
Old School Ties
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CHAPTER ONE

DUSK HAD come early to Archer’s Junction, for it had been drizzling for most of the day. The old-style street lights that lit the business district were winking on, one by one, a couple of hours earlier than was normal for mid-April. Business had been slow because of the cold, unpleasant rain; the shop that specialized in Depression glass had already closed, as had the antique-lace store and the wrought-iron business.

Inside Cookys—in the narrow little shopfront between Depression glass and antique lace, and across the High Street from wrought iron—the lights were bright, and the aroma of raisins and chocolate and nuts still hung heavily in the air. But the odor was deceptive; Cookys smelled that way even in the early morning, before the first oven was turned on or the first batch of sweet dough was mixed.

Heather DeMarco picked up a small waxed paper bag, opened it with a professional flick of the wrist, and sacked up a couple of double-chocolate-chip cookies for a late customer. At the cash register, Katherine DeMarco made change.

Heather saw her yawn furtively. “Mother,” she said firmly, “go home. I’ll take care of closing up tonight.”

Katherine’s second yawn wasn’t so easily concealed. “I’m all right, Heather. It’s just the weather, I think. When it rains like this all I want to do is crawl into my cocoon and sleep.” But she didn’t hesitate to trade her dark brown apron and cap for raincoat and umbrella, Heather noticed.

After Katherine was gone, Heather began to clear the cases, moving the leftover cookies down to the end cabinet so she could clean the rest. It was not her favorite part of the job, but after two years at Cookys, she could do it with her eyes closed.

Across the glass counter, a teenage boy—one of several who still lounged around a small table—looked up hopefully “As long as you have to throw all those leftovers away, Heather,” he began, “you might as well throw them to us.”

She laughed. “You know the rules, Rod. Buy six and get one free.”

He looked downcast. “Not even a special deal for me?”

“Stop on your way to school tomorrow and I’ll make you a price. But they aren’t day-

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old till tomorrow, so stop trying to talk yourself into a bargain now.”

He grinned. “It was worth a try,” he confided as he bought the last three oatmeal-pecan cookies in the case. “Sometimes your mother will make a deal.”

Heather sacked the cookies up for him and said, “My mother is an easy mark. Now get out of here, all of you. It’s quitting time. Besides, this is a business, not a hangout for the football team.”

“My feelings are hurt,” Rod complained. “I’m the least troublesome customer you have. My mother is actually grateful that you ruin my appetite with cookies every day before I come home for dinner.” He pulled the door open. “But since we’re obviously not wanted here, come on, guys. Let’s go up to the school and toss a basketball around.”

Heather frowned. *It’s none of my business*, she reminded herself. Nevertheless, she called, “Wait a minute, guys. You don’t mean the old school, do you?”

Rod looked a bit sheepish, as if he wished he hadn’t said it loud enough for her to hear. “Yeah.”

Heather said carefully, “I thought it was supposed to be locked up tight.”

Rod sounded a bit defensive. “We didn’t break the padlocks off the door, Heather, somebody else did. But the fact is the locks are gone again, so the building is standing there wide open. It’s the only decent gym floor in this whole end of town, and it just sits there. What’s so wrong with playing on it?”

“Because it’s not a public school anymore. It’s private property, Rod. And you’re trespassing when you go in there without permission.”

“So who’s going to notice? Nobody ever pays any attention to it except the hoods who break off the locks. Why should they be the only ones who ever enjoy it?”

“That’s beside the point, guys. It doesn’t belong to you.”

Rod was matter-of-fact. “If what’s-his-name gave a damn about the building, he’d do something with it, wouldn’t he?”

Heather bit her lip, hard. Rod was one bright young man, she had to grant him that. His line of reasoning mirrored her own conviction, and it was difficult to argue against herself.

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Rod pressed his point. “It stands to reason that he’d turn it into something useful, or sell it to someone who would. Or he’d at least lock it up securely till he gets around to it. Those cheap padlocks...” He made a face. “My baby brother could break them off in two minutes flat. It’s like the guy doesn’t care who gets in.”

“Rod, that doesn’t excuse trespassing.”

“Face it, Heather, he’s never going to do anything with that place. It’ll sit there and rot and one day the roof will fall in. So what’s so awful about someone getting some good out of it in the meantime?”

