

Chapter One

A woman in jeans and a blazer, a scuffed green canvas book bag slung over one shoulder, had taken up vigil in the corridor outside A. J. Ferinelli's basement office in the Academic Center. It wasn't an everyday occurrence at seven o'clock on a Thursday morning in October. But it certainly was an improvement, A. J. decided, over the night janitor finishing his rounds.

Her back was turned, revealing dark hair in an intricate twist at the nape of her neck. She didn't hear him coming. They had installed new carpet over the patchy tile flooring of the building several months ago.

"Looking for someone—?"

She swung around in his direction. The reaction was a trifle too quick, anxious and he could sense the questions close to the surface in those intense blue eyes.

"Professor Ferinelli, we talked some time ago," she said, "at a faculty meeting. The schedule on the door says you come in early on

Thursdays.”

A manila folder full of quizzes tucked under one arm made it hard to maneuver, but A. J. managed to shift his briefcase and keys so he could shake her hand. Her grasp matched her eye contact, straightforward. Still something about her body language, tense and guarded, told him whatever brought her here at the crack of dawn, it was not to discuss class scheduling.

“A. J.’s fine or just Ferinelli,” he said. “That Professor business always sounds so fossilized, conjuring up images of ivy-covered halls and moss-covered faculty. Dinosaurs. Vaguely depressing.”

A cautious hint of a smile played at the corner of her generous mouth. She nodded, “A. J. then.”

At fifty-one, Ferinelli had the distinction of being the longest survivor among the younger faculty members at Bolland, a struggling four-year liberal arts college in mountainous rural Pennsylvania. Armed with a political science doctorate from the University of Chicago and eventually a night school law degree, he had begun teaching at an age when a lot of students were only starting their studies. They had given him tenure by thirty. Another record.

All that was not without costs. The most obvious was his once-curly mop of hair, a casualty of the stress dished out by a curmudgeon on his thesis committee. It never totally grew back, and what was left A. J. kept tightly cropped. Penetrating hazel eyes, the horn-rimmed glasses and lean, austere profile reinforced the look. All business.

“You’re Pomerantz. Samantha isn’t it?”

“Sam, third year instructor in developmental math. Once in a blue moon a course in college algebra if I’m lucky. Otherwise bonehead stuff.”

“But doing something unusual with math anxiety, as I recall. Singing?”

“Jingles, rap, you name it,” she hesitated, then launched into a restrained but catchy, “*Geometr-y-y-y is fun for me. Hey-heyyyy, yeh, woe-ah, woe.*”

“If you’re thinking of giving American Idol a try,” A. J. chuckled appreciatively, “you’d have my vote.”

Sam flushed. “Corny maybe, but it works—reduces the stress, as long as your classroom is nowhere near mine. We laugh a lot.”

“Fascinating, innovative teaching. I’ve got to believe even Pythagoras would sit up and take notice.”

Apparently he should have as well. Although A. J. vaguely remembered he and Sam Pomerantz had talked before, he realized he hadn’t been really listening. This woman cared about students, had a quick, creative intelligence, a sense of humor. Attractive, he concluded, in a unconventional way. It had something to do with her eyes—blue or green, it depended on the light.

“Thanks, but I really can’t claim my approach is all that original,” Sam said. “Of all people, Leibniz beat me to it, a little nugget from Intro to Philosophy ‘back in the day’. The gist of it, music gives all the fun of counting, without actually counting. Students seem to *get* that intuitively, though when the light bulb finally goes on for them—well, as a teacher there isn’t a bigger thrill in the world.”

Visibly embarrassed, she dropped her gaze. “Sorry, I didn’t intend to get into all that,” she said. “I was just hoping . . . thought you just might have a minute . . .”

A frown settled in between his brows as he consulted his watch. “A seminar at eight, unfortunately. I’m giving a quiz. Constitutional Law. Barbaric scheduling a class before the caffeine kicks in, but it weeds out the faint of heart.”

Sam’s smile flickered, vanished. “Of course, I should have guessed . . . knew I was taking a chance coming here, but then I don’t know many senior faculty,” she said. “And when my . . . when the students need help, they say you can be trusted . . .”

That half question at the end spoke volumes. A. J. was willing to bet she hadn’t talked to any of her other colleagues and his was the only name on her short list. Student scuttlebutt or not, he suspected the lack of options scared her, plenty. Not waiting for a response, she already had turned to go.

