

CHAPTER ONE

“The President wants to see you.”

Dean Beth Ellis stopped at her office door and turned to her assistant, Lillian, who had just delivered the bad news. A meeting with the President of Grafton College was possibly the worst way she could think of to start a day. The promise of the bright April morning evaporated.

“What about?” Beth asked.

Lillian grabbed a fistful of pink message slips from her desk and followed Beth into her inner office.

“He speaketh from on high and deign not to telleth me,” Lillian said, casting her eyes downward.

Beth sighed, hauling herself back up and moving toward the door. She stopped and turned back to Lillian. “How do I look?”

“A little like you’re being marched to the guillotine.”

“It’s not that bad, I guess. I just find him a bit . . . difficult.” She looked down at her dark gray tailored suit, glad that she’d chosen to wear a skirt that day and tugged on the jacket. She knew she looked fine. She always looked fine. She work clothes that were appropriate to her title, carried weight appropriate to her height, wore her hair styled appropriately for her age. Hence, she looked like a 40-year old Dean of a liberal arts college. For a wild and thrilling moment, Beth wished she were about to walk into the President’s office in cargo pants, a torn t-shirt, and a slice of her slender midriff showing between shirt and pants.

The President’s suite of offices were opposite Beth’s on the first floor of Old Main. While Beth felt her own offices were far too lavish for her needs, President Landscome’s offices were continually being upgraded to suit his. In the nine months since his appointment as the 16th president of Grafton College, Landscome’s renovations had given his offices a sort of masculine, clubby feel, a place where you’d expect to see tweedy older gentlemen dotted about the room in club chairs, snoring behind their copies of the Financial Times and wrapped in the womb-like comfort of cigar smoke and dark wood.

It did not escape Beth’s notice, or she supposed, anyone else’s on the faculty, that though the man’s name was David N. Landscome, he insisted on being known by his middle name, Nigel. This was in the hope, Beth surmised, that he would be mistaken as someone at least slightly British. His manner of speech was also slightly British, but only in that

most irritating of all possible ways, that is, inexpertly done. He sounded like a community theatre actor making his first attempt at Jeeves and Wooster. The accent fell away whenever he had to concentrate on his lines.

“Good morning, Cora,” Beth said as she walked into the President’s outer office. “I understand he wants to see me?”

“Go on in. He’s waiting,” said the president’s assistant. Her pinched face and slightly hunched back gave her a rodent-like appearance, which matched her remarkable survival skills.

Beth walked into the president’s office and found Landscome sitting on a leather sofa in a corner of the immense room, sipping a cup of tea and reading the morning paper. He was a distinctly pear shaped man, with thin legs dangling below his great middle. The president rose to greet Beth, his plump, ruby red lips forced into a quick smile, lips that appeared to be pasted on his strangely pale, round face. Beth found him thoroughly unattractive.

“Good morning, Dean. I trust you’re well?”

“Very well, President Landscome.”

“Nigel, please. I think we’re at the sort of professional level where some informality is allowed, don’t you?”

He gestured toward one of the chairs in front of his desk and took his own chair behind it.

“Of course. And you must call me Beth.” Beth wondered what sort of informality it was that took nine months to get on a first name basis.

“Beth, I’m leaving this afternoon for a board meeting in London. I wanted to check whether the tenure committee has returned their vote on Dr. Barrow’s tenure yet?”

A fairly incompetent assistant professor of English had been brought to the college faculty by the president, for no apparent reason other than that the man was British. No one seemed to know any details beyond that. His presence was not popular among the faculty, which made no attempt to hide the fact.

“The decision is supposed to be made today. They should send word to me as soon as the vote is taken,” Beth said.

“And what’s your feel on how that’s going to go? It’ll be bad business if he’s turned down.”

Beth’s heart sank. The question of whether John Barrow would be awarded tenure was one of the hot topics on campus, and she would inevitably end up right in the middle of

the controversy.

“You have to understand the perspective of the faculty, particularly of the tenure committee. Their opinion of Dr. Barrow, and mine as well, is that he’s not nearly as qualified as candidates they have turned down in the past. I think we know how they’re going to vote today.”

The president rose slowly from his chair and turned to gaze out the window, his hands clasped behind his back. Beth imagined he was trying to channel Monty at El Alamein, ready to take on the Nazi horde that was the Grafton College faculty. Prior to coming to Grafton, Landscome had been the CEO of a major agricultural corporation. He reportedly ruled his company expecting his wishes to be anticipated and respected by his subordinates, certainly not questioned. This approach may have worked perfectly well in that environment, but Beth wondered how he had been so misinformed about the culture of debate that was the very nature of college life.