It wasn’t that she didn’t have an answer, but the boys were gone by the time Heather found her tongue. She sighed unhappily and finished cleaning the display cases while she thought about her options. Should she call the local police station? The boys were clearly wrong, but surely turning them over to the law would be excessive. They’d no doubt be blamed for the break-in and end up with criminal records over a simple basketball skirmish, while the real villains escaped altogether.

And she wasn’t foolish enough to believe that would be the end of it. It had happened before, after all. Someone in the neighborhood would complain to the corporation that owned the property, and the building would be secured for a while. Then someone would break in once more, and the whole cycle started over. She wasn’t going to change that now by simply calling in the police. The only thing that would change was her relationship with the boys; if she reported them, she’d never have another ounce of influence over any of them.

I’ll talk to them tomorrow, she decided. And I’ll tell them that if there’s one more incident, I’ll report them, no matter what.

She’d have to, because if one of them were to get hurt up there—

The thought gave her an uneasy ripple in the pit of her stomach. What if one of them got hurt tonight, and she could have stopped it?

They may have been going up there every day for weeks, Heather, she reminded herself. The fact that she’d just now found out about it didn’t mean it had just started.

She tossed her chocolate-stained apron into the laundry hamper, brushed out the stream of mahogany-brown hair that had been tucked up under her cap all day, and started up the High Street toward her apartment. Just a block beyond the retail district, the old

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school loomed up out of the evening dimness, off to her left on a gently sloping hillside. She stopped to look up at it with a dispirited sigh.

It was a heavy building, sitting squarely in the center of an entire city block. The sloping lawn between school and street had once been kept manicured, but now it was overgrown with weeds. The school's lower floors were native fieldstone, huge solid dusty-beige blocks, while the upper stories were built of oversize dark red paving brick. The windows and the entrance and the irregular roof line showed Gothic influence, with pointed arches and lacy stone trim that relieved the weight of the facade. Above it all a tower soared two stories higher yet.

In daylight, one could still see the beauty that remained in the brick and stone that had been so carefully crafted a century ago. But in the dim light of evening the old building merely looked tired and dilapidated and decrepit—like something from a bad gothic movie. All that was needed to complete the illusion, she thought, was a mist to cling around the lower floors, and a swarm of bats circling the high chimneys and the irregular peaks of the roof.

It looked dead, she thought, this old building that had served students for ninety years and then been discarded to stand empty for another five. Most of the glass panes had been either broken out or covered with plywood years ago. The few windows that still remained intact stared blankly out across the valley, and a couple of nearby streetlights reflected weakly off the dirty glass.

Those lights, dim as they were, must be how the boys saw to play basketball inside the wing that held the gym; she hadn't even wondered till now how they managed that in the dark old building, with the power shut off long ago. What a waste it was, she thought, to take a perfectly sound building and let it dwindle into a useless hulk!

"It's a sin," she said vehemently.

She wasn't aware that she had said it aloud until a man spoke behind her. "That's for certain."

Heather wheeled around to see an old man stooping over a small bush at the corner of the brownstone apartment house next door to the school. "Oh.. .hello, Mr. Maxner. Isn't it still a little cold to be planting things?"

"I'm not planting, Heather, just checking on the progress of what I put in last year.

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The forsythia is just starting to bloom, you know.”

Heather glanced at the hints of yellow on the bush, and then at the sky. “It looks as if it will get another good drink before the night’s out. Look at those clouds stacking up behind the school.”

The old man stood up slowly and looked up at the building’s silhouette, fading now against the darkening sky. “I got my education there, you know, and it’s still a lot more solid than the so-called modern wonder they built to replace it.”

Heather sighed. “I know. I was down at the new school just last week. Five years old and it’s already got cracks in the walls, and meanwhile this one just sits here, useless.” With determination, she turned her back on it. “Well, it doesn’t do any good to fret about it, does it? Dennison Incorporated doesn’t seem inclined to put it to any use.”

Mr. Maxner shook his head. “Is that who bought it? Can’t think why Cole Dennison wanted it in the first place, when the school board declared it excess property, if all he was going to do was let it sit there.”

From the top of the hill came a shout, and Heather turned to see a couple of boys come scrambling down the clay slope from the school, half-running, half-tumbling through the weeds.

It’s happened, she thought frozenly. And I’m at least partly to blame, because I knew they were there, and I did nothing.

One of them was shouting, but when she realized what he was saying it made no sense at all. Fire? Her eyes met Mr. Maxner’s, and she saw her question reflected in his face. How could there be a fire in the school? There was no electricity and no natural gas supply.