A. J. began fumbling with his keys. It wasn’t exactly private out there in the hallway. “There’s no guarantee I can help,” he told her, “but if you can live with me having to dash out of here at some point—yes, this much I can promise. Everything said in this office stays in this office.”

Muttering softly under his breath, he bent over the lock trying to get his office door to function, not easy since he accidentally had dropped the keys in the garbage disposal about a month ago. The door

itself yielded to a gentle push, an anticlimax after all that effort. Sam followed him into the room, watching silently from just inside the doorway as he cleared away the debris on a battered leather sofa enough for her to sit if she chose.

“I was dead serious about the caffeine,” he said apologetically. “If you give me a minute, I’ll get the coffee going.”

“Thanks,” she nodded. “I’d like that.”

Quietly she shut the door behind her. Not, he noticed, before a quick glance along the corridor in either direction. As he renegotiated the plugs in his overloaded electrical outlet, excused himself for a brisk jaunt down the hall for tap water and scouted around for unused coffee filters, he sensed her sizing up where she found herself, taking a measure of his turf before she tentatively settled in on the far end of the sofa.

It occurred to A. J., he probably should have turned his long-suffering housecleaner Margaret loose on this place long ago. A messy business, teaching. His floor-to-ceiling bookcases were crammed to overflowing with volumes, supplemented by stacks of papers and files on the floor. On the window ledge amid a collection of mismatched coffee mugs, half of which had a film of mold on top of the murky contents, stood an articulated plastic model of a skeleton, and totally out of character on the face of it, a marble bust of Athena. The latter was a lucky junk shop find, a copy of a copy of a copy—Roman from a Greek original, fourth century AD—hand-chiseled for the modern tourist trade before resin or pressed stone versions took over the market. The skeleton was sporting a crudely lettered stick-’em note that read, *Carpe diem*.

Time was not on their side. “So,” he said, easing gingerly into his slightly off-kilter swivel chair, “what can I do for you? Whatever it is, I meant what I said. It stays behind these four walls.”

Sam hesitated. “My career could be on the line here.”

“Understood.”

“It’s the Dean—”

“Bremer.”

“Yes.”

A. J. felt a throbbing at his temples, suspected what was coming. Still, he waited for her to say it.

“It’s out there in the rumor mill that the administration has the axes out, chopping programs,” she said. “With enrollment tanking,

they're looking for human sacrifices to balance the budget. I'm told my classes are on the hit list."

There was no point in mincing words about her situation. "Remedial courses were always on shaky ground around here," he said, "from Day One. When enrollments were on the skids a couple of years ago, alarmists forced through programs like the math equivalency exam to give students a way around the more flunk-happy faculty. It didn't mean the traditionalists among us liked it."

None of that would have been news to Sam or that hiring her was the Admissions Office's idea of a Plan B. When the competency exam proved to be so tough that few if any tested out, a developmental math course was put in place to help prep for the test.

"You would think it would be tough for anyone to complain, when the pass rate in math has been climbing steadily," she said.

There wasn't really a tactful way to explain. "Put yourself in the Old Guard's shoes," A. J. said. "A new guy on the block like you triples the math test-out numbers and students keep claiming you're doing it without giving away the store—"

"So there's gotta be a hitch. It's too simple to chalk up the change to solid teaching."

"You've got the general idea," he told her. "Rampant paranoia and hardball politics aren't so farfetched as bedfellows go—at Bolland or on just about any campus these days, I suspect. With few exceptions, across the board colleges are struggling with tight donor money and skyrocketing costs."

By now the coffee pot had begun to shudder, the sound of water just before it boils, on the edge. Appropriate, he concluded, given the expression on his colleague's face.

"Politics." Sam looked at him intently, drew in her breath, then let it out again slowly. "Well around here, we're talking cesspool levels. When I went to see Dean Bremer last week for a soul talk about the curriculum, I spent the better part of the hour—"

"Fighting him off."

Sam blinked. A deep flush spread across her pale features. "How did . . . you *already knew*."

"Only that the Dean seems to be a serial womanizer," A. J. said quickly, softening his tone. "As an academic leader, the man came here with impeccable credentials, the champion of standards, truth, beauty and the liberal arts. Not exactly the embodiment of any

of those—certainly not what the faculty had in mind when the majority recommended hiring the man.”

