



*You can't expect to catch a cub without venturing into the tigress's den.*

*~ Chinese Proverb*

The next morning, I drive to the address Heather had provided for my interview with Ms. O'Connor. This house is in Westport, a swanky little town along the Connecticut side of Long Island Sound. My family didn't put on the Ritz, so this is new territory for me.

After Googling the area, I'd gathered it was fancy, but I wasn't prepared for what's in front of me. Every house on the spacious tree-lined street is as large or larger than the White House. I'm nervous my car's dented door, cracked windshield, and hubcaps held on by zip ties might encourage someone to call the police. I grip the steering wheel.

Just because I am *in* trouble doesn't mean I *am* trouble.

My insecurities rise another level as I observe the O'Connor estate. The driveway to the house is as long as a football field and surrounded by large fountains, each the size of a playground pool. With a gabled roof, embellished doorways and windows, and a turret fit for a castle, the mansion takes my breath away.

Once I finish fawning over the house's intricate details, I ring the doorbell. In a matter of seconds, the large wooden door creaks open, and a middle-aged woman dressed in a dark navy uniform greets me.

"Yes?" She holds the door slightly ajar.

"Hi, I'm Nicki Mayfield with Save My Space Organizing. I'm here to see Ms. O'Connor."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Heather asked me to come."

Satisfied by my name-dropping, she pushes the door open enough for me to enter. "Please, come in."

"Thank you." I step inside.

"Follow me."

I fall into step behind her down a dimly lit hallway covered with paintings that look like they belong in the Louvre. I only wish my guide would slow down so I could enjoy them. When we pass by an entire wall of windows leading to the backyard, I stop and take in the beautiful scenery.

The manicured lawn, ancient statues, and cobbled pathways remind me of a luxurious English garden straight out of a magazine. I smile, imagining myself wandering about out there, lost in my own little world.

"Miss Mayfield?" A voice snaps me out of my daydream.

I peel my gaze away from the scenic spot and back to the woman. "Oh, sorry, I'm coming." I quicken my pace and rejoin her.

We pause at a mahogany stained door. From the far side, I hear another woman's voice.

"That's a good girl, Princess! That's how to use the bathroom."

*Princess? Bathroom?* She must be in the middle of a potty-training session.

The woman taps on the bathroom door. "Ms. O'Connor? A Miss Mayfield is here to see you."

Without a word, my escort darts back down the hallway

from which we came, leaving me alone.

I turn back toward the bathroom, and the door thrusts open. Ms. O'Connor glares. Her short, silver-blue hair, crisply pressed khaki ankle pants, and white top reminds me of the prim and proper grandmother from *Gilmore Girls*. Even her black sweater lays perfectly on her shoulders.

"And who are you?"

"Hi, I'm Nicki Mayfield." I extend my hand. "Heather asked me to come discuss my organizing services with you."

The wealthy socialite gives me the once-over, keeping her perfectly manicured fingers affixed to the door.

I pull my hand back. "Is this not a good time?"

"Not really." Ms. O'Connor wipes away the small bead of sweat that has formed along her hairline. "I'm not sure why Lucinda brought you back here, but—"

A loud wail erupts from the bathroom.

Spinning back toward the cry, Ms. O'Connor rushes back inside. "No, no, no! You bad little girl! Now look at what you've done!"

With my ear against the door, I listen to the rush of scrambling feet and high-pitched howling.

"Ms. O'Connor," I say through the thick wood. "Do you need some help?"

"No, Princess, no!"

"Really, I'd be more than happy to assist," I call out again, this time a little louder. "I'm not great with kids, but I can try."

Ms. O'Connor yanks open the door. "Then get in here and help me."

Following her, I search for the right words to assure her that potty training young children is a difficult process. But when I catch sight of the toilet, it's not a toddler sitting on the seat.

I gasp. "What in the world?"

"I give up." Ms. O'Connor throws her arms in the air. "I've tried for almost an hour to get Princess to potty in the toilet, but she's stubborn."

“That—that’s a cat!” I jump back. “You’re potty training your cat?”

“Of course I am. Persians are so persnickety.”

My eyes dart back and forth between Ms. O’Connor and the fluffy white cat straddling the adapted toilet seat. While it’s rude to stare, I can’t help myself. “I assumed you were potty training your grandchild.”