Mr. Maxner hurried up the front steps of the apartment building towards the telephone, and Heather bounded across the street towards the white-faced boys. “Fire?” she demanded. “Did you build a fire in there? You idiots!”

“No,” one of them gasped. “We’re not stupid. We smelled smoke when we went in, so we went looking and... It’s in one of the storerooms above the gym, Heather. Clear on the top floor. Somebody set it.”

In the distance she heard the shriek of sirens leaving the fire station. “Where are the

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others?” she asked crisply. “Rod and Steve and Brian and Jay—”

“They’re still up there, trying to put it out. We ran for help.”

“They’re still up there?” It was not much more than a whisper.

“Yeah. There were some extinguishers in the gym.”

The first fire truck pulled up. A captain, already in heavy rubber garb, swung down off the back, and Heather ran to meet him.

When he heard about the boys, he muttered, “Oh, hell,” and turned to shout to his crew. Then he smiled wryly down at Heather. “Can’t say I’m surprised they’re fighting it,” he said. “It got away from them, no doubt.” He was gone, shouldering an air pack, before she could correct him.

It seemed hours, but she knew it could have been no more than five minutes before the missing boys stumbled down the stairs, with a firefighter guiding them. They huddled in a clump in a corner of the school yard, disheveled and covered with soot, watching the commotion with eyes red from smoke.

The neighborhood residents were gathering by then. A hundred people were milling around, anxiously watching the telltale puffs of smoke, and eyeing the boys, as well, with suspicion.

Heather went over to the uncomfortable little group. They looked at her morosely, and Rod muttered, “Just go ahead and say it.”

“All right, I will,” she said calmly. “You guys smell awful.”

“They think we started it, Heather.”

“Surely you’re not surprised by that? I imagine you’ll all have a nice chat with the fire inspector tomorrow. You *and* your parents.”

One of the boys gulped. He looked very young all of a sudden.

Heather pressed her advantage. “And next time you decide to be heroes, you might think about possible consequences first.”

“Heroes?” Rod snorted. “We are, you know. They said if it had had another fifteen minutes’ start the whole building would be going up in smoke.”

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That sent a chill down Heather's spine. But before she could even begin to think through all the implications of the fire breaking into the attics and through the roof, it was over—the blaze was out, and the danger was past. It had been a minor fire—if, she told herself glumly, there ever was such a thing as a minor fire. Archer's Junction had been lucky.

This time, she found herself thinking. But what about next time? For it was obvious that someone had set that fire on purpose, and equally obvious that it would not be difficult to do it again. And if, next time, no one happened to smell the smoke until it was too late...

The fire captain, supervising the clean-up, saw her shiver. "Young fools, trying to fight it," he said. "Derelict old buildings aren't worth the risk of a human life."

"But if they hadn't found it and tried to help—"

He shrugged and pulled off his helmet, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Then it could have been one hell of a blaze," he said calmly. "Fire could smolder in there for hours behind those sealed-up windows, and once it broke through the roof—" he waved a hand down the street "—with a stiff breeze, it could have taken out half the retail district, too."

"What a cheerful thought," Heather said. Her voice felt frozen.

"Just giving you the facts," he said coolly. "We'll leave a crew here to watch it for a while, of course."

She forced herself to smile. It certainly wasn't his fault. "Thank you—all of you. I'll bring up some cookies for them."

He was watching her closely. "Cookies? This really is a small-town kind of neighborhood, isn't it? I just transferred out here from the middle of the city, and believe me, no one there would bring cookies to the firefighters." He touched his fingers to the wide brim of his helmet and climbed back onto the truck.

The owner of the antique-lace shop had been listening, too. "Another conquest, Heather?"

"The heck with Heather's boyfriends," snapped the owner of the wrought-iron place. "What about the fire? Do we just sit around like ducks in a row and wait for it to happen

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again?”

Heather swallowed hard. “No. No, we don’t. I don’t know what we do, but we aren’t just going to wait. It’s too important for that. I think, to start with, we should have a meeting of the neighborhood association. You’re the president. You pass the word while I go put the coffee on.”

“Right now?” The owner of the lace shop sounded doubtful.

“Why not?” Heather said briskly. “Right now is when we have the problem, isn’t it?”