The coffee maker gave one last audible sigh, then silence. Grateful for the reprieve, A. J. ducked his head, intent on transferring the steaming brew into two of the cleaner mugs—though not without a swipe in each of them with a dish towel first. The results weren’t exactly Starbucks, but better than nothing, potent.

Not the best of times to hand his colleague an open container of scalding liquid. “Cream or sugar?”

“Black’s fine.”

Sam just stared into the depths of the mug without a word, her expression unreadable. A. J. felt for her. Personally he had never been one of the Dean’s fans. Still, this seemed like unusually brazen, even for Bremer.

Now in his mid-fifties, Dean Wilton Honore Bremer was an Oxford grad with a shock of prematurely white hair, two divorces behind him and an ingratiating charm he aimed at a fair number of single women faculty and staff over the past five years of his tenure at Bolland. But then, as far as A. J. could see, those attentions also seemed to end as quickly as they began.

“I don’t mean to sound callous,” he said, “or that I’m condoning any of this. A few students have complained from time to time. I’m sure you understand, for an individual professor it’s tough to bring those concerns to the judicial committee when no one involved has been willing to go on record.”

Sam winced. “Afraid of flunking out, I can empathize. He . . . I think it’s an instinct with the man, sensing what he can get by with. But still, I have got to believe there are other colleagues who must suspect there’s a problem—”

“I’ve not been privy to any of the speculation, if rumors are out there. Unfortunately, it’s not unique to Bolland—an amazing number of good-old-boy-faculty have some borderline Neanderthal tendencies themselves when it comes to women,” A. J. said. “Bremer also apparently knows how to hide behind the unspoken glass ceiling. No one ever said the man wasn’t slick, that’s the dangerous part. Someone needs to nail the guy—”

“If by someone you mean me,” Sam said deliberately, all the while watching him intently, “you need to know, my first month here, Bremer and I . . . we had this unfortunate thing going.”

It was coming back to him as she spoke. Crude faculty gossip had floated through the department some time back about this math teacher who ostensibly was getting it on with a Dean. Bolland was a small campus.

“Legally the situation is unambiguous,” A. J. told her, not unkindly. “No means *no*—past history, irrelevant.”

There was more, he read it in her eyes, something she wasn’t ready to talk about. Odds on, his colleague was understating not just what had transpired in the Dean’s office last week, but why. Evading his gaze, Sam eased forward on the sofa, took her time depositing her now half-empty coffee mug on a precariously stacked pile of books.

“Thanks for the coffee, for listening.” She seemed suddenly self-conscious, as if afraid she had revealed too much. “But at this rate you won’t . . . your seminar is going to be wondering if you—”

“They’ll live. Don’t give it a second thought.”

She had begun gathering her belongings, her eye on the door. “Truth is, I’m really not sure what I’m doing here . . . what I thought you, what anyone could do.”

“Ostensibly rank has some privileges, even at Bolland. For starters, I can keep an ear to the ground, try to sort out truth from fiction when it comes to possible cuts, try to figure out how much support Bremer really has out there.”

“That would be helpful.”

“In the meantime,” he found himself saying, “if you’re up for it, I suggest you let me buy you lunch in the faculty dining room.”

Her head jerked up—Sam was no less surprised at the offer than he. It had been three years since his wife died. This would be the closest he had come to being seen alone on campus with a woman ever since.

“I’m not sure I understand,” she said slowly. Her eyes never left his face.

“*Lunch*. It sounds like you could use a friend,” he said evenly. “Plus the Dean hangs out in the dining room on a regular basis. At the very least, showing up over there with a senior faculty member, male no less, would confuse the heck out of the rumor mill. It’s an in-your-face move as political gestures go, I’ll admit.”

“I’ve heard of worse,” she said after a conspicuous pause. “It might just . . . yes, thank you. I would appreciate it. Very much.”

“No problem. Noon?”

“I’ll be there. Except we’re going Dutch.”

A. J. nodded. “You got it.”

Hand on the doorknob, Sam turned and looked at him. Her smile was back, tentative but nice. “Wishful thinking, but you’re right,” she said, “I would love to see that sorry excuse for a human being on a fast track out of here. Trust me, he deserves it!”

A. J. just stood there staring at the empty doorway—not a guy’s average office hour walk-in, that’s for sure. Revving into high gear, he grabbed his briefcase, locked up and tore out the nearest exit in the direction of the main classroom building.

