

Chapter One

Audrey stared out the window as she tuned out the speech being spouted by the man sitting across from her, behind the enormous mahogany desk with all the brass and marble accessories. Why was she here? She did not want to go through this again; so why was she starting down another path leading to another failure? The answer was simple, family. In an unprecedented display of concern, not for her but rather the family reputation, the family had united to prevent the possibility that a Worthington might be considered less than stellar at their chosen occupation. They had insisted that she accept this job, one that she hadn't even applied for, and stay with it. When she had heard what had motivated the college to seek her out to make her a professor, without even knowing the details, she knew that there had been some serious money put on the table. Discreetly, anonymously, her family had bought her this job and made it clear that this time there had better be a different outcome from her previous teaching experiences.

“Dr. Worthington, we seem to have lost your attention.”

“Call me Audrey, please,” she murmured and brought her eyes up to meet the irritated glare of the college president, Cecil Boxford. She sighed and sat up straight. “I’m sorry. I hadn’t expected to be teaching this year. I’m just a bit overwhelmed with how fast everything has happened.” She made an effort to bring up her practiced smile, the one that she had worked on until it was second nature. “I am very honored to be joining the faculty here and I will do my best to give the students a first rate education in history.”

Boxford’s eyes narrowed as he stared her down. “Failure is not an option, Dr. Worthington. This institution will receive a very sizable donation if you complete the full year teaching here and an endowment larger than the current top three endowments combined if you retain your position for five years. Someone wants you to have this job and has made sure that we are significantly motivated to keep you on. Dr. Hamilton has done some research into the reasons behind your dismissals at your previous positions and will see to it that history does not repeat itself.” He gave a humorless smirk at his

wittiness. He shot his index finger out to emphasize his point; “Wheatleigh believes in giving our scholars value for their tuition and has a policy of giving immediate feedback on their progress. All work is returned, graded, within forty-eight hours of being submitted. That will continue; the History Department will not be exempted.”

Audrey gasped and shook her head in denial; this was the crux of her problem with her previous teaching positions. She seemed to be constitutionally unable to attach grades to her pupils’ efforts. She got lost trying to understand the hows and whys of their answers and tended to want to write comments to engage in discussions with them rather than assign a grade. When confronted with the avalanche of term papers and final exam essay questions at the end of a semester, she floundered; and her previous employers had been very disgruntled when grades were due and she had more than half of her work unfinished. Each time, once the mess was sorted out, she had not been invited to continue teaching for the second semester. This pattern had repeated at all three positions she had held since obtaining her doctorate.

Boxford nodded at her reaction. “Yes, we know that this has been your problem. By all accounts you are an excellent lecturer; your students have enjoyed attending your classes. As head of the History Department, Dr. Hamilton has orders to do whatever he has to do to ensure that you comply with Wheatleigh’s policy of promptness. We have made sure that he has some significant motivation as well.”

His voice took on a conciliatory tone as he changed tactics and tried to come across as a stern but loving fatherly figure. “Your academic career has been very impressive, Audrey. You have gathered so many honors and accolades at such a young age, a remarkable accumulation of degrees. It’s clear that you are just having some trouble making the transition from student to teacher. We at Wheatleigh will help you with this. Dr. Hamilton, Thornton, will mentor you every step of the way until you are settled into our little family routines. I’m sure that you will be happy here; along with a very respectable salary and benefits package, you have very few duties outside of your teaching schedule and something that almost no other private college can offer, we provide housing. I look forward to a long and successful collaboration of educating the next generation.”

He stood up and came around his desk to take her hand and clasp it between his two, actually patting it. “It was a shock when Dr. Chambers departed so suddenly and we are very aware how difficult it is to step into a teaching position after the semester has already begun. We really appreciate that you were able to get here with such short notice. I’m sure it’s been an extremely tiring weekend for you, so I will let you get on your way so you can settle in and prepare for classes tomorrow. Thornton, make sure that she feels right at home. We want our newest faculty member to know just how happy we are to have her join us.” He turned towards the other man, “I expect to be kept well informed on how things are going.”

“Yes, sir,” Thornton responded as he straightened up from where he had been leaning against the corner of a bookcase. In a typical show of power, Boxford had not invited him to sit during the meeting. He moved to open the door and stood aside to allow Audrey to pass through first. “I imagine Security has already put your things in your rooms. It’s a very comfortable and convenient set-up; I’m sure you’ll soon feel right at home.” Once he had closed the door to the office behind them, he placed his hand lightly on her back and guided her out of the president’s house.