The wrought-iron lady rounded everyone up, and they squeezed into Cookys, twice as many people as the tiny store was designed to hold. They shared chairs, sat on the window ledges, leaned against the walls. They passed around foam cups of coffee until everyone was served, because there were too many of them even to form a line at the counter to serve themselves. And they talked, neighbor to neighbor, about the eyesore on the hill.

Heather was astonished at the outpouring of frustration. The closing of the school, and the transfer of its students to the new facility a few miles away in another suburb, had been a blow to the identity of the proud neighborhood. Once, Archer’s Junction had been a fiercely independent little town, and it still resented being swallowed up by the exploding city. The big, empty school building looming uselessly over the retail district was a constant reminder of the way the little town’s identity had been submerged in the metropolitan area.

But what truly astounded her was the cynicism of the crowd. Nothing had been done in the past five years, they seemed to be saying, and nothing could be done about it now, either, so they would drink their coffee and have their say, vent their anger and then go off home as usual....

“Dammit,” she said. It was just short of being a shout, and the buzz of multiple conversations died. “Something has got to be done. There’s no reason we can’t force Dennison to do something useful with that building.”

Someone snorted. “Dennison? Nobody forces Cole Dennison to do anything. He’s the one who does the forcing around this city.”

“All right,” Heather said impatiently. “So he’s a tycoon. He’s got money. He’s got power. He’s still only human.”

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There was a sardonic laugh from the back of the crowd. “There’s been some debate about that.”

Heather ignored the interruption. “If we go to him and tell him what’s happening to his property—”

“D’you think he cares?” It was the man who ran the Depression-glass shop. “He owns half the city, Heather. He doesn’t care about this little chunk of real estate.”

“Then we make him care,” Heather said stubbornly.

There was a murmur at that and a shaking of heads. “How? It could burn down or blow away and it wouldn’t bother him.”

“But it matters to us, so it’s up to us to do something about it. Maybe we could sue him.”

“That would be like a mosquito stinging an elephant,” someone muttered.

“Make him mad enough,” said another, “and he’ll put us all out of business.”

Heather put her chin up. “Oh, is that it?” she mocked. “You’re afraid of a bully? How do you think bullies get to be that way, anyhow? It’s because ordinary people cave in. Well, I’m not going to cave in. Are you with me or not?”

“Go get ‘im, Heather,” the wrought-iron lady said. “Let’s take a vote, shall we? All those in favor of accepting Heather’s offer to take up the matter of the school with Mr. Dennison, say aye. Those opposed—”

“That’s not what I—” Heather began.

She was overridden ruthlessly by the wrought-iron lady. “I’d say the ayes have it. We’ll hear Heather’s report at the regular association meeting next week and discuss it further then. Adjourned!”

“I didn’t exactly—”

But it was too late. The door had swung open under the ruthless press of people, and within minutes Heather was alone inside Cookys, gathering up the stacks of empty cups and wondering how she had managed to get stuck with the job of facing Cole Dennison. *Had* she volunteered?

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She bit absentmindedly into a leftover caramel-coconut cookie, and ate half of it before she remembered she didn't really like the things. So she put the rest of it into the garbage bin, turned out the lights, and started for home.

Were her neighbors in the retail district correct? Was it a waste of time to talk to Cole Dennison? *They're crazy*, she thought. Whenever there had been a complaint about the school, he'd taken care of it.

With the minimal effort, she reminded herself. *It's hardly been an effective response.*

And last fall when she'd written to him about the semi-annual clean-up effort in Archer's Junction, she hadn't exactly seen hordes of lawn service people manicuring the school grounds. She hadn't gotten an answer at all, in fact, and had spent a couple of days up there with a rake herself, making the place look a bit more presentable. And she'd probably have to do it again this spring....

But that was different, she thought. A little litter caught in the underbrush didn't threaten anyone's life and livelihood. Arson did.

The man couldn't be a monster, she reasoned. If she could just point out to Cole Dennison what the inevitable end of this was going to be, if it wasn't stopped right here, then he'd do something about it. Anyone with good sense would, for his own self-preservation, if nothing else. And if there was one thing that everyone in the city agreed on, it was that Cole Dennison had a very lively sense of self-preservation.

She walked on up the hill with a lighter heart. She would show those cynics down in the retail district what could be done with just a little persistence!