Landscome slowly turned to face her.

“Here’s what I want you to do. You’re to go immediately to the members of the tenure committee and lobby for approval of tenure for Dr. Barrow. Have them postpone their vote if you need to, but make it happen. I’ll be most displeased if my veto of their decision is necessary.”

Beth just stared at the man, unable to understand why he was trying to ruin the college. He was an occupying force, a foreigner without any respect for the society he’d conquered. The Board of Trustees hired him believing he could raise enough money as president to rescue the College’s imperiled endowment and turn around its fortunes. Beth knew that he was already doing just that, giving him solid backing from the board. She didn’t care.

“I don’t believe I can do as you request,” Beth finally said.

Landscome’s lips grew redder, and a flush came to his sallow skin. “You will do as I tell you because that is your job. If you want to continue on as Dean of the College you’ll learn to execute the orders of the president. This is not the first time you’ve balked in this manner, and I warn you that I have little patience with disloyalty.”

Beth remained quiet, determined to not give him the satisfaction of forcing her resignation. She wasn’t ready for that yet.

Landscome walked around his desk, escorting Beth to the heavy wooden doors, which he opened as if he were announcing the Prince of Wales. But there on the other side was Cora, typing furiously on her keyboard.

“Don’t let me down, Dean. Bring me tenure for Dr. Barrow. We are on a mission to set a new tone here at Grafton and Dr. Barrow is a step in that direction. You’ll just have to

trust me on that.”

The president retreated into his office and pulled the big doors shut behind him. Beth turned to go, her heart in her shoes.

“Bloody wanker,” Cora said under her breath, demonstrating her own command of British vernacular.

Beth walked out of Old Main to breathe some fresh air and ease the tight feeling in her chest. The building sat on the top of a hill, the apex of Grafton College, with the rest of the campus spread out below, draped around the gentle hill. The small town of Mount Avery lay below the campus and the Midwestern bread basket stretched for miles beyond that. The fact that the campus was on a hill was a blessing and a curse. It was brutal in the harsh winters with the winds whipping harder the higher she climbed. But Beth was also mindful that the exercise helped her stay slim, which was harder to do as she moved into her forties. Her mother once told her she had the sort of looks that would last well as she aged, but she wasn't certain the same would be said about her body. That on-going battle would eventually be lost. She wondered if the new battle on campus would also be lost.

Beth spent the rest of the day barricaded in her office feeling angry and ill used. As soon as she heard Lillian say good-bye through her closed office door, Beth left for home. Her house lay just beyond the outer ring of the campus, purchased through a faculty loan program when she arrived at Grafton. It was small and simple and perfectly suited her needs. She was no closer to deciding how she was going to handle the tenure matter, other than knowing she would not do as Landscome ordered and lobby on Barrow's behalf. She was only slightly relieved that the tenure committee had not delivered their decision to her yet. Someone on the committee must be holding up the vote, and Beth idly tried to guess who. It hardly mattered, she knew. Their no vote was inevitable. War between the president and the faculty, it seemed, was inevitable.

The recent April thaw made running outdoors possible again and she looked forward to the exercise and after changing into sweats she jogged around the hill toward the rural road leading out of town. Twenty miles down the road was the state university in Center City, a much larger town that offered many of the things Mount Avery lacked – bookstores, cafes, concerts and theatre, ethnic restaurants, gay and lesbian bars. Over the years Beth had formed close relationships with a lot of people at State, mostly faculty there, and not a few who moved from friend to lover and back to friend. There had been no such relationships lately, not in the year since she'd become Dean at Grafton College and thrown herself into work more than ever.

Beth ran hard for forty-five minutes, but as she walked through town on her way back, sweating freely in the still cool air, she realized she was still agitated. She passed by Dale and Mel's Auto Repair on the corner of Main and 10th Avenue and turned in to the open garage bay. There she saw a familiar figure with her head under the hood of a car. Even swathed in her olive gray coverall, Mel's powerful body was distinct and familiar.

Beth approached quietly, reached over to a battered boom box sitting on top of a tool cart, and turned the volume down on the blaring country music. Mel extracted herself from under the hood and turned around, smiling her slow sexy smile when she saw Beth. Mel was an ace mechanic, far more clever than her brother Dale, and she loved what she did. And when her head wasn't under the hood of a car it could most likely be found under the sheets of someone's bed, for her expertise as a lover was also well known in town. It was her stated mission to keep everyone happy, including herself, and that meant no promises, no relationships, no strings. Beth had nothing but admiration for Mel, and, when the mood struck, a fair amount of desire for her as well.