“Don’t be silly. I don’t have, nor do I need, children or grandchildren.” She rolls her eyes at me and runs her fingers through the cat’s fur. “I don’t like the smell or mess of cat litter, so this is a more suitable option.”

Princess leaps off the toilet and onto the floor. Her pink diamond-encrusted collar jingles as she dashes out of the bathroom and down the hallway.

For a moment, I wish I could run away too.

After brushing off cat hair from her clothes and washing her hands, Ms. O’Connor struts out of the bathroom, leaving me alone. I’m tempted to go after her but decide that, like a lost child, it’s probably best if I stay in place.

As sweat clings damply to my back, Ms. O’Connor pops her head in. “Well, don’t just stand there. Come with me,” she barks like a drill sergeant.

Being the rule-follower that I am, I fall in line behind her. A rogue organizer I am not.

We trek through the house in silence. I keep one eye on the back of Ms. O’Connor’s perfectly coiffed hair and one on my surroundings. If I want to make a good impression on this woman, I need to understand more about her. Unfortunately, the sparse décor and minimalist design don’t offer me many clues.

After a lengthy walk to another wing of the mansion, we arrive at a small room. Unlike the rest of the house, this space is cozy and warm, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves all lined with beautifully bound tomes, an antique writing desk, and two wing back chairs situated in front of a toasty fireplace. I assumed these types of settings only existed in books or movies.

“This is gorgeous.” I enter the room, awestruck by its ambiance. “You must love being in here.”

“Yes, it’s one of my favorite rooms.” Ms. O’Connor settles into one of the chairs then points to the chair next to her. “Please, have a seat.” She studies me like a science sample under a microscope. “So,” she finally says, “tell me about yourself.”

“My name is Nicki Mayfield, and I’m a professional organizer.”

“Is Nicki short for something?” She places her forearms on the armrests and crosses her legs. “I don’t care much for nicknames.”

“Nicole is fine ... I guess.”

“Good. Tell me then, Nicole, why should I hire you?”

For such an easy question, I have trouble responding. “Well, I ... I like order, and I think I can help you.”

“You *think* you can?” She arches her left eyebrow. “Don’t you believe in yourself and your abilities as an organizer?”

I rub my thumbs together. I *used* to think I was a good organizer. But with everything that happened over the last few months, doubt was my constant companion, always reminding me of my mistakes and failures.

As the bills piled up and the requests for help dwindled, I found myself questioning my talent more and more. I certainly couldn’t share that with Ms. O’Connor, though. It’s unlikely someone of her status would place much confidence in an employee who acted carelessly with her business and her client’s keepsakes.

Ms. O’Connor lets out a heavy sigh. “Nicole, I’m not sure you’re what I need. I’ve had other organizers work for me in the past, and I sense you aren’t on their level.” She rises from her chair. “This interview is over.”

I watch her cross the room towards the door. Her words set my mind reeling with the thoughts of living with my mother and all her clutter again. *I can’t go back there. My relationship with my mother would be destroyed, and she’s all I have left.*

Ignoring the sour taste in my mouth, I stand. “Ms. O’Connor, wait.”

She halts at the doorway and faces me.

“I understand why you’d be hesitant to hire me. Listening to my answers, or lack of them, I would be, too.” I take a deep breath. “But I can assure you that hiring me will be a great decision.” I inch closer to her. “I specialize in bringing order to nearly any cluttered space, and I can handle whatever you throw my way. If you’re not satisfied with my work, I’ll give you your money back. But I promise you, that won’t happen.”

Ms. O’Connor walks back into the room and glares at me, the lines around her eyes resembling cracked pottery. I stand as tall as possible and match her stare. My goal is to convey a strong and brave façade, but on the inside, I’m melting faster than Frosty the Snowman in Hawaii.

“You can start tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. Don’t be late.”

Restraining myself from hugging her, I smile. “Perfect. I’ll email you my contracts and prep checklists later this evening.”

Without as much as a goodbye, she leaves. When I’m sure she’s gone, I slump into the chair. Thanks to my courage, I don’t have to start packing.

But had I just sold my soul to the devil with a money-back guarantee?

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THE NEXT DAY, adhering to Ms. O’Connor’s imperative not to be late, I park my car in her driveway ten minutes early and do something that causes me to squirm in my seat.

I pray.