Sam Pomerantz was nowhere in sight, but her predictions were dead-on. Halfway across the quad, the carillon started playing the Bolland fight song, dashing any illusions he had about making it to his Con Law seminar on time. He burst into his second-floor classroom, red in the face and out of breath, to find the entire seminar watching for his arrival as if collectively expecting the ax to fall any minute.

The quiz. He had forgotten he was giving a quiz. His thoughts unprintable, A. J. rummaged in his briefcase for the questions and court cases he had run off the night before, unfortunately now MIA. In his haste, he must have left them on the desk. Sheepish at his out-of-character logistical faux pas, he told the students to fend for themselves, review their notes, while he sprinted back to get the missing folder.

Good God, they were young. A. J. stared out at the faces bent over the quiz sheets on the desk tops in front of them—vaguely making a pact with himself to start working out. Maybe even cut back on the blasted caffeine. His heart was still in hyperdrive after that humiliating relay across the quad. Whatever the cause of the abrupt time warp that followed, he found himself no longer a detached observer, monitoring what was going on in his silent classroom. Their struggles were becoming inseparable from his own.

All those questions, even the knowledge behind them, were never the motive, only the excuse—to push the limits of the known, the knowable. In the Testing itself, writ large, is where the journey began for him, where it always begins, the awe-filled, fearful pursuit of the inner sanctum, the holy of holies. The Life of the Mind.

Hunched over a gunmetal desk in the cramped steel cubicles of the library stacks at Chicago, he wrestled with the selfsame Great

Eternals, the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Towering walls of musty volumes became at once his sanctuary and his prison. Over the narrow aisles and drafty cells, bare bulbs hung from the ceiling, scant illumination at best. A. J. could have located the cardinal points of that cosmos in his sleep.

Library of Congress subclass HXHX1-970.7 Socialism. HX806-811 Utopias. The Ideal State. Library of Congress subclass JC—Political Theory. The State. Theories of the State.

Pushed to the limits, he would close his eyes, draw in the acrid-sweet smell of ink and paper, intent on internalizing the contents of the yellowing pages in his hands. *I will not let you go*, the Soul cries to the dawn, *until you bless me*. Heady stuff for a tousle-haired kid from Long Island.

Decades ago. And yet, for the man and scholar—the academic—he had become, even the simple act of stepping into the hushed confines of a bookstore, the smell of printer’s ink, the sight of all those spines and titles turned outward could still evoke in him the same intense, inexplicable longing. Intoxicating. Unsatisfiable.

Those were different times in higher education. In the golden decades when he was earning his doctorate and the early years at Bolland, all it took was hanging out a sign, College or University, and the students came in record numbers. Dorms and building projects sprang up like cement block and brick-clad mushrooms on what often had been cow pastures. Grant money flowed freely, spent with equal abandon on essentials and amenities. Board membership promised the perks of a glorified country club, replete with a flowing bar. Civilized. Collegial. Whatever their issues with one another on campus, faculty socialized freely after hours, cultivated the mystique of a campus family.

Family. The images were like a knife twisting in his gut. All that was before he lost his wife, Anne, and their unborn son at the hands of a drunk driver. Three years of grief had been a relentless tutor. He learned to reach inward, grasp at the only constants left to him—his passion for teaching, his research. These alone had not failed him. These alone he could trust.

In his well-ordered universe, Sam Pomerantz standing in the hallway outside his office simply didn’t compute. He had defined himself as a political scientist. The dynamics of human governance

were his stock in trade. But as he replayed Sam's story in his head, A. J. realized it had never occurred to him—not once—that while he had been withdrawing more and more from campus life, the community around him had not been standing still. The Bolland he thought he knew had been changing, evolving, mutating. *Not*, it seems, for the better.

He sensed the students were getting restless. The period would be ending soon and the bulk of the class had already packed it in. A few stragglers still hung in there, bent over their quiz sheets, confused and uncertain from the look of it. They weren't alone on that score. It was as if A. J. suddenly felt uncomfortable in his own skin—like a man abruptly and unexpectedly emerging from a long, in his case self-imposed, sleep.

"Tough stuff," one of the brighter juniors muttered, depositing his quiz on the stack piling up on his professor's desk. Tough stuff, indeed.

"We'll debrief," A. J. flashed what he hoped was a reassuring smile, "don't sweat it. There's still a good week before midterms. Consider this a trial run."