IT TOOK more persistence than she would have believed just to get to talk to Cole Dennison's secretary, and when she did manage to get through, the woman told her she simply could not find a free minute in Mr. Dennison's calendar within the next three weeks. She sounded almost regretful; Heather thought she'd probably practiced the tone of voice.

Heather tugged impatiently at her skirt, which insisted on creeping up well above her knees. It was a narrow-cut apricot tweed, part of a brand-new spring suit, and far dressier than what she usually wore to work. She had put it on in case Cole Dennison could see her this morning.

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I don't know why I bothered, she thought irritably. Obviously I'll have months to get dressed for the occasion!

"It's very important," she said firmly, before the secretary could disconnect her.

"Well, perhaps.. ." The woman sounded uncertain, and Heather's heart rose a fraction. "If you could tell me what this is in reference to, Miss DeMarco?"

"It's about a building he owns in Archer's Junction."

The secretary's voice warmed. "Oh, a building! Then you'll want to talk to Mr. Sheldon. That's what Mr. Dennison would suggest you do, anyway, so I'm glad we won't be wasting your time waiting for an appointment. I'll connect you with that department."

Mr. Sheldon's secretary had never heard of the old school in Archer's Junction. "Mr. Sheldon may know of it," she said helpfully, "but he's out of the office today. Oh, you say it's not a rental property? Then it wouldn't be our department at all. Perhaps Mr. Hanford in property management..."

Heather's head was swimming.

Mr. Hanford was actually in, and he was free to take her call. Heather dared to take a deep breath of relief as she started her story.

"A fire?" he said. "No, I haven't heard about that yet. It was juveniles, I suppose. Ought to be hung if they catch them, but then they never seem to. Well, fortunately it was only an empty building. Thank you for calling, Miss... Markley, was it? We'll certainly secure the premises."

"That's not what I—"

But Mr. Hanford had hung up. Heather drummed her nails on the side of the stainless steel refrigerator and said a few uncharacteristically pungent words under her breath.

Across the compact kitchen, Katherine took a baking sheet from the depths of an oven. "Heather, dear, it's not very ladylike of you to talk like that."

"Personally, I thought I was being mild, Mother. At least now I know who everyone's been talking to when they've complained about the school—and why they're so sure nothing will get done. Hanford is a—" She swallowed the rest of it and smiled at her mother. "And here I am taking it out on you, when you're doing me a favor by carrying

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all the load yourself today so I can see Cole Dennison.”

Katherine’s eyebrows rose. “I thought you couldn’t get an appointment, Heather.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She gave her mother a hasty kiss on the cheek, and shook a finger at her. “And by the way, I’ve been hearing tales about free samples after school, partner.”

The accusation wasn’t quite true, but it let her get out the door before Katherine could return to the real subject. There were some situations, Heather told herself, where it paid to be vague.

Rush hour was over, so it took only twenty minutes to negotiate the freeways to the glass-and-steel heart of the city. It was one of the better things about living in Archer’s Junction, Heather thought; one still had the advantages of the small town, with the city just on the doorstep. Actually, she seldom came downtown. If she couldn’t find something in the shops in Archer’s Junction, then the nearby suburban shopping malls were sure to have it.

But she certainly knew where to find Dennison Incorporated. Everyone knew that. Just last year Dennison Tower had been completed, and it had opened with no end of pomp and fanfare. Heather had never been inside the tower, but she had seen it. The newspapers had made much of the fact that tons of marble had been specially quarried for the lobby, and that the huge panels of glass that sheathed the exterior had required an entirely new process of manufacturing.

She stopped on the pavement just outside the polished brass revolving doors and looked up. The sheer size of the place gave her the quivers.

Don’t think about that, she told herself. Think about the tremendous ego a man must have to build a monument more ostentatious than the pyramids, and name it for himself.

She was surprised, after her experience on the telephone, that she didn’t have to run a gauntlet of security to get to the executive floor. The young man at the information desk just directed her to the proper elevator with a smile. Heather smiled back rather wearily, and crossed the lobby slowly.

The seventy-fourth floor, she thought, and forced herself to take a deep breath, as she had been taught in the desensitizing class. *Close your eyes, she instructed herself, and think your way through it before you get on the elevator. You’re in command of your*

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body. Being terrified of heights is a totally irrational emotion, and you can reason it away. You have to, if you're ever going to talk to Cole Dennison.