Mel pulled a bandana from her back pocket and wiped her face and then crossed her arms, her filthy hands tucked away. "Professor. Haven't seen you for awhile."

Whenever Beth allowed herself to find the relief Mel provided, she allowed herself everything. Her gaze lingered on all six feet of her and her mind started to empty at the thought of that body on top of hers. She stood there mutely, her need blatant.

"Looks like you're about talked out for the day," Mel said. She levered herself off the car and walked over to Beth, leaning in to whisper in her ear. "Why don't I come over so we can spend some quiet time together?"

Beth nodded her head. "Eight o'clock?" she asked.

"See you then." Mel kissed Beth's forehead and then turned back to the car, bumping up the volume on the boom box before she slipped back into the deep. Beth strolled out of the garage and then broke into a run as she headed back to her house.

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By eight o'clock it was dark in Mount Avery. All of the lights were out in Beth's house, except for the night light in the hallway. It cast an amber glow that barely stretched to the bed, enough so that Beth was able to see Mel, her strong hands gripping her hips, holding her in place. Beth closed her eyes and gave way completely, and she was none too quiet about it. But then she savored the delicious exhaustion and calm the run had not provided her as she lay perfectly still on the bed. Mel eased herself off Beth and scootched herself up and onto an elbow, trailing her fingers over Beth's shoulders, down her breast, her belly.

"You can talk now, you know," Mel said, reversing her course and heading back up Beth's body.

"I really don't think I can." Beth kept her eyes closed.

Mel lay next to her for a while, and when Beth finally stirred, curling up on her side, she kissed the top of her head and left the bed. Beth opened one eye and watched as Mel put her clothes on. She knew she should say something like "Thanks," or more accurately,

“Thanks again.” That would be the polite thing to do, but instead she started to drift off. She heard Mel leave the house by the front door, jiggling the handle to make sure it was locked.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time she reached campus the following morning, Beth felt more willing to face the tenure situation. Mel's visit had helped rearrange her cells into fighting form. She realized that what she felt while she was hiding in her office the day before was fear. Not fear of President Landscome or fear of being fired as Dean, but fear that a nervous Board of Trustees and an ass of a president were slowly ruining the college she'd loved for most of her adult life.

When she first arrived at Grafton College Beth had been twenty-seven with a PhD fresh in hand. Moving to Mount Avery felt comparable to moving into a space colony or a biosphere – she was a newcomer in a closed society. She had to make a place for herself in order to survive. The college would provide her safety and community and purpose, and in exchange she would devote her life to the college. The structure remained upright because everyone did their part, but it felt to her that since becoming president, Landscome had been patrolling the campus, pulling out bits and pieces of the foundation. Soon the structure would fall in upon itself and be replaced with some flim flam institution supported by corporate sponsorship, populated by uninspired and unimaginative students and a faculty of frightened part-time teachers. And President Landscome would be proud of the job he'd done.

As Beth walked through the main quad toward Old Main she saw John Barrow, still untenured, heading right toward her. There was no way to avoid him.

“Good morning, Dean.” Like the president, John Barrow went for the outdated tweedy, academic look, but unlike Landscome, Barrow managed to carry it off. He was in his mid-thirties, with a full head of wavy dark hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and a wiry build. He was, Beth acknowledged, very handsome, and no doubt used to getting his way. Beth said her hello and continued walking, hoping Barrow would continue in the opposite direction.

“Dean, if you have a moment there's something I want to call your attention to.”

Beth worked to keep her tone pleasant. “If this is about the tenure vote, John, it's not really appropriate for us to discuss it.”

“It happens that this is about something entirely unrelated. A past student of yours, as a matter of fact.”

“Which student is that?”

“Jennifer Manos, who's in my senior seminar.”

“What about Jennifer?”

Barrow came up close to Beth, rocking back and forth on his crepe-soled feet, each forward motion impinging on her personal space. Beth took a step back. “I’m quite concerned, actually. It seems Jennifer has gone missing.” He raised an eyebrow at Beth, almost as if he thought Beth had perhaps tucked Jennifer away somewhere.

“What do you mean she’s missing?”

“As you know, Jennifer is an avid student, so it caught my attention yesterday when she missed her second seminar session in a row. I took the time to look up her contact information and called her mobile. It went straight into voicemail. I called her house and a flatmate said she hadn’t seen Jennifer all week but didn’t know where she’d buggered off to.”

“John, I doubt she’s ‘buggered off’ anywhere. She’s a sensible young woman. I’ll contact the Dean of Students and we’ll find out what’s up.”