Three minutes to go. There wasn't much sense in prolonging their misery.

"You've given it your best shot," A. J. said. "Let's wind it up, call it good."

A guy could hope, anyway. Gathering up the remaining exams, A. J. headed back to his office, where a preliminary run at grading several random tests confirmed his worst nightmare. For all his prep time, there were still far too many blanks on the answer sheets to generate anything approaching a normal bell-curve. Several students had already guessed as much—dropped by to see him, anxious about the results. By noon he had a monster headache and was late for lunch.

At least if he had handpicked a time or cast of characters for orchestrating his impromptu show of support for Sam Pomerantz, he couldn't have done a better job of it. The faculty dining room was crowded, a microcosm of departmental and divisional politics in action. As usual Bremer was ensconced front and center with a couple of his cronies from Natural Sciences, and over in the far corner, A. J. saw an historian locked in animated debate with an adjunct in languages and a tenured member of the art department. Perfect.

Professor Enoch Slaughter, senior psychology guru, his tie askew, was balancing a tray in one hand and a battered leather briefcase in the other. He was mumbling to himself as he picked his way between the chrome and Formica tables to his usual spot, something about what had or had not transpired in his day.

It was the predictable list—campus gadfly, power broker, nervous newbies—one that hadn't changed much since A. J.'s last appearance in the faculty hangout. The dynamics at work in the campus lunch room were his intellectual life's blood, with one unsettling twist. He suddenly found himself seeing the assemblage through someone else's eyes, not just his own.

Like any community, Bolland had never been without its proverbial warts and moles, the stuff of indulgent humor and much head-wagging over the years. A. J. had always defended the cast of characters as vaguely eccentric, harmless. Sam Pomerantz had put a face on that lie. The campus of her experience had become a snake pit, with precious few resources apparently with which to extricate herself. *Except him*, at least as she saw it, a sobering thought.

At first glance she seemed to have given up on him, bailed, but then A. J. spotted her, standing off to his right just inside the door—alone, chewing on her lower lip. Sam looked up from consulting her watch, visibly relieved to see him. His heart went out at her determined attempt at a smile.

“Sorry . . . I tried to call but I got your voicemail,” he said. “On the way out the door, I had a last minute, panicked walk-in.”

“Amazing what a D on a pre-midterm quiz will do for a prof's popularity.”

“You guessed it,” A. J. chuckled softly, shook his head. “With midterms in two weeks, the guy was . . . does anyone still say *freaked?*”

Sam wasn't laughing. “Freaked. Right now, it makes perfect sense to me.”

“I hear you,” A. J. said in undertone as he reached out and helped her readjust her shoulder bag that was in danger of sliding to the floor. “It's too late for us to back out now. We're already an ‘item’. . . *showtime*. And if this display of solidarity of ours is going work, subtlety is *not* going to cut it.”

Sam's eyebrow arched. “I'm not sure I follow—”

“*When they mess with you, they mess with me*. Crude, but

effective. I suggest you take a deep breath, brace yourself.”

“Bring it on . . . I think . . .”

With a reassuring smile and his hand at her elbow, A. J. deliberately drew her close alongside him, then aimed them toward the snack bar counter. Sam had fair warning what was coming. Still, reflex took over. She stiffened at his touch, seemed about to pull away before a subtle tightening of his grip stopped her.

“Sorry,” she breathed. “I wasn’t—”

“No problem. We’re good.”

A. J. felt for her. This was going to be a heck of a lot tougher than she thought. Jaw tight, he didn’t allow himself to back off an inch as he waited for Sam to order lunch, then did the same himself.

“If it helps, this macho stuff—invading someone’s space—isn’t my style either,” he told her quietly after the lone snack bar worker was out of earshot. “But then you already know that. I think you also know, before you start fishing around for your wallet, it makes sense to let *me* pick up the tab.”

Sam blinked, appeared about to protest. Instead, she forced a tight smile, let out her breath in an audible rush.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it,” he said.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Chuckling softly to himself, A. J. laid a single tray on the counter directly in front of them. The student working the snack bar didn’t ask. He just loaded the tray with enough silverware, napkins and condiments for two before turning back to the grill to rescue several burgers—A. J.’s among them—from a potential conflagration.