She stood for a full minute with her eyes closed, and when she got on the elevator she was surprisingly calm. It helped, when she reached the executive suite, which had his name discreetly lettered on the door, to see that there were few windows—just walnut paneling, jewel-toned Oriental rugs, invitingly lush leather couches, an acre or so of pale grey carpeting, and a secretary who looked every bit as cool as she had sounded earlier.

“Miss DeMarco to see Mr. Dennison,” Heather said pleasantly.

The secretary frowned. “I don’t believe I have—you called this morning, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I spoke with Mr. Hanford about the matter this morning, but as it turns out, it is Mr. Dennison I need to see, after all.” It was not a lie, Heather reminded herself. It was just carefully phrased, and if the secretary concluded that it was Mr. Hanford who had told her she needed to talk to the boss, well, that was all to the good.

The secretary looked doubtful. “If you’ll have a seat—”

“Of course.” She chose the nearest leather couch and tried to look immovable. Would they take her word for it? Or would they call Mr. Hanford? Maybe she’d be lucky, and he would have stepped out of his office....

The secretary picked up a notebook and walked across to a plain walnut door. Beside it was a discreet little key pad, and she pushed a series of numbers. There was a click and the panel slid open.

The man had to be locked in? Heather thought, a little wildly. Maybe he was some sort of monster, after all.

She got only a glimpse of the office beyond the walnut door before it closed with a soft swish behind the secretary, but she got the impression that it was huge and entirely bathed in sunlight. Of course, she thought, it would be a corner suite, probably with a stunning view of the city. *Well, I’ll just stay away from the windows, that’s all.*

The secretary returned to her desk. “He’s very busy this morning. I don’t know when he’ll be able to fit you in.”

“I’ll wait,” Heather said, trying not to sound breathless with relief.

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But the minutes ticked by excruciatingly slowly, and nothing happened. Heather began wondering if it was only her imagination, or if the building really was swaying in the crisp spring breeze. Then she told herself not to worry about it; of course skyscrapers swayed when the wind blew, or they would topple. *Great*, she thought. That was just the encouraging reminder she needed!

So she concentrated on the secretary instead, watching her every move as she typed and filed and telephoned. The woman spent half an hour talking to what could only be a caterer, discussing petits fours and shrimp puffs and champagne for an upcoming cocktail party. From the sound of the arrangements, Heather speculated, the whole Third Army must be attending.

The secretary went back into the private sanctum; Heather watched thoughtfully, and this time she saw an entire corner of the office, including what looked like a very good Impressionist painting above a marble mantel. She also saw—or thought she did—the combination of keystrokes that opened the walnut door.

Fat lot of good that will do me, she thought.

The secretary came back. “Mr. Dennison has left to keep a lunch appointment, I’m afraid. If you’d prefer not to wait—”

“Of course I’ll wait,” Heather said. *I’m certainly not going away*, she thought. She’d never have the nerve to come up here again.

But a few minutes later the miracle happened. The secretary picked up her coffee cup and went down the hall.

Heather was on her feet the instant the woman was out of sight. Her fingertips trembled as she reached for the keypad.

I’ll just sit down inside and wait for him, she was thinking, *and the secretary will think I gave up. Obviously he went out some private way. He’ll no doubt come back that way, too—and I’ll be there. He’ll have to listen to me for a minute, at least, and then I can get out of here.*

Her fingertips flicked over the numbers, hoping she was right, and she held her breath for one interminable instant until the lock clicked. She slid through the door almost before it was completely open, and tugged on it, trying to hurry its closing, for seconds that seemed like eons. Then she saw the matching keypad inside and punched at it. Nothing

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happened.

A voice spoke from behind her. “Beating on it isn’t going to help, you know.”

The voice was calm, baritone, beautiful, ever-so-slightly husky—and Heather wheeled around in something close to panic as a man rose from behind the desk. The sunlight streaming through the windows ten paces behind him made him nothing more than a silhouette.

His hand moved slightly at the corner of the desk.

“What are you doing?” Heather knew she sounded breathless and scared. “Calling up the security thugs to haul me out?”

“Oh, no. I’m sure I can handle you all by myself.” The door slid shut behind her with no more than a whisper of sound.

“Do come in, Miss DeMarco,” he said softly. “You wanted to see me badly enough to come bursting in here. Well, you have my full attention. Now what would you like to do with these precious private moments you’ve stolen for us?”

She was groping behind her back for a doorknob that she knew did not exist, as he started slowly towards her, tall and lean and threatening.