“With your extensive academic experience you must feel pretty comfortable on a college campus. Ours is fairly typical for a private institution this size. The more traditional departments are housed in the buildings around this quad, with the dorms forming an outer ring behind them; the library, gym, auditorium and dining hall are situated at the outside corners. The newer science labs are housed on the Felton Campus, which is on auxiliary land about two blocks away.” He pointed out the various buildings as they walked across the park-like grassy space where clusters of students were engaged in playing Frisbee or studying textbooks.

Once they had travelled at least half the distance towards the building he had pointed out as the home of the History Department, he leaned over to speak quietly in her ear. “So is everything okay with John Chambers?”

Audrey stopped abruptly, “What?”

His hand on her back urged her to resume walking, “I don’t want anyone to realize that we are talking about this. I just figured that since someone wanted you to have this job, John needed to go to create a space for you. He left without talking to me

and hasn't been in touch. I'm hoping that whomever is throwing all this money around made it lucrative for him to abandon his job like that. He'll need a good story to explain his actions to future employers. He's a good man, please tell me that he wasn't threatened or harmed."

"Oh, dear!" She tried to stop again and discovered just how firmly his hand on her back was guiding her.

"Keep walking and talk to me."

"I'm sorry, Thornton, I'm not in the loop on this. I was told that this job had opened up and I was expected to uphold the family reputation and not screw up anymore. I certainly hope he is okay. I would expect that he is, Worthingtons don't hurt people; although I have to say that this whole episode is not in my family's normal style of handling things. I can try asking around if you want, although I think I'm going to hit a wall. No one is going to admit to having anything to do with this. They are all acting as if this job offer was unexpected."

"No point in asking them then. My friends call me Rich, by the way. Our noble leader likes the formality of my first name and uses it when he wants to impress people." He leaned close again, "Which means he uses it all the time. I suppose he's good at doing what a college president is supposed to do, which is raising money, keeping the alumni happy, presenting a good public image for Wheatleigh. But he sure puts a low priority on the actual educational process, especially the social sciences. If something is not precisely quantitative, he doesn't know how to deal with it and can really muck things up. So I do my best to keep our department off his radar screen. Please try to work with me on this, okay?"

She nodded. "Wow, I wasn't expecting to land right in the middle of campus politics like this. Of course, if you asked me Friday morning what my plans were for the weekend, I would have never guessed in a million years that I would be moving to New England and starting a new job at a school I've never even heard of before."

Rich chuckled, "Feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland, do you, Audrey?" He stopped their progress in front of a three story brick building with ivy climbing up the walls in several places, which was clearly one of the earliest buildings on the quad. He waved to encompass the entirety of it. "Welcome to Abernathy Hall, your home, office,

classroom and library. Gets very handy when the snows come, can't beat the commute." He led her up the stairs, opened the door and, with a flourish, bowed her inside.

She looked around and gasped. The center of the building was a vast open space with a mixture of library style shelving and conversational groupings of tables and chairs. Around the perimeter of the room, between the bookcases, were doorways, leading, she could see, into classrooms. A curving stairway drew the eye up to the second story, which was open to the floor below, contributing to the airy feeling of the space.

Rich nodded in satisfaction at her reaction. "Nice, isn't it? I've always been grateful that they let the architect's design stand and didn't try to close things up by putting more rooms in upstairs." He pointed to a mahogany desk nearby. "That's basically our other duty in addition to teaching. This is the school's library collection for history; they moved everything here when Yardley Library got tight on space. So whenever the building is open to the students, we need to make sure that the desk is manned."

"To prevent theft."

"And answer questions and just generally be a deterrent to misbehavior. We're one of the smaller departments on campus and don't have a lot of traffic through here; students have been known to try to use the stacks for a little hanky panky. When winter hits it can be hard for couples to find a nice warm space on campus for some private time alone." He led the way to the doors on the right hand side of the main room. "These are the classrooms John used. Since your schedule is pretty grueling with all your classes back to back, John liked to move between the rooms so that lingering students from your eight o'clock class, Ancient World, don't interrupt your arriving students for your nine o'clock class, Asian Studies, then back to the first classroom for the ten o'clock class, European History, and, you guessed it, one last move for the eleven o'clock class of American Experience. The system seems to work well. If you are unhappy with it, we can talk about it. Although, I have to confess to an ulterior motive of using as much space as possible to prevent other departments from trying to muscle in on our building space."

She nodded understanding, "I like this idea of moving between the classrooms, but if I'm going to be here for very long, I'd like to talk about perhaps easing up on the

scheduling. Why cram four classes into Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings and leave Tuesday and Thursday and all the afternoons open?”