Fumbling for the right words, I spout the first thing that comes to mind. *Lord, thank you for this opportunity. It’s not what I was looking for, but I’m grateful for the money to help me out of the mess I’m in. Give me patience to deal with Ms. O’Connor. Based on yesterday’s experience, I’m going to need a lot of it.*

Hopefully, that will carry me through the workday.

I ring the doorbell precisely on time. Lucinda once again ushers me inside, where she takes my coat and hangs it up. “Follow me,” she says, before heading down the hallway.

*Please don't let her lead me to another potty-training session for Princess.*

Walking in silence, I focus my attention on the back of her shirt and the tightly rolled bun that lies just above her neckline. Watching her head bob up and down, I have so many questions. *Does Ms. O'Connor require you to wear a uniform? What's it like working for the socialite? Do you like your job?* My mind was running so quickly I almost collide with Lucinda when she stops.

“This is the space Ms. O'Connor would like you to organize today.” After unlocking the door, she steps aside to let me in.

I peek around the doorframe. The room is triple the size of my bedroom and lined with custom-made slanted shoe shelving similar to those I've seen in glossy fashion magazines or the high-end boutiques I've passed by in the city. “What's this room used for?”

“It's to be Ms. O'Connor's new shoe room.”

My eyes widen. “You're kidding, right? This whole room is just for shoes?” I wait for a smile to break out across Lucinda's face, but the forlorn look she's worn since I arrived remains intact.

“It's not a joke, Miss Mayfield. This room is solely dedicated to Ms. O'Connor's vast number of shoes.”

“Uh, okay.” I have no clue how anyone could have so much footwear or why they would need a separate room just to store them, but what do I know about high society living? I glance back down the hallway. “So, where is Ms. O'Connor?”

“Not available.”

“What? She's supposed to be here with me.”

Lucinda sighs. “Not today. Now, if you'll excuse me—”

She takes a step to leave, but I pull on her arm.

“When will she be back?”

“This afternoon. I really must be going now.” She removes my hand from her sleeve.

“How am I supposed to organize the shoes? By color? By type? By season?” I rake my hand through my hair as I realize the terrible position I’ve been put in. While I’m confident in my ability to bring order to any mess, I like to customize the organizing system to my client’s preferences. How am I supposed to guess Ms. O’Connor’s? Or is this why Heather asked about Marie Kondo? Ugh, how am I to know?

“The shoes will be delivered shortly. Just make sure you do your absolute best for her. Otherwise ...” Her voice trails off as she slinks away.

I close my eyes and imagine Ms. O’Connor having an outburst similar to what I’ve seen on *Hell’s Kitchen*.

Dropping my workbag and purse onto the floor, I run my hand over the smooth shelving and inhale the smell of fresh paint and wood. The space is nothing more than a blank canvas waiting for the artist. Normally a room like this would be putty in my hands, but without Ms. O’Connor’s input, it’s like I’m carving a piece of stone with a dull knife.

Within minutes, a three-person crew arrives with the boxes. Like a game of Tetris, the workers carefully stack different-sized boxes in the middle of the room. I can only stand to the side and stare at the vast amount of footwear they bring in. Counting them all would be pointless and daunting, so I stop calculating how many pairs I’m going to be organizing and wait for the workers to finish.

Then I roll up my sleeves, pull my hair back into a ponytail, and turn on my shoe organizing playlist. I decide to sort and order the shoes by color from darkest to lightest to make it easier for Ms. O’Connor to find what she needs.

It will also provide a colorful aesthetic to the room, something that’s missing from the rest of her house. Starting with her black shoes in the far right corner, I line up all her boots, flats, heels, wedges, and sandals in an orderly fashion.

Progressing through the color wheel, I can't help but admire Ms. O'Connor's great taste. Who would have guessed that a woman who cared so little about accessorizing her home would be such a fashionista?

As I'm about to place a pair of blue studded Versace heels into their new home, Princess meows and jumps out at me. I scream and drop the aquamarine beauties onto the floor. Realizing it's just Ms. O'Connor's pet-child, I catch my breath and swat my hand at the fluffy troublemaker. Chasing her around the room, the white ball of fur races into the hallway to escape my wrath.

There, I run smack-dab into a young woman dressed in gray dress slacks and a green cable knit sweater that matches the color of her eyes. Her strawberry-blonde bob frames her face and reminds me of Taylor Swift a few haircuts past.

