

Chapter 2

J. McLoughlin Visits Beauty School

- Didn't you two ever see a lady's toes all scrunched up from wearing shoes before? You girls can't have been giving pedicures for very long.
- *I'm sorry, ma'am. We're just taking the course now.*
- You'll be seeing far worse than those two dogs—OUCH—that's too hot! Say, what kind of music do they call that?
- *That's rock 'n roll, Missus McLoughlin.*
- My lan' what a racket! Well, do me a favor and tell Betty Boop up front to change the dial, would you? Or just turn it off. Now where's my watch? Say, Ginny ... it's Ginny, right?
- *Yes, ma'am.*
- What time is it, Ginny? Forgot my watch.
- *Almost four.*
- Time for cocktails! Would one of you be a dear and run to that store a few doors down while my feet are soaking? Here's five dollars. Bring me a little bottle ... just like ... this one here. I'll be grateful forever and you can keep the change.
- But we can't, Missus McLoughlin.

- Oh, you girls can be so contrary! You can't or you won't?
- *We can't. We're only eighteen, ma'am. Like Ginny said, we're not old enough.*
- Oh, never mind, I'll get it myself later. Anyway, which one of you had onions on a cheeseburger for lunch? Was it you, Ginny?
- *Yes.*
- *I did too.*
- You did too, eh? Remind me what your name is.
- *Jackie. I'll be doing your hands while Ginny does your feet.*
- Well, I've let my fingernails go all to hell but do what you can with 'em, Jackie.
- *Shall we get started, Missus McLoughlin?*
- Get started, get started. But may I tell you both something? Ginny and Jackie, or G and J, or whatever you two go by.... I said, Get started, but listen. I doubt they'll teach you much about what I have to say at a place like this but it might help.
- *What is it, Missus McLoughlin?*
- Sitting here I can smell what you had for lunch. Now how attractive is that? I suppose you'll think I'm just oversensitive about scents. Well, as it turns out, I am. How do you think I got to be sales manager at the Belcanto Cosmetic Company? Och, you can't imagine the cheap perfumes the new girls wore before I had a chance to educate them. "Oh, but Miss McLoughlin, it's from Missus Albee's original Little Dot Set! It's White Rose!" "Oh, Miss McLoughlin, it's Heliotrope from the CPC!" I'm sorry but I was gifted with a superior nose. My mother used to say I was cursed with one. But over the years I did study up on the subject, you see, about esters and terpenes and carbons and so on, so I do know what a fragrance is and what goes into making one. I was sent to Europe to learn about perfumery, you know. And when I was put in charge of sales I established a rule: trainees with the Belcanto Cosmetics Company were to give up all fragrances once they started with us.
- *Completely?*
- *How long did you keep that rule, ma'am?*

– How long? As long as it took those coconut heads to learn better. You try breaking in a bunch of females not much older than you are now. The ones coming right off the farm? The toilet waters they poured on just killed me! I wasn't ten years older than some of them and I knew what they were up to. Drenching themselves in some gad-awful rank eau de cologne. Trying to impress people, or cover up something was more like it. So I told Missus Bee—that was my employer, Missus Beatrice—I told her before we opened up in LA, “Let me take care of all the sales trainees from now on, Mary-Helen.” “And you'll have a nervous breakdown by Easter,” she said. Hey, not so hard with that thing, Ginny! So I told her, “They're the ones'll end up with the breakdown, not me.” Say, are either of you two onion-eaters listening to me or not? Can't you work and listen at the same time?

– *Yes, ma'am, we can.*

– *We're listening.*

– I'm only telling you this for your sakes you know. Oh, you better skip that heel altogether. It's sore to the touch. I do wonder what it'll be like to visit the old homeplace again....

– *The old homeplace, ma'am?*

– That's why I'm here in the first place. I haven't been down there in ... why, it must be forty years.

– *Why did you say you're here?*

– Why? To make myself presentable for my trip to Santa Cruz this coming week. Didn't I say that already?

– *I don't think so, ma'am.*

– So maybe it was Miss Betty Boop up front I was talking to. You see, I own this land down on the North Coast of Santa Cruz County. It's only got an old farmhouse on it with some tenants of mine who've been living there since forever. I know they're poor as church mice. They sure can't afford to buy the place but someone will have to. Those Lowries just have to get out of the way, is all. Anyway, I was in the cosmetics business. I guess I made that much clear.

– *When you were our age?*

– Your age? When I was your age I was still stuck in Cliffport where I’m going to visit. And there sure wasn’t much in the way of cosmetics in that itty-bitty little town, I can tell you that much. Oh for Pete’s sake, what am I saying? There was nothing at all. Cucumbers, we mashed those for facemask. My sister and I cooked up flaxseed for a gel to set our hair with before Easter and Thanksgiving and Christmas. What else? Oh, go ahead and smile, I know it sounds silly. Makes me laugh too. Lemon juice to brighten our hair but then again that keeps coming round, doesn’t it? You still see that in the magazines. A few shelves at the general store held the closest Cliffport ever came to beauty supplies. Balms and saps and salves. All sorts of stuff in a bottle with somebody’s grandmother’s picture on the label. Old Mother Hubbard’s Apple Cider Vinegar to cure your ills, end your ailments, rejuvenate your skin, and raise the dead! Nonsense like that, sure, but no cosmetics.