A. J. and Sam made eye contact. “You okay?” he said.

“I could ask you the same thing. First a shellshocked student, now this. Some would say you’re a glutton for punishment.”

“Or something. That student is Pre-law, my advisee,” A. J. winced, “and our little come-to-Jesus moment was way overdue. He *knows* nonstop memorization is par for the course. The review session was loaded with dire warnings to nail the basics of the cases we’ve been studying . . . names, majority and minority opinions. I even cut the class a break, heavily slanted the quiz toward multiple bluff or guess. Heaven knows what the guy was thinking. But then he wasn’t the only one who had a meltdown—just by far the brightest.”

“Cocky, lazy or all of the above?”

“Distracted,” he amended. “Joel Van Susten. The guy is trying

to do it all—captain of the tennis team, student government, editor of the student weekly and a damn articulate leader when it comes to campus causes. Unfortunately, the downside tends to be a substantial gap between promise and performance in the classroom. I ought to have cracked down on him ages ago.”

“Or maybe you’re being a tad hard on yourself *and* him,” Sam said. “Joel stuck it out in my course, twice, until he finally nailed the math competency exam. Aced it.”

“Now why do I think it was *you* who had something to do with that?”

Their lunches were up. A. J. caught Sam’s hint of a frown, but outside of that she didn’t put up a fuss when he shoved a ragged assortment of coins and bills at the counter attendant. It was more than enough to cover her fruit yogurt, side salad and mineral water, plus his burger and cholesterol-laden plate of breaded jalapeño poppers with dipping sauce. The coffee—thick, black high-test—was his fifth cup of the morning.

“Combat pay,” A. J. told the harried snack bar employee as he shoved the change into the tip jar sitting on the counter.

The guy grinned. “See ya in class, Ms. Pomerantz,” he said.

Sam gave the young man a reassuring thumbs-up. “Good job on that worksheet,” she said. “Go for it!”

Grace under fire, A. J. had to hand it to her, despite the rocky start. Awkwardly balancing their tray and with Sam in tow, he crossed the dining area and staked a claim on the last remaining table for two, somewhat removed from the thick of things.

“Perfect,” he said. No sense pushing it.

He would have loved to force eye contact with Bremer, but the Dean was having none of it. It was impossible by now to miss the openly questioning looks some of their colleagues shot in their direction. Mercifully, Sam didn’t appear to have noticed. With a puzzled expression she had been watching A. J. sort through and distribute the items on their lunch tray.

“Problems?”

“Just thinking,” Sam hesitated, “you certainly have an interesting notion of food groups . . .”

His explosion of laughter was enough to turn heads at several of the neighboring tables. “Unlike certain past Commanders-in-Chief,” he said, “broccoli is about the *only* green thing I enjoy. Not on

the menu. The rest are more or less tolerable, if well disguised. Breeding, lots of sauce, creativity is good.”

Sam’s eyebrow arched. “Somehow . . . I guess I would have figured you for a fellow health nut. No red meat. Low everything.”

“Certifiable, maybe. Health . . . doubtful,” he shrugged. “Too many students, chronic insomnia. I could put together quite a list.”

His eight o’clock Con Law class was no accident, he explained. When Contemporary Political Issues, his survey course, had the dubious distinction of winning excellence-in-teaching honors a half-dozen years running, all it accomplished was to send his enrollments through the roof. He wasn’t about to flunk out the overflow and the administration was opposed to quotas. So, just let the schedule weed out the less motivated. Passive aggressive, but it works.

“Some quid pro quo, you also have to *teach* at that hour . . . !” Sam’s laughter faded almost as soon as it began.

“*Why, Ferinelli, you’ve deigned to join us!*”

Startled, A. J. slowly laid down his fork. He knew that voice. The sensual undertone—Tennessee Williams meets way too many BBC costume dramas—was a dead-giveaway. New was the malice fueling it.

Tray in hand, self-styled “Brit lit” expert in the English department, Winona a.k.a. Winna Dougherty must have gone out of her way to stop alongside their table. For some time now, A. J. had the uncomfortable feeling the woman—a twice-divorced ash-blonde, late forties—had more on her mind than the Bronte sisters whenever their paths crossed on campus.

Winna didn’t give him a chance to respond. “*And with our own Ms. Pomerantz, I see.*”

Sam was tracking down the last bit of kiwi at the bottom of her yogurt container, which didn’t totally explain the slow flush spreading across her cheekbones. A. J. had to admire her grit. When she looked up from the task at hand, her eyes were a steely gray in the face of Winna’s blistering scrutiny.

“Hello, Winna,” she said.

“So, are you folks meeting—or eating?”

A. J. wasn’t about to let the woman join them. “Sorry,” he said, “solving the problems of the college, Winna. Some other time.”

The look Winna shot in Sam’s direction could have frozen

solvent. “Have *fun*, you two!”

Instead, the woman headed for Dean Bremer’s table. Audible even over the escalating conversation level in the room, she held forth on enrollment ratios and academic standards. Pointed, too pointed.

“Sorry, that was my fault,” Sam said softly. “I didn’t intend to drag you into this.”

“Winna is in a class by herself,” he said. “I’m not sure how much clout she has, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“She has enough. Tenured, plus she sits on the faculty Personnel Committee.”

Something in Sam’s voice stopped him, mid-bite. “And you think she has you on some personal hit-list,” he said.

“Rumor has it, I had the honor of displacing her in Dean Bremer’s address book. Only Winna actually *enjoyed* the status.”

“Ouch.”

Eyes averted, Sam was making an art form of accordion-folding an unused napkin left behind on the tray. “She chaired the search committee when Bolland hired me—knows how badly I wanted this job after teaching endless overfull sections of intro math at a community college in Ohio. Adjuncts like me were two notches below union scale from the custodians and grounds crew. So, when Winna called to set up an interview here, I thought I had it made.”

“I can imagine. Winna would have given you an impressive dose of the usual Bolland wannabe-Ivy hype.”

“Try the promise of a decent salary,” she started to bristle, caught herself, “and yes, students with a touch of fire in the gut. As another woman on the faculty, I honestly thought Winna would be on my side. She certainly talked a good line, early on anyway.”

There was no arguing with the pain in her voice. “Winna is out for Winna,” he said gruffly. “You don’t deserve this.”

She just looked at him, then slowly straightened in her chair. “According to the college catalog, I understand you earned both a PhD and a law degree.”

“Civil,” he said, “passed the bar, but not practicing though.”

“*Could* you . . .,” she breathed, “take a case, I mean?”

A. J. looked at her, hard. “If you’re thinking of legal action, I would think twice,” he said slowly. “Only a handful of harassment cases ever surfaced around here in my day, all unsuccessful. In the end, they always came down to He-said-She-said. And all of them

were internal campus grievances—nothing as risky, publicly combative or embarrassing to the institution as a lawsuit. When an in-house complaint fails, at least it’s all in the family. Awkward, uncomfortable, but potentially survivable.”

He could read the uncertainty in her eyes. “The thing is, I really need a lawyer who knows this place . . . hoped you might—”

“I *have* drafted grievances before,” he said, “if it came to that. And one of my best friends is a labor lawyer, local—a darn good one. Problem is, what winds up on those documents is not the issue. The tough part, the nitty-gritty of the process, you would have to be prepared to level not just with me, but publicly and out loud with every single colleague on this campus. Brutal.”

Sam didn’t say a word, but he noticed how her gaze lingered momentarily in the direction of the table, now empty, where Bremer had been sitting. Somber, A. J. concluded, beginning to realize what she was up against.

Without their noticing, the lunch crowd had been thinning out. Classes changed at one and these were prime-time afternoon teaching slots. A. J. was acutely aware how their peers would have been processing this subdued one-on-one.

“In any case, this is no time or place to talk about it,” he said. “If you don’t have plans for Friday night, I suggest dinner. This isn’t something you should be handling alone. An evening would give us some time, some privacy to discuss your options.”

Friday. That was tomorrow. She hesitated, toying with the empty yogurt container on the table in front of her. “Five-thirty. My place is fine . . . since you won’t let me buy lunch, I’ll whip up something. It’s the least I can do.”

“Six,” he smiled. “And dessert’s on me.”

Something in her face told him she was getting the wrong idea again. The taut set of her mouth and the way her dusting of freckles stood out against the porcelain of her skin were dead giveaways.

“Mousse,” he said gently, “I’m talking about *mousse*, Sam—chocolate, straight out of a deli case, but edible. No strings, no agendas. And I promise you, whatever you choose to do in the end, you won’t have reason to regret coming to me about this.”

Those expressive eyes of hers couldn’t hide much. When it came to harboring regrets, on some level, she already did.