

“Laura DeNooyer has once again charmed us in *The Broken Weathervane* with engaging characters, historical authenticity and a sprinkling of literary quotations fitting for the characters and the time period. Mix in family secrets, an understanding of mental illness and a love story or two and DeNooyer has given us another winner!”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *ACROSS THE CRYING SANDS*

“*The Broken Weathervane* surprised me in the best way. It was engaging, heartfelt, and avoided cliches and easy answers. I loved how the characters were complex and authentic. I recommend this story to fans of Amanda Cox and Sara Brunsvold.”

—KATIE POWNER, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
OF *WHEN THE ROAD COMES AROUND*

“This beautifully written novel follows Leslie Wickersham, a grant writer who has always tried to hide her grandparents’ complicated past, until she ends up working for an academic whose research threatens to expose everything—and whose presence in her life becomes impossible to ignore. *The Broken Weathervane* is a bittersweet story about family secrets, reluctant love, and how the past refuses to stay buried.”

—SUZANNE WOODS FISHER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *THE MOONLIGHT SCHOOL*

“DeNooyer crafts a compelling story exploring sensitive issues of mental illness and the desire to protect those we love. Her tender portrayals and raw relationships offer readers a heartfelt story of hope and healing.”

—SARAH LOUDIN THOMAS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
OF *THESE TANGLED THREADS*

“Laura DeNooyer winds a unique and mesmerizing strand of story DNA, as she entwines captivating characters, complex plot, and compelling literary beauty in *The Broken Weathervane*. While she tackles issues of mental illness trauma in a true way that displays both our innate human frailty and beautiful fullness, DeNooyer writes with grace and depth. Most importantly, the story doesn’t fail to culminate in hope and compassion. With her signature style, complicated relationships are explored and the past is unraveled, and DeNooyer drops mentions of other literary works like sweet lemon drops to savor along the way. Readers will relish this enthralling story.”

—NAOMI MUSCH, HISTORICAL FICTION AUTHOR
AND AWARD FINALIST FOR *SEASON OF MY ENEMY*,
THE ANGEL AND THE SKY PILOT (COURTING THE
COUNTRY PREACHER), AND *MIST O’ER THE VOYAGEUR*

THE BROKEN WEATHERVANE

Award-winning Author
Laura DeNooyer



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*To my dad, who told me the story of how his dad and uncle loved
their brother well.*

“The highest form of knowledge is empathy, for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in another’s world.”

— BILL BULLARD, MEMOIRIST

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”

— ARISTOTLE

“Empathy is the only human superpower—it can shrink distance, cut through social and power hierarchies, and transcend differences.”

— ELIZABETH THOMAS, ACTRESS

“Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it.”

— MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

CHAPTER ONE



2015

All washed up at age thirty-five. The premonition rumbled through Leslie Wickersham like a morose headline announcing her dismal future. Seated in the office of Raymond University's administration building, Leslie Wickersham squinted at the framed quotation above the clock.

Time is too slow for those who wait, too swift for those who fear, too long for those who grieve, too short for those who rejoice, but for those who love, time is eternity.

—Henry Van Dyke

Its pithy wisdom churned her stomach. If she weren't awaiting her third interview, she'd snap a picture, post it on Instagram, and ask, "Is time a friend or an enemy?"

Instead, she stared at the clock as if the hands had stopped at the hour of someone's death, like back in the day. Perhaps

this moment marked the demise of her career. Tomorrow she might be bagging groceries at Klipton's.

Her phone pinged. Grimacing, she grabbed it from her purse to silence it. One look revealed a text from Vic, her ex. Ugh. She'd blocked him, so he must have a new number. She plunged the silenced phone back into her purse and wiped her sweaty palms.

An attractive man, perhaps early forties, with golden brown, windblown hair swaggered to the counter, a hint of Old Spice wafting. His presence engulfed the room the way a lake sunrise fills both sky and water, silently relishing its own brilliance. A plaid scarf circled his neck. Bronze whiskers framed his square jaw.

His voice affirmed his virtuosity as a lecturer. "Maggie, has anyone approved my proposal yet?"

The gray-haired administration assistant stiffened. "I'm sorry, Dr. Stafford. We're still in the hiring process." She glanced at Leslie. "I'll call when I have news."

Was this the inimitable Gregory Stafford?

Leslie expected to see him, but not so soon. Her muscles tensed. Four years ago, when freelancing, she'd sought him for an interview as the renowned expert on the Buckwalter family. He'd thoroughly rebuffed her email with choice words about the magazine she wrote for. He deemed the publication *as inconsequential as a dog scratching fleas*. But what did Gregory Scott Stafford, PhD, know? That magazine had far more readers than his lofty academic articles did.

Lofty but eloquent. She knew them well, having read several.

Dr. Stafford followed the direction of Maggie's glance and nodded at Leslie. His green eyes briefly lit, but his stiff "How do you do?" left Leslie cold. His attention returned to Maggie.

Déjà vu. Another dismissive gesture.