– *Did you sell beauty products to places like this, Missus McLoughlin?*

– Are you kidding? The San Francisco Downtown Beauty School? No no, we did business on another level. But tell me something. Do either of you plan to go into straight sales of beauty products? Yes? No? Don’t know?

– *We don’t know, I guess.*

– Maybe it’s too early to know.

– *How many salesgirls did you have working for you, Missus McLoughlin?*

– What, the most ever? I believe it came to twenty-five when we were hitting on all fours. There was Los Angeles, San Diego, let me think ... Santa Barbara, Portland, Seattle ... where else? The main office and manufacturing plant were always right here in San Francisco, of course. No, the Belcanto Company made money hand over fist throughout the twenties and after that into the thirties and the forties too. In 1932, when the Depression went about as deep as it ever went, even then we were making money. Companies always lie about such things but in our case it was true. I don’t know about over at CPC. Say,

are you two on a slowdown or something? I'm here to get a permanent too, you know.

– CPC?

– *The Avon company, dummy!*

– *“Ding-dong, Avon calling!”*

– That's correct, Jackie. Avon Products to you. But that's quite enough rubbing my feet. Just put on the polish, would you?

– *Yes, ma'am. Number Thirty-nine?*

– Whatever I gave you. Yes, thirty-nine, fine, fine. Now where was I? Oh yes, those onions! So take a lesson, girls, about what you have for lunch when you're on the job. You will, if you want to get into the real sales game, that is. If you're serious you'll always be up on your best presentation.

– *Your next appointment's here, Jackie.*

– So my fingers and toes have been beautified, have they? Goodbye, Jackie. OK, Ginny. Now how about that shampoo?

– *I'll take you to another station, Missus McLoughlin. You can use these paper slippers if you like.*

– OK, but help me up out of this chair will you? I've got a pair of bum hips. Wait, where's my cane?

– *It's right here, ma'am. You settle in this chair and I'll start the water running.*

– Not too hot now.

– *Hey, Ginny. Gina wants to see you up front.*

– *What? Oh her again. I'll be right back, Missus McLoughlin.*

– Don't be too long now.

– *I won't, Missus McLoughlin. I'll be right back.*

Chapter 3

The Landlady Pays a Visit

Janice McLoughlin stood alongside the car idling in the turn-around under the oak and, steadying herself with one white-gloved hand atop the open passenger door and her other hand shielding her eyes, appeared to wobble.

“Can she see us?” Katie asked her mother.

“I have no idea.”

The landlady secured her handbag in the bend of her elbow then gazed in all directions before tapping the black half-hat atop her head of gray hair and walking one hand over the other along the top of the door; she closed it and the vehicle drove out the gravel drive. Gathering her winter coat in front, she paused before taking her first step then, as she moved toward the house, the Lowries noticed her limp.

“Why doesn’t she use a cane?”

“Don’t ask me,” Elise replied. “Have her come up the steps to the deck. It’s shorter.”

When Katie reached her, J. McLoughlin was standing still, contemplating her next step, and searching in vain for something against which to lean. Become aware of Katie’s presence, she scanned her up and down through the thick lenses of her spectacles. “You’re the daughter.”

“I am, I’m Katie,” she replied, offering the visitor her forearm.

J. McLoughlin laid her right hand on Katie’s arm. As they headed toward the wooden staircase, Katie noticed the nicotine stains

between the first two fingers of the glove and the yellowed cellophane tape keeping one arm of the elder woman's eyeglasses intact. At the bottom of the stairs, the visitor secured her moss-brown handbag in the crook of her arm, transferred her hand to the rail, then rescanned the figure of her escort.

“Katie, did you say?”

“Yup, that's it: Katie.”

J. McLoughlin again sent her fingertips to the half-hat, as if to verify that the simple spring pins fastening it to the back of her head were still in place. Following her up the stairs, Katie noted the worn-out heels of her brown strap pumps and her dress's frayed hemline peeking out from under the coat. Halfway up, both hands gripping the rail, the landlady stopped, regaining her breath while looking in the direction of the lodge before resuming the ascent, her eyes fixing on each next tread.

Elise stood upon the threshold of the pantry; once J. McLoughlin had both feet planted on the deck, the two looked at one another. “Elisabeth Lowrie,” the woman stated, matter-of-fact, adjusting her eyeglasses on the bridge of her nose.

“Missus McLoughlin,” Elise replied in kind.

J. McLoughlin released the rail and crossed the deck. Elise stepped aside, silently remarking upon the collapsed jowls on the face of the older woman passing into the house.

The landlady sat herself down in the winged, threadbare armchair at the round table and looked around. Katie slipped into one of the straight-backed, cane-bottomed dining chairs.

“Can I get you a cup of tea?” Elise essayed, still standing.

“That'd be fine. Room for milk and sugar, thank you,” she said, letting go of her flat-bottomed handbag; its impact on the wooden floor jarred the metal clasp open, exposing to Katie's view paper tissues, cigarettes, a train schedule, and the stubby neck of a chrome flask encased in brown leather. “Be a dear and fetch me an ashtray ... Katie.”