He gripped her shoulder. “We’ll have none of that kind of talk. I want to make that clear right from the start.”

She looked surprised, “I have no input at all on the scheduling? None? Can’t even talk about it?”

“Not that, although you don’t, really. I meant there will be no expressions of doubt about you continuing here. You are here for at least five years, there is no doubt about that; the school will get that promised endowment.”

“And what do you get, Dr. Head of the Department?”

“I get to keep my job.” He looked at her surprise and laughed. “Did you think Boxford would part with any cash? Once you get to know him, you’ll see how outlandish that idea is. My significant motivation is continued employment. If you go, I go, plain and simple. It’s a hell of a good motivator, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh Rich, I’m so sorry! First John Chambers gets his employability severely compromised and now your job is in danger, too! This is completely outrageous; if I knew who to yell at, I would. But I don’t know who set this all up.”

“Thank you for that lovely concern, but, as I just said, we will not be talking or thinking that way. You are here for five years. Accept that and get used to the idea. When we get to the part of the tour that is your living space, I will be happy to hear any renovation requests you may have, because, my dear, you are going to be here a while!”

“ ‘My dear’?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it; I can be a bit old fashioned in my speech patterns.” He shrugged, “I’m a traditionalist, probably what drew me to history in the first place, I’m an old geezer in a young body. Or maybe I’m just a schoolmaster who has been reincarnated into a history professor.”

She smiled at him. “It’s okay, in fact I think it’s cute. I love when I go south and suddenly everyone is calling me sugar, honey, or darling or when I go to England and I’m love or lovey. It’s just so much friendlier. It’s a shame that everyone is so concerned about what is politically correct to say without even waiting to know if the person is offended or not.”

“I’m glad to hear that you are so receptive to my old fashionedness.”

“I’m pretty traditional too. It is interesting to hear your thoughts about that; I never thought to question whether that has anything to do with why I am so interested in the past.”

“We’ll have to explore the idea further over dinner sometime. But for now, I’d like us to keep moving. We have a good amount to go over before I can hand off the syllabi and let you start planning your classes for tomorrow morning.” He returned them to the main space and started walking towards the back. “The stairway is used by the public, but there is a small elevator in the back here for our use. It provides a good separation for our private living quarters since access to the third floor is deliberately made unobtrusive and students are strictly forbidden to go up there. There is a second staircase available for emergency use, but it is extremely narrow and steep.” He looked over his shoulder and saw that she was lagging behind. “Audrey? Do you have a question?”

“I don’t want to seem touchy after I just said that I didn’t mind your speech patterns issue, but aren’t you assuming quite a bit when you say we’ll have to discuss things over dinner sometime?”

“I guess that wasn’t made clear to you. We’re both living here together. I just assumed that we would inevitably share some mealtimes, who wants to eat alone all the time? Certainly John and I used to trade off on the cooking.”

She threw up her hands and stepped back. “Whoa there! I don’t cook. I may be traditional in many things, but don’t assume that because I’m a woman that you’ve suddenly got yourself a live in cook. And what the dickens do you mean, we’ll be living together?”

He reached out, grabbed her arm and got her moving again. “Do you always stop walking when you talk? Please try to keep up. I’ll explain if you will just give me a chance.”

He interrupted himself to explain the operation of the elevator, which was rather antiquated, and then resumed once they reached the second floor. “This building’s living space was modeled after the British university house system. We each have our private rooms, and then we both have use of shared space, most notably, the kitchen, which is on

this floor. It's a bit inconvenient for us at times, although I suppose it is like many private homes where the kitchen is downstairs from the bedrooms; but having the kitchen on this floor works very well when the department has events and refreshments are served. The main problem is that it is not our, yours and mine, private space. Our offices are on this floor, as are some conference and study rooms, which means that students are frequently wandering around the second floor during the day. They are not banned from the kitchen; in fact some of the more serious senior history majors like to eat their lunch here rather than traipse across campus to the dining hall. So I warn you now, keep any private foods that you are not willing to share, hidden, disguised or clearly labeled. You know how hungry students always seem to be, and a box of cookies or a container of ice cream will not survive the munchies when they go looking for something to nibble on. All alcohol should remain upstairs where the students won't have any possibility of access." He opened the refrigerator to show her the labeled food, did a double take and started rummaging, although there wasn't much in there, "Aw, hell! My piece of cake that I brought home from the restaurant the other night is gone. Man, I hate that! I even wrote 'Death to thieves' on the box."

He sighed as he straightened up, "Well, proves my point, I guess. Come on, I'll give you a quick peek at your office and then take you upstairs so you can unpack and settle in."

Their offices were on opposite sides of the floor, each with an adjacent small meeting room. There were a couple of the work space cubicles prized by students, to finish out the floor plan along the sides and the kitchen, on the center back wall, was flanked by two larger conference rooms.

"I've left you all the materials you need for a quick jump start for teaching tomorrow in those folders on your desk, along with the textbooks John used. You can explore the filing cabinets for more in-depth information once you get a chance to catch your breath. The official story is that John left for personal reasons. Please do your best to squash any speculation that he was fired or that there was any misconduct. The poor guy is going to find getting a new job tough enough as it is without those kinds of rumors floating around. And, as Boxford said, although I think you had zoned out by then, there is to be absolutely no mention of the financial aspects of your employment. Remember,

we want to stay under the radar.” He pointed to a stack of packing boxes. “I spent my weekend sorting through everything, figuring out what belongs to the department and what needs to be sent on to John, once I know where he is. I’ll have Maintenance move them into storage upstairs tomorrow to get them out of your way.”

“He left without clearing out his office?” Her eyes were wide as she looked around. “No wonder you were asking me if he was okay.”

“He taught his Friday morning classes and went upstairs. I heard him use the elevator a little later, I’m guessing that’s when he took his suitcases out, but I didn’t see or talk to him. I found his keys and a note when I went looking for him to see if he wanted to go shoot some pool, a frequent Friday night activity for us.”

“There’s a pool table?” She looked around like she expected to see it hiding in the shadows.

Rich laughed. “We’ve got a nice set-up here, but it doesn’t run to that! We used to shoot pool at a place in town.” He gestured for her to step out of the office and pulled out his keys to lock the door. “Your keys are upstairs. I have a master key that lets me into your office. You do not have access to mine, but your key will open everything else.” They headed for the elevator.

“My key, singular, will open everything except your office, and my keys, plural, are upstairs?”

“You only need the one key for Abernathy Hall, we had everything re-keyed a few years back to simplify things; but, as a faculty member, you also have some keys to various other places on campus. They should be labeled.”

The elevator doors opened and they stepped out into a short hallway, which delivered them to a slightly shabby, and obviously well used, living room, located in the center of the building over the space that was open on the first and second floors. It had large windows on the front of the building looking out over the quad and doors on each of the other walls.

Rich gestured, “We went with the obvious set-up for practicality. Your rooms are over your office, which is over your classrooms. That way, when you are working, no one is clumping around overhead. My rooms are on the other side with the same set-up, and there is a set of rooms there,” he pointed to the rear of the building, “over the kitchen,

for visiting lecturers or scholars. Or,” he sighed, “for another professor, if the department should ever grow.”

“You don’t sound very optimistic about that possibility.”

“Wheatleigh has a stated intention of remaining its current size, to focus on maintaining the high standard for students accepted here and increasing its exclusivity. While it makes a nod towards the traditional liberal arts, Wheatleigh’s focus shifted towards the physical sciences a few decades back. It continues to pour a lot of capital into keeping on the cutting edge in certain sciences. It is starting to have quite a reputation in computer sciences and heavily computer dependent sciences like genetics. The number of history majors is very small and the History Department will not see a penny of any funds that result from your employment here. But hopefully, they won’t come looking to raid our budget anymore.”

He turned the knob and threw open the door to Audrey’s rooms. “You have a bedroom, a small sitting room and an en suite bathroom. I forgot to point out that there’s a small bathroom in the back hallway by the elevator for visitors to the common space living room, so you don’t have to worry about sharing access to your bathroom with anyone if there is a party or something. I put fresh linens on the bed and towels in the bathroom. We don’t have any housekeeping up here. They clean the first two floors, but stay out of our private living space, so we are on our own. Obviously the situation was unusual surrounding your hiring, so we haven’t had a chance to do any painting or anything, but new hires are entitled to a small re-decorating budget. Just let me know what you want and I will make sure that Boxford makes it happen.”

“I thought we were staying under the radar.”

He grinned, “Honey, you are the goose that is going to lay the golden egg for Wheatleigh. I’ll make it clear to our fearless leader that we want to keep you happy with your surroundings. But you are right, so decide pretty quickly what you want so I can get it taken care of and we can fade into the background once something new captures Boxford’s attention, okay?”

She nodded as he turned to leave. He made it to the door before turning around with his finger raised in emphasis, “Just so we are clear, your golden goose status gets

you no leeway on your job performance. You will have to meet the forty-eight hour grading rule just like the rest of the faculty. Understand?”

She nodded. “Yes, Boss.” And stuck out her tongue as he closed the door.

His laugh floated back to her along with his warning, “I saw that!”