

THE CORNUCOPIA OF JULIA K.

IT STARTED IN THE ELEVATOR when the doors shut and she realized that she was standing there with her laundry and cleaning in her arms. She knew that she was in the elevator but she wondered why she was going up to her office carrying a box of laundry and a suit while all the men were pushing past her heading for court with their briefcases. She felt like she had fallen into some kind of time trough. Last week she'd been ten minutes late for everything. This week the trough had grown to twenty minutes, an irretrievable twenty minutes. The doors shut and Julia was alone. She hated cologne and tobacco odors first thing in the morning, and, as the elevator began to move, she already felt the pressure beginning to build behind her eyes.

The walk down the corridors of her law firm always reminded her of peering into the compartments of a doll's house, little people in the rooms, little stick furniture, people caught in frozen moments, blinking, looking up at her as she passed. There were nameplates beside each doorway. She had an immaculate name-plate, white enameled letters on a black plaque. Julia Latham Kiefer. Across from every office there was a stenographer's typing carrel formed by a curved, white plaster half-wall with hi-tech furniture and word-processing equipment. The occupant of the carrel was a woman, usually bent over a scanning screen. Julia had sent a memorandum to the office committee suggesting that the scanning screens emitted radiation and that the stenographers be issued radiation badges. She knew that the machines were cancerous, that the green glowing chains of perfectly formed calligraphy were as lethal as chains of carcinoma cells. It was all excess verbiage anyway, pages and pages of abstruse verbiage, and it was metastasizing and spilling out of the screens. Even the machines wouldn't store it anymore. It would eventually kill the women in the carrels. She thought about that this morning as she made the corridor walk.

When she entered her own office, she put the cleaning and laundry down and reached across and touched the asparagus fern on her bookcase. It was a very beautiful plant and she liked to touch its soft fronds as soon as she closed the door.

She'd told her psychiatrist about it.

"Every morning lately, before I do anything, I reach across to the plant and touch it."

"Maybe you're just acting something out, Julia."

"Acting out?"

"Well, psychodynamically. Like if I reach out and touch this leaf. What does it mean?" He touched the plant beside him.

"It means you're tired of listening to me, Norman."

"It could be something else."

"Such as."

"Such as I'm tired of being alone."

Julia touched her hair and slowly crossed her legs. She noticed that her hand was trembling as she reached for a cigarette.

"Do you think the plant will eventually abandon me, Norman?"

"I don't know, Julia. Do you water it enough?" She'd laughed and laughed.

She remembered that conversation this morning. She also knew she was already fifteen minutes late for a conference of the plaintiff's committee on a securities case. Soon it would be twenty minutes.

There was a knock on the door. Her secretary, Claudia, slowly opened it and handed her a cup of black coffee. "Your mother is on the phone from Sarasota. She wants to know what flight."

"Don't tell her I'm here. Tell her I leave Chicago at 8:30. Look up the flight. The tickets are somewhere in this horrible pile. I'll call her from O'Hare before I leave."

She sipped the coffee and put it down and picked up her cologne atomizer and squirted it at the secretary. "Halston, Claudia," Julia said as she rushed by. "Try a fragrance lift."

The cold air of LaSalle Street hit her face as she walked through traffic to the bank building across the street. She wore a long hooded raccoon coat with black cloth buttons edged with red glass jewels. In the Chicago gloom she looked like a wealthy young North Shore wife picking her way through the slush to meet her husband for a conference at the bank's trust department. Julia Kiefer at thirty-two was a litigator, a trial lawyer, and lead counsel in the securities case for her firm, Connaught, Marquis, and Schales. The clients were members of the Connaught family who had joined twenty other plaintiffs suing a broker and a securities firm for fraud. She didn't really care whether her client had lost two million. If you have fifteen million and you lose two you still have thirteen million and so what. She hadn't even begun her Christmas shopping, and she'd be in Sarasota tonight with no gifts for her parents or her sister's children.

She stamped her boots and shook the snow off her hood as she entered the building. She looked at her face in the white, enameled elevator doors. My hair is too long. I am not that innocent. Also, it's beginning to go gray. She smoothed her hair away from her face as the doors opened and brushed the snow crystals off her collar. Another vertical ride. She was always riding elevators and moving vertically. Someday she'd get on an elevator and it would move horizontally. She wouldn't even raise her eyebrows. Once she'd known the difference between horizontal and vertical integration. It had something to do with antitrust and oligopoly.