“Ahhh....” Elise interjected, pausing between the refrigerator, the stovetop, and the sink. “I’m afraid we don’t smoke in this house.”

When J. McLoughlin removed her gloves—the buttons on each were chipped—and laid one atop the other on the tabletop, Katie saw how the skin on the backs of the woman’s hands, splotted with pink and brown spots among the prominent, empurpled veins, dipped and rose as it traversed the bones; the nails had recently been painted red. “Bring me an ashtray, Katie.”

“But, Missus McLoughlin,” Elise protested, carrying a tea tray to the table, “we really don’t allow smoking in the house. Katie quit years ago and we—”

“Och! Just whose house do you think this is, Elisabeth?”

“Why, what do you mean?”

“Who do you think you are, telling me not to smoke in the house where I was born and raised?” Elise collapsed into the closest dining chair, bent her elbows on the table, and cradled her forehead in her palms. “Don’t tell me you haven’t understood the nature of my business here,” J. McLoughlin continued, shaking her head and dragging her purse up into her lap to extract a cigarette before seeking out the younger woman’s eyes. “And along with that ashtray, a drinking glass with some ice. Please.”

Elise’s labored breathing became audible before she took her hands from her forehead, nodded acquiescence to her daughter then closed her eyes, lowering her forehead back into her palms. Katie fetched a glass with ice and an empty saucer and set the quilted cozy squarely over the brewing teapot.

“Then you tell me. What is the nature of your business here?” Elise inquired, plainly startled by the sight of the landlady taking hold of her flask to pour a generous double-shot of amber liquid over the ice and lighting a cigarette.

“You must’ve read Mister Hudson’s letter, Elisabeth. So you must know I’m expecting Mister Greenbrier to arrive any moment now. He’s going to help me find out what this place is worth.”

“On the real estate market, you mean.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Jan stated.

“I can’t believe you’d considering selling your family place,” Elise replied.

“And the buildings on it,” J. McLoughlin said and repeated, “and the buildings on it.”

“But how?”

“How what?”

“How could you, I think my mom means,” Katie said.

“That’s exactly what I mean! How could you? Didn’t you just say this is where you were born and raised? This is where your people are buried.”

“By that you don’t mean Mister William McGrath, I hope,” J. McLoughlin quipped. “Listen, Elisabeth, at some point it will become clear to you that this whole place is mine: this house, the old lodge, the store, the hotel, all of it. And I intend to sell all of it, ‘from sea to summit’ as the drummers used to say. I’m going to turn it all into money and enjoy one last fling at a grander style of living than you can probably even imagine. I certainly don’t intend to spend the end of my life sliding any farther down the skid road than I already have, I can tell you that much right now.”

“But it’s the McLoughlin family place. It’s your family’s history.”

“And I hope you’ll remember that as we proceed. McLoughlin’s my last name, not yours. My lan’! To think that for as long as I’ve been off this place, you’ve been on it.”

“Yes, I have!”

“And because you’ve lived here longer than I ever did I suppose ... och! I halfway expected this to happen.” J. McLoughlin brought the glass to her cracked, dry lips. Katie rose, raised the sash of the double-hung window over the sink, and propped it open with a wooden stirring spoon. Returning to the table, she poured tea for two.

“But what will we do?” Elise cried out, the back of her hands splayed out on the tabletop, her palms to the ceiling, her head thrown back, her eyes rolling.

“If you mean after the sale, I can’t tell you. If you mean today, I assume you’ll be available to answer any questions that may arise when Mister—”

“NO! Haven’t you a heart? This is our home! Don’t you understand? I raised Kaitlin here. She’s raising her son here. My son is buried here. This place is all we have.”

“Not for long,” J. McLoughlin remarked, draining her glass and tapping the first ash off her cigarette. “And in the meantime there’s the glaring matter of back rent for your use of the store. I have reason to believe that you’ve been responsible for the unauthorized occupation of that building for Lord knows how long.”

“Since 1950, as a matter of fact, ever since we started the Guild.”

“What ‘guild’ is that, Elisabeth?”

“What guild?”

“Yes. What ‘guild’ are you talking about?”

“Our North Coast Potters Guild.”

“She’s the executive director,” Katie volunteered.

“Then your mother knows perfectly well about such things as leases and rent. 1950. That’s almost fifteen years, isn’t it? All without paying a dime. I believe that’s what’s called ‘squatting’ in common parlance.”

“We’re not criminals!” Elise protested. “Mister McGrath knew about it and he never asked us for a dime. Not once did he object to our using the building. We have always paid for the utilities and the upkeep and we even added on—”

“—well well well,” J. McLoughlin interrupted, snuffing out her half-finished cigarette. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard of any agreement as sweet as that one. But the fact is that so-called ‘guild’ of yours is in serious arrears.”

“You wouldn’t!” Elsie snapped.

“Ma-aaam!”

“But we haven’t been hiding anything from anybody, Katie. The whole North Coast knows our pottery studio and sales room have