"I'm so sorry I didn't see you there," I say to her, panting.

"Oh, don't worry. Princess has that effect on people." She laughs. "Nicki, right?"

I nod. "Yes. And you are?"

"I'm Heather Campbell." She beams. Her smile is a pleasant change from Ms. O'Connor's pinched face and Lucinda's worried expression.

"Oh, Heather." I hold out my hand to her. "It's so nice to meet you in person."

Heather bypasses my hand and wraps me in a bear hug. For a small woman, she's quite strong. "I'm so glad you called the other day." She holds me tighter. "I had gotten the dates mixed up for the completion of the shoe room and had to have it ready for Ms. O'Connor ASAP. You were the only one willing to help me. Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome," I say, gasping for air.

She releases me and steps inside the room. "Wow, this looks great. Katherine will be impressed."

"I hope so." I shake my arms to get the blood pumping

through them again. “I’m worried I didn’t make a great first impression on her yesterday.”

“Don’t worry.” She waves off my comment. “She liked you. If I recall, she described you to me as young, smart, and surprisingly bold.”

“Well, that’s a shock.”

Heather chuckles. “Katherine has a hard exterior, and she’s guarded, but once she’s in your corner she’ll fight for you like a mother bear. Do a good job, and she can connect you to all the right people.” She picks up the abandoned Versaces. “She’s a bit obsessed, wouldn’t you say?”

“Uh-huh.”

“According to Katherine, she’s competing with Imelda Marcos—whomever that is—for the title of largest shoe collection.” She sets the heels on the shelf. Her phone dings and she pulls it from her pocket. “Sorry, Nicki, but I need to reply to this. Let me know if you need anything or have any questions.” She disappears into the hallway.

I take a deep breath and look back at the half-finished shoe room. If Ms. O’Connor could connect me to all the right people, it might be just the thing I need to get a stable job.

After seven hours of intense work, I finally finish organizing all of Ms. O’Connor’s shoes. The kaleidoscope effect of the room fills my heart to bursting. “Not too bad,” I say, patting myself on the back.

“Um ...” A voice behind me speaks over the clearing of a throat. I spin around to see my client in the doorway.

“Ms. O’Connor, hi! I didn’t hear you come in.” I stretch out my hand like a model introducing prize items on *The Price is Right*. “So, what do you think?”

Ms. O’Connor sets down three shopping bags and surveys the room. She taps her finger across her mouth as she takes in my work. “Well, it’s not the KonMari method I was expecting, but I guess it will do.”

I frown. “If you aren’t happy with the way I’ve set things up,

I can always change it. Had Marie Kondo had her way with this space, she would have gotten rid of half of your collection and organized everything by category.” I chuckle. “To me, doing it this way just seemed like the best way to handle the large quantity of shoes you have. Plus, I thought the rainbow effect it gave the room was a nice touch.”

“It will be fine.” She scans the room again. “However, it makes me realize I don’t have enough yellow and green shoes.”

My pulse races. I want to remind her that she has more than enough, but there’s no point in wasting my breath. She won’t listen to me. I’m just hired help.

“I’m glad you’re pleased with what I’ve done,” I say through clenched teeth.

“As I said, it will do.” She retrieves the bags she abandoned at the door and hands them to me. “Please take care of these.”

I open the bags to find four more boxes of brand-name shoes. A foul taste fills my mouth. How much does one woman need to be content? I’m not a sage, but I’m certain acquiring more shoes is not the answer.

When I look back up, Ms. O’Connor is gone. Blowing through my lips, I add the new footwear to her overflowing inventory. I scan the room one last time. Just think of how all the money spent on these shoes could have made a difference in the world! Confused by the ways of the wealthy, I close the door and make a beeline for the front entrance.

Once I’m situated in my car, I take deep breaths to regain my composure. I’m meeting my mom for our weekly dinner, and I don’t want to show up in a sour mood. It wouldn’t be fair to her. I crank the ignition and head down the driveway at full speed.

Watching the estate shrink in my rearview mirror, I question what’s truly bothering me: Ms. O’Connor’s extravagant materialism, the fact that I don’t have her in my corner yet, or that her shoe obsession is eerily reminiscent of my mother’s hoarding.

Perhaps it’s a mix of all three.