“Yes, well, I’m just a bit concerned. She’s not seemed quite herself the last few weeks.”

“What do you mean?” Beth asked. John had now stopped rocking back and forth and was shifting from one foot to the other. She wondered if he was hyperactive, though she had always been left more with an impression of sloth than energy. Perhaps he was nervous about the tenure vote.

He spoke more quickly than was normal. “Oh, who knows what goes on in the minds of students? I just sensed she was distracted, if not unhappy. I’d hate to see anything happen to her.” Beth doubted he cared about Jennifer’s welfare as much as he did about appearing to care.

She excused herself and continued on to her office where she’d delegate the missing student question to the Dean of Students as soon as she got in. When she entered Old Main she looked toward the president’s suite. Landscome was safely away in London, probably for the better part of a week, which gave Beth time to figure out how to play the tenure situation with John Barrow so that she could keep her job as Dean, keep the faculty from revolting, and keep the president happy. Beth was no stranger to the Machiavellian hornet’s nest that was academic politics, so she felt confident, for the first time in a couple of days, that she would figure out this puzzle. As she walked into her office Lillian followed close behind with another wad of message slips.

“Dean Taylor called and she sounds upset. You need to call her right away.”

“Okay, I think I know what that’s about. Any other emergencies in there?” Beth looked up at Lillian as she settled in behind her desk. Lillian looked down at her pityingly.

“Delilah Humphries is on her way over to talk about the tenure vote. She should be here

in fifteen minutes.”

Beth took a deep breath. “Okay. What else?”

“The Board just faxed over a letter saying they are moving up the due date on the annual plan by two weeks. That means you have to get it to them by next Friday.”

“Oh, my God.” Beth looked stunned. They might as well have said she’d have to write the next *War and Peace* in a day. Suddenly the thought of Mel jumped into Beth’s head – uncomplicated Mel and her uncomplicated lovemaking. “I don’t even think that’s physically possible, especially with the President out of town. Anything else?”

“That the worst of it. The rest can wait, though your mother called and said she couldn’t get through to you last night at home. She wants you to call today.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

Lillian laughed. “Enjoy the time with her if you possibly can, Dean. Mothers drive you crazy, and suddenly they’re gone. Then there’s that big void where the irritation used to be.”

Lillian had no idea how often Beth had yearned for that big void to hurry up and get here. But it was true that now that her mother was getting older, Beth honestly didn’t know what she felt. She associated dread with almost all her dealings with her mother and she could not deny that on the question of her mother she was extraordinarily sensitive. She never volunteered any information about her and when asked she told a version of the truth, that it was just the two of them in the family and that they weren’t close. She could not admit to anyone that her mother was a brothel owner in Nevada. She felt a constant dread that people would somehow find out.

Beth watched Lillian walk out of her office as she picked up the phone to dial the Dean of Students, Harriet Taylor. Dean Taylor was in her fifth decade in her position. She knew, intimately, the vast array of stupid things that students did, as well as the great range of their energy and sweetness and eagerness to learn.

When Beth placed the call it was picked up on the first ring and a voice barked, “Taylor.”

“It’s Beth Ellis, Harriet. I have a message you called.”

“Jennifer Manos is missing.” Dean Taylor got down to business, as usual.

“God I was hoping it wasn’t true. I just ran into John Barrow and he told me he was concerned that she might be.”

“Oh, I bet he’s concerned, that son of a bitch.” Beth could hear Harriet blow out a breath. “I’ll get to him in a minute, but let me tell you what I know. I got a call from a student

over at Hadley House where Jennifer lives. Her housemates figured out today that no one has seen Jennifer since Monday morning, when her roommate Mandy saw her still in bed when she left for class. Mandy spent the next two nights over at her boyfriend's room and when she finally got back to Hadley she didn't even think about the fact that Jennifer wasn't around. She figured she'd hooked up with someone."

"Why does she think that's not the case now?" Beth asked.

"When all of the girls in the house compared notes they realized no one had seen her, and that even if she had hooked up with someone she would have come home at some point to change clothes or get books or something. The other thing is that none of the girls think Jennifer is a hook-up kind of girl. As far as they knew there was only one man in her life, and when Mandy took a call from John Barrow telling her that Jennifer hadn't shown up in class this week . . ."

"Oh, no." Beth said. "Please don't tell me that Barrow is sleeping with Jennifer."

"I wish I could tell you that he is. That would be one way to get him removed from this campus," Harriet said. "But according to her housemates, Jennifer never said they'd gotten together, just that she had a thing for him."