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He pulled a worn calendar from his bag as if he hadn't yet joined the 21st century. "What's the holdup? My grant proposal has a deadline." When he clapped the countertop, Maggie flinched. He strutted out the door.

Leslie exhaled as if Dr. Stafford's judgments had been directed at her.

"Leslie?" The provost appeared from around the corner. His deep voice and wizened face made up for his shorter stature.

Leslie approached him, hand outstretched. "I'm honored to meet you, Provost Martin."

He gave a hearty handshake. "At least you didn't call me Dr. Martens, like the shoes. Unlike our last candidate." He chuckled.

His humor eased her anxiety, but interviews were not her forte. *Inhale, exhale*. Time to ramp up the fake confidence.

In his office, he sat across from her at his desk. "It's good to finally meet you." He scanned her resume. "I'm impressed with your experience as an educator, editor, and grant proposal evaluator. Eighteen out of twenty grants were accepted."

"I was grateful to help those projects receive funds. Each worthy in its own right."

"But the best project in the world won't receive funds without a flawless presentation." He knuckled the desktop. "I once facilitated a board that gave funds to study the mating habits of hummingbirds over one that assessed additional uses of whale oil for machinery and lubricating spacecraft. It boiled down to presentation over practicality."

Leslie smiled. Did practicality matter at universities? "True. That's why I started my own business, helping people put their best foot forward."

He riffled through her application. "Considering all your accolades, what do you perceive is your greatest weakness?"

This question she hated. Her jaw twitched. “Self-criticism, second-guessing myself.”

“What do you do then?”

“Call my best friend, then apply creative problem-solving skills.” She cited examples.

“Which book should everyone read? Fiction or non-fiction.”

This question she loved. She plunged ahead. “*To Kill a Mockingbird*. The hero chooses to fight a losing battle but proceeds because it’s the right thing to do. The issues are just as relevant today. And *story* is my preferred method for inspiring someone to empathy and action, whether it’s the failing hero, the persecuted African American, or the slighted Boo Radleys.”

“Excellent.” He checked the resume again. “BA double major in Communications and Secondary Education in Literature. With your teaching background, you’ll have no difficulty transitioning from social service projects to scholarly ones.” He removed his glasses and wiped the lenses. “How badly do you want this role, Leslie?”

Not the time to admit she was at wits’ end finding a suitable job. “My previous positions dovetail perfectly into this one, Dr. Martin. I love this small, historic university in the heart of Avondale.” With only 3,000 students, Raymond University was primarily a liberal arts college with recent additions of post-graduate degrees in engineering and business administration. Perhaps humor would calm her thumping heart. “But I wouldn’t rob a bank for it.”

“I’m glad you’re not *that* desperate.” He chortled. “You have an impressive online presence via Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, plus a blog and podcast.”

“Yes, sir.” Her mind raced. Had he heard her phone ping earlier? Had she inadvertently posted something controversial, degrading, or offensive? Did she post too many baby animal

gifts? Oh, dear. Hold on. She was jumping to conclusions. Self-criticism escalating to mental self-flagellation. Case in point.

“Seems folks hang on your every word. Why?”

Swallowing, she straightened. “I want to reduce the stigma of mental illness. After helping Avondale High School obtain a grant for a mental health initiative, I built a platform to create awareness and direct people to community resources.”

“In the name of altruism?”

“Getting paid would’ve been a bonus. My reward was watching attitudes change and students begin therapy. It started while teaching students with depression, OCD, and other ailments. They floundered in the classroom. They were bullied too.”

“Ah, the Boo Radleys. Tell me about the grant.”

“It involved writing curriculum tied to literature for discussing current treatments and fighting stigma.” She mentioned research she’d gathered to convince potential funders of the need, including her survey of thirty schools.

He nodded. “An impressive endeavor.”

“My podcast continued the conversation. I interviewed faculty and students from high schools around the country.”

“Well done. Raymond University’s on the cutting edge, too—of a different sort.” Again, he wiped his glasses. “We’re combining scholarly research with community interests. Rather than focus on faculty publishing only in scholarly journals that comprise less than point zero zero one percent of the population, the powers that be insist we become more consumer-friendly.”

“How?” Wasn’t it enough that Raymond University still had an English major while much of academia shut down humanities to focus on STEM?

“The board wants scholarly events to create public interest. Partnering with local organizations. Hosting relevant panel

discussions. And using social media to the university's advantage."

Cutting edge or dead end? That would require periodically stepping down from Mt. Olympus. "How do professors feel about it?" Perhaps it was like handing out plebeian doughnuts versus French croissants at a fancy bakery.

"The majority are onboard. Our social media coordinator handles communication, but one man is going for full professor promotion and needs a boost in community outreach. Of which social media is a means." He leaned forward. "This is how you can serve us, Leslie, as a side hustle. You'd be compensated. On top of being the grants officer."

An image of a stodgy, accomplished professor hunched over a smartphone posting Instagram images elicited a smile. Like imagining him in dinosaur pajamas. Perhaps this additional task was the reason the provost wanted to meet her in person. "Would I monitor his social media or teach him how?"

"Both, until skills are mastered. For planