits in lieu of credit cards, because she didn't have enough steady income for a credit card. So, okay, she had no debt; well, that was good. And if she had a credit card, it could be for emergencies like getting the car fixed or a new uke or all those records she'd been eyeing at Rockaway and a couple of new evening gowns from Saks Fifth Avenue, where you have to pay retail, for casual and country club gigs and... Okay, it was better that she didn't have a credit card; her life would become a continuous emergency if she did. But didn't Saks have a revolving charge account? "Aw, shit!"

"S'matter, miss?" the bus driver asked.

"I spaced my stop," she said, scanning in the rain for the next one.

"Don't tell anybody I did this," he said, opening the front door at a red light. "And don't get hit."

"You're a prince, daddy-o," she said, checking traffic and bolting for the curb. She decided the bus driver's compassion was a good omen, indicating that her luck was changing and it was blue skies and smooth sailing from here on out. It was pouring rain and her shoes were soaked by the time she got to the office. But her luck was changing; fuck her shoes.

She dashed into the building and was even able to get into an elevator just as the doors were closing. And found herself in a small space with a tall, slim, gorgeous male type of man with lovely blue eyes and just enough gray in his dark hair to set him squarely on the dishy side (to Hackenbush, who occasionally admired the distinguished, suit-wearing

types, of course only for aesthetic reasons because, well... looking at men was really the only safe thing to do with them). For his part, he was leisurely looking her over, too. Hackenbush took a deep breath. These situations caused all the stored-up nicotine to rush to her feet so she pulled a mostly dry pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. “Say, buddy, got a light?” she asked.

“No smoking in elevators,” he said, taking the smoke out of her fingers.

“And what are you, dad? The fire patrol?”

“Hardly,” he said, putting the cigarette in his pocket. “However, I am an officer of the court, if you need an identifying characteristic.”

“I’d say there’s other identifying characteristics about you I’d rather remember,” Hackenbush told him as the elevator shuddered to a stop.

“Good-bye, miss,” he said with a smile and a nod.

She watched him walk away and just as the doors were closing, realized he’d gotten off on Withers and Sons’ floor. She pressed a random button, the roof as it turned out, to give her time to think. “An officer of the court,” she mused as the elevator ascended. It was early yet, so she stepped onto the roof landing and lit a cigarette to keep her company.

Hackenbush liked being up in tall buildings. The one she was on now was only six stories but, now that the rain had stopped, gave her a clear view of downtown to the east, Wilshire corridor to the west and parks—Macarthur and Lafayette—on both sides. She liked this height: it felt like she was in the city, not looming over it. It was a big flat roof; bigger than most rehearsal halls and certainly cheaper—like, free.

All this flitted through her mind just behind the largish fact that she’d probably just been sassing her boss in the elevator. She stubbed out her smoke and considered having another, but decided she’d rather get her exit interview over with. Fuck. Out of work and Anna, not to mention Paula, would give her hell. “Men. The bane of my existence. The fuckers are nothing but trouble. Tall ones, short ones, fat ones, old ones, and especially the young ones; nothing but

trouble, trouble, trouble and more trouble,” she snarled at the elevator on its way to fetch her off the roof. A roof she wasn't likely to be allowed to enjoy. “Damn, damn, damn,” she sighed, pressing her floor. Just to add a professional note to her last five minutes on the job, she changed into her black heels. And because it was a slow elevator, danced a few steps she and Shorty had been working on. Or were before the Lotus Room's unfortunate, ah, accident.

“Morning, Paula,” Hackenbush said, passing the office manager.

“You're early, Mabel,” Paula said handing her a cup of coffee.

“Thanks. I'm still figuring out the bus ecology so I gave myself too much time to get here,” Hackenbush said. She shoved her bag under her temp assignment desk, hung her coat on her temp assignment coat-rack and turned on her temp assignment IBM compatible computer.

“Oh, well, you can meet Withers, Junior,” Paula smiled at her. “And lucky,” she lowered her voice, “he turned up this morning in a wonderful mood.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why'd'ya think that is?”

“Don't know, Mabel, he just looked happy when he got out of the elevator,” Paula said.

“Really?”

“Yes.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Here he comes, no swearing, okay?”

Mabel watched her long, tall elevator trouble stroll up the desk, never taking his amused gaze off her.

“Mr. Withers, this is Mabel Hackenbush, and—” Paula began.

“We met in the elevator. I believe this is yours, Ms Hackenbush,” he said, handing her smoke to her.

“You're too kind,” she said, watching him flick open a slim, gold lighter. “But do call me Hackenbush or Mabel, Mr. Withers, I like it so much better.” She put the cigarette in her mouth and let him light it for her.

“I shall, very nice to meet you,” Withers said, pocketing

his lighter, and left the scene.

“And what happened in the elevator, Hackenbush?” Paula asked

“I asked him for a light,” Hackenbush said mysteriously from a cloud of smoke.

“And?”

“And, he said,” she took another drag, “no.”