Beth got up from her desk and started to pace. "They have no idea where she might be?"

"None. I've gone ahead and contacted Jennifer's aunt. She's listed as her emergency contact, though I'm not sure yet why her parents aren't."

"Her parents are dead," Beth said, knowing this and several other facts about Jennifer's background. Before she left the English Department, Beth had been Jennifer's advisor. "She was ten years old when they were killed in a car wreck and her aunt took her in."

"Well, this keeps getting better, doesn't it? The aunt doesn't have any idea where she is either, and now she's frantic. I think it's time we called the police."

"Absolutely. Keep me up to date and let me know if there's anything I can do." Beth saw Delilah Humphries enter her outer office and waved her in. "I've got to go, Harriet."

"That's fine, I'll take care of everything, but I've got to tell you, if I find out that one of your faculty has caused harm to one of my students, I'm going to be on the war path." Dean Taylor hung up.

There was no time to react to this crisis with Delilah coming in. Beth retreated behind her desk. There had been a short time, a number of years before, when Beth and Delilah made an attempt at having a relationship, a rather half-hearted one on Beth's part. She found Delilah's charming insistence that they try a romance tempting enough to ignore her better sense, but once she got up close and personal, charming became eccentric and then eccentric became controlling and off-putting. Beth put an end to things quickly and

after an uncomfortable period when Delilah kept trying to get Beth to change her mind, they'd manage to resume a friendship of sorts. Still, Beth was always a little nervous around Delilah.

Delilah swarmed into the office, her presence large and commanding. She was not fat, but she was tall and big boned and seemed twice as large as she really was. She had a great mass of long hair and she wore flowing clothes, simple make-up, flat shoes, and a jangle of rings and bracelets. She whooshed, clanked and clacked wherever she went, so there was no doubt in anyone's mind when Delilah Humphries was making an entrance. She pulled up immediately in front of Beth's desk, dropped her huge valise with a loud thud, and said, "I'm here to report on the matter of John Barrow."

"Okay."

"As chair of the Tenure and Promotions Committee I have just presided over what I thought would finally be the meeting in which we would vote on Barrow's tenure. However, due to one member's insistence that the vote be delayed until Monday morning, we won't know the answer until then."

Beth didn't know whether to be relieved or concerned. She'd already determined that she would not interfere with the vote, so the delay did not make any difference in terms of her role in the outcome. But if there was some aspect of Jennifer's disappearance that involved John Barrow, she appreciated having additional time to investigate before he became a tenured professor. He would lose tenure for sleeping with a student, certainly his own student, but it was easier to keep it from being granted than taking it away after the fact.

She looked at Delilah, "I take it that the majority still seems to be against tenure?"

"God, yes," Delilah said. "He is one of the least qualified candidates we've ever seen. He hasn't published, he does absolutely nothing on his committee assignments, and even the students think he's lazy." She gave Beth a long look. "Be on the level with me, Beth. What is the reaction of your president going to be if we deliver a no vote on his guy?"

"He is not "my" president, Dee. He is, unfortunately, the college's president, which gives him the ability to veto your decision. I'm afraid that's what he'll do."

"What the hell is he thinking? Has the man ever been on a college campus before? Does he not have the slightest idea how things work here? He is ruining this place, I swear to God."

Delilah was running her hands through her wild hair, her eyes shut tight. When they opened she whacked the top of the desk with the palms of her hands. "Well, I'll tell you this. If he vetoes our vote on John Barrow he is going to have a fucking war on his hands and it will be over before he even knows what's hit him. I don't think the board is going to see him as their White Knight if the faculty delivers a unanimous vote of no

confidence.

“He’s going to remove me as Dean if you vote against Barrow.” Beth watched Delilah carefully as she took this in.

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that I will have failed to convince you to vote for tenure.”

“But that doesn’t make sense, even for him.” Delilah blew out a long, noisy breath. “This is getting very serious, Beth. We need you as Dean to perform whatever damage control is possible while this man is president. If you get tossed back into the ranks with us, he’ll replace you with some Barrow-like person.”

Beth felt a sickening sensation as she realized something. “No, wait. It does make sense. As soon as I fail to deliver the tenure vote that he wants, which he knows I can’t do, he’ll veto the vote, get Barrow tenured up, fire me and then put Barrow in as Dean.” Beth leaned back in her chair. “It’s diabolical.”

“It’s fucking unacceptable, is what it is.” Delilah abruptly turned and stormed out of the office.

Lillian stuck her head in and said, “It’s time for you to go to the meeting in town with the Mayor.”

Beth laid her head down on her desk and moaned.