

VERITAS

by

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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 deigneth not to tell 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 looked like a forty-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 was 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 sixteenth 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 leather chairs, snoring behind their copies of the *Financial Times* and wrapped in the womblike 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 to the president's assistant as she walked into his outer office. "I understand he wants to see me?"

"Go on in. He's waiting." Cora peered at Beth over her reading glasses. Her pinched face and slightly hunched back gave her a rodentlike appearance, which matched her remarkable survival skills.

Beth walked in and found Landscome sitting on a 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. He rose to greet Beth, his plump, ruby red lips forced into a quick smile. His lips 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.” She 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 Landscome, 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.”

Landscome 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 might 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.

“I don’t believe I can do as you request.”

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.”

Landscome 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 breadbasket 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 ongoing 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. 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, cafés, concerts and theatre, ethnic restaurants, gay and lesbian bars. Over the years Beth had found the university faculty the best source for the only type of relationship she seemed to feel comfortable in—no strings, plenty of sex, and no messy or painful endings. The Grafton College faculty was too insular to pull off that sort of trifecta. She knew from experience that extricating herself from a relationship with a colleague was a complicated matter. Since becoming dean the year before, Beth hadn't found time to

visit Center City enough to maintain even these most undemanding of relationships. Her work had rounded that last part of the circle and now encompassed her entire life, a fact that she was aware of but too short on time to resent.

Beth ran hard for forty-five minutes, but as she walked through town on her way back, sweating freely in the cool air, she realized she was still agitated. She passed by Dale and Mel's Auto Repair on the corner of Main and Tenth Avenue and turned in to the open garage bay. A familiar figure stood bent over 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. Her expertise as a lover was 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, then crossed her arms, her filthy hands tucked away. "Professor. Haven't seen you for a while."

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.



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 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.