Whatever Paula was going to say was interrupted by a phone that wouldn't stop ringing. She leaned over Hackenbush's desk to answer it. By the time she was done, Hackenbush was transcribing from the Dictaphone machine with such an innocent, but focused, look on her face; Paula decided she'd wait for a better moment to find out what else happened in the elevator. Or better, she'd have Bobby find out; Hackenbush liked him better anyway.

Withers Junior had a mirror in his office cunningly angled so he could keep an unobtrusive eye on his secretary. Usually he had better things to do and ignored whoever was out there, but Hackenbush was more interesting than anything on his desk at the moment. She was so focused on what she was doing, she seemed almost to be one with the Dictaphone. She also seemed to be able to smoke and drink coffee with hardly a ripple in her typing rhythm. And what posture; it would put a Sergeant-Major to shame. It had been her stance in the elevator that he remembered now; loosely coiled, but ready to spring nevertheless. The baggy coat had hidden a rather dowdy figure and the big black glasses had obscured a pair of bland brown eyes. He'd gotten a better look at those when he lit her cigarette. But none of that had much meaning when she moved, or even when she was still and about to move.

“I see you have another admirer here, Hackenbush,” Withers Junior thought, watching Bobby Dreisler stop by her desk with coffee, a pack of cigarettes, a selection of donuts, more coffee, and then, apparently, just to worship her. Must have seemed that way to Paula, too, who chased him off every time she caught him there. Hackenbush kept her eyes to herself when Paula was on the rampage, but when they were alone, she smiled pleasantly at Bobby and listened, well,

vivaciously, or so it seemed to Charles, who could not recall anyone listening to him like that lately (if ever). Curious beyond male endurance, Charles glided out of this office, past Hackenbush (who did not look up) and into the mailroom, where Bobby was diligently working away. “So, Bobby, how goes it here in the, ah, mailroom?”

Bobby could not really remember Withers Junior ever actually coming all the way into the mailroom and yet here he was leaning on the photocopier, seemingly parked there. It was a singular event, but Bobby, ever the aspiring hipster, did not lose his cool. “Very well, thank you, Mr. Withers,” he said. He was well brought up, too.

“Just ‘well’? We have such interesting people working here now,” Charles said.

“Have we?”

“Yes, the new temp, what’s her name?”

“Dr. Hackenbush?”

“She’s a doctor? What kind of doc—”

“It’s a joke, Charles,” Frank said, joining the duo. “She’s a musician. ‘Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra’.”

Bobby could count on one hand the times Withers Other had been in the mailroom. This was turning into an interesting morning. “She’s a great musician,” Bobby said. “And an inspiration to everyone.”

“She is?” Charles asked, looking at Frank for clues as to why this might be so.

“Yes! She’s astonishing and magical and lumen—”

“And both you Mr. Withers have calls waiting on your phones,” Paula cut Bobby off mid-word from the doorway. “In your offices.”

Withers Junior handed Bobby three twenties and told him to find out what everyone wanted for lunch. On his way back to his office, he noticed that Bobby started with Hackenbush’s lunch order.

Hackenbush got off the bus at North Broadway and Johnston and just slumped for a moment. She wasn’t the only one; several other mass transit riders were slumping along with her, waiting for the light to change. It had been a hellish bus

ride—traffic, gridlock, traffic accidents, idiots in cars, idiots on foot—and she'd had to stand. Actually, what she didn't have to do was give her seat to an old woman, but, since she was betting on being an old woman someday, she figured she better store up all the good karma she could. "But I'd rather be dead than be on the bus at that age," she sighed.

Tired as she was, hunger got the better of her and she stopped for a half a chicken at Chapalita. Chapalita had ruined her for all other roasted chicken. Unfortunately they were sold out so she settled for two lingua tacos, one of which she ate on the way home. The bonus sandwich Withers Junior sprang for at lunch had been nice, but lunch was long ago and far away.

"Yes, lunch," she thought, walking home, eating her taco. Lunch had been the last normal moment of the day, which had descended into muted chaos with the arrival of Charles Withers, Senior, Esq. in his motorized wheelchair. His first action was to bump Hackenbush, who was innocently walking across the lobby, onto his lap and carry her off to his office.

Since she was on his lap she had a good, up-close look at him. He was older than God's wet nurse and had more wrinkles than anyone she'd ever seen alive. It was impressive, at least Mabel thought so, as she introduced herself.

"Ah, the new temp," he hissed, going around a corner on two wheels. "Fresh meat."

"Ah, too bad you've missed lunch, mister," she said. "That was all the fresh meat there was here."

He didn't laugh and wheeled her into his office, where he didn't protest when she got off his lap. "You're older than the last one," he growled, motoring up to his desk.

"Not really. I'm sure I'm only, oh, a fifth of your age."

"That would make you sixteen," he said, looking her over. "And if so, mam'selle, you're not holding up very well."

"Touché, dad," she thought, but merely smiled and said something about getting back to work. She was glad when he waved her off as he struck her as an angry, old guy and she