She was alone again as the doors closed. There was something very surgical about this elevator's walls. She looked very thin. Like a thin nurse in funny coat. Why do nurses wear white? Why don't lawyers wear black robes with white pleated blouses and those funny black hats like the grinning men in the Daumier sketches or like the Nazi jurists who always wore those neat little pleated blouses? She shook her hair out and ran a comb through it. She was too thin and she'd drunk too much last night.

"My God, Julia," Ted had said to her. "I feel like I'm holding a bag of bones." "I am a bag of bones, darling," she'd answered. "We all are. We just have different coverings." What an asinine remark, just when she was looking for nurturing. If she could have, she would have slipped out of her skin and handed it to him, molted on his living room rug like a giant caterpillar, an immediate metamorphosis. She'd leave him the wind in her bones. She smiled. Where was Norman's leaf? She saw her face in the enamel doors. The fragile, white, enamel face, a perfectly made-up geisha, gray eyes, lavender lipstick. She was very, very tired. Little drops of perspiration were coming to her forehead and her legs were weak underneath the leather boots. She didn't want to go to another boring conference on another meaningless securities case. She wanted to be on a hidden beach somewhere with a straw hat over her face and the sun burning down on her breasts.

Julia wasn't surprised that the Atkinson and Lawrence conference room had electric draw drapes. When she sat down she noticed that Nicholas Barr, the associate hosting the conference, was buzzing the draw drapes slowly back and forth across the glass partition that divided the conference room from the corridor. Another kind of acting out, an unconscious opening and closing. She nodded to him. He nodded back and buzzed the drapes slowly across the partition.

She spread her damp fur coat over the back of the chair and took her box of cigarettes out. The man across from her was short with a black beard; she recognized him, Jeffrey someone. She couldn't remember his last name. He was another Atkinson and Lawrence associate. She'd remembered Nicholas and this man Jeffrey. She'd used a memory trick when they'd been introduced. Not Nicholas and Alexandra she'd told herself. Nicholas and Jeffrey. Alongside Jeffrey there was a gap of three chairs and Stephen someone taking notes and then another man she hadn't met, thin, horn-rimmed glasses, pin-striped suit, his hands folded in back of his head. At the head of the table, a blond, balding man with a British guard's mustache was talking very quietly, almost mumbling. Julia could barely hear him as she sat down. She lit a cigarette and shook her hair back over her shoulder.

The host buzzed the draw drapes closed again.

"Please, Nick," she said.

"Please what, Julia?"

"The drapes."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's too early in the morning."

"Can I get you something, Julia?"

"Yes, you can get me a surrogate."

The man with the horn-rims across from her smiled and sat up. He folded his hands in a pyramid and stared at her.

The lawyer with the mustache at the head of the table kept on talking in a quiet, flat voice. "We have a deposition schedule and of course we need people to prepare for them. Now if any of you want to volunteer, okay, we can try to make up teams."

The wristwatch buzzer went off.

The blond man with the mustache looked annoyed.

Stephen looked up from his notes and pressed a button on his watch. "I can't be on a team," he said. "I'll be in Washington for three weeks starting next week. I'll do some backup but nothing original. No first seat responsibilities." He began writing again.

The blond man continued without expression. "How many of you can be on a team?"

No one raised a hand.

He didn't say anything. He just pursed his lips and pretended to look through the glass partition although the drapes were shut.

Julia closed her eyes. All I want to do is get up and leave. She wanted to stop booking time. Empty time, time filled with absolutely nothing, time like the gray time inside a cocoon, a lacuna of time. She didn't want anything to do with teams. She'd had enough of two-somes.

"Does this have to be a project?" she suddenly said. "Why don't those people who want a particular witness depose that witness, and those who don't just stay away. We don't have to have a commission."

The host buzzed the drapes partially open.

"Nick, if you do that one more time, I'm going to leave," she told him.

"Oh, Julia, don't leave. We've just begun. It wouldn't be polite to leave."

"I'm not getting involved with a deposition over the holidays." She felt for her glasses. They were on top of her head and when she brought them down the room turned a soothing amber.

"I'm not suggesting that," the blond man said. "We're looking at thirty days from now, well into January, maybe February." He yawned and covered his mouth.

A squawk box sounded on a side table, and a voice came crackling over it. "This is Bryan Colmar here. I hope you're all making yourselves at home."

"Yes sir," Nick said to the box.

"I'm sorry I can't be there, Nick, apologize to everyone for me." Colmar was a senior trial lawyer with Atkinson and Lawrence.

"Everyone is comfortable, sir." Nick looked directly at the squawk box and fingered the control cord for the drapes.

He buzzed the drapes apart.

"I'm leaving, Nick," Julia said. "You gentlemen dispose of the deposition issue."

"Is everyone comfortable? Nick, did you send some coffee around?" the voice said from the box. "Did I hear someone say they're leaving?"

"That was counsel making a joke."

"I'm sorry, I'm probably interrupting something."

"You're not interrupting anything, sir." Nick was out of his seat and was unconsciously kneeling on one knee before the box on the table.

The man across from her tossed his pencil into the air as she left.

"Julia isn't up to the rigors of a litigation practice," she heard Nick telling the others as she walked out the door.

Back in her office, she immediately touched the plant as she entered. Norman's remark about being alone. Okay, so she was alone, divorced three years and still alone. Everyone is alone. Everyone ends up alone. She got her watering can out from the closet. The earth around the plant was cracked. Nick was even a bigger fool than Ted. He didn't even realize he was kneeling when he was talking to the box. If she could just get through the afternoon. She finished watering and sat down at her desk. For some reason she began cutting her hair over her desk. Certainly she was too innocent and she should be shorn of innocence. Everything was an acting out, wasn't it, Norman, even this cutting of the hair. How thin the air is inside a cocoon. Snip. How stultifying. Snip. She had a luncheon date with Mary, her friend who was studying to be a doctor. Mary, who sewed beautifully with her left hand; they'd made her sew with her right hand and still she'd been the only person in the class who had stitched the dog's bowel closed. The stitches of the other students had torn. She held another piece of hair. Snip. She was crying now.

"So what happens, Mary, to the dogs after you operate on them?"

"Oh, they die of course. But they're sort of like from farms in southern Illinois and they never learned to follow the hunter and would run off and chase butterflies."

Snip. Julia K., she said to herself. Stop worrying. Stop building a psychodrama. She caught the fine strands of her hair on the papers on her desk. She had taken off two inches all the way around. Now if she could just hold the rest of herself together until she got on the plane.

There was a soft knock on her door. Claudia stood there with a fresh-faced young woman, dressed in a long woolen sweater, no cosmetics, about twenty-two, obviously a student. "Julia, this is Kimberly Bascomb; she has an appointment with you, an interview."

"I don't know anything about an interview."

"Julia, it's in your diary." Claudia looked at her.

"Sit down, Ms. Bascomb," Julia said to the young woman. Claudia shut the door.

Julia made a paper cone for the hair trimmings, like a funnel, and let them all fall into her teak wastebasket.

"Why do you want to be a lawyer, Ms. Bascomb?"

"I think I really want to help people."

"This is a bad place to help people, Ms. Bascomb. We don't help people here."

The young woman was silent.

"This firm of eighty-five men and three women is not exactly the cutting edge of the legal profession, Ms. Bascomb." Julia held her scissors up. "We help hamburger corporations and toilet paper manufacturers, but we don't help people." Julia put the scissors down.

"I would still like to apply."

"I don't think you should," Julia said quietly, "in fact, I won't permit it. Go someplace else. Go where the sun shines occasionally. You can always come back and get yourself a tailored suit and a briefcase and be an advisor to chicken franchisers."

"Ms. Kiefer, you've become a partner in this firm, that's an accomplishment."

"Is it?"

"I think it is."

"Don't be beguiled." Julia began making another paper cone. She picked up the scissors and snipped an inch of her hair and dropped the cuttings in the paper cone.

"Here, Ms. Bascomb, is a cornucopia of sorts. Take it with you. Someday, when you think about our meeting, you'll realize that I really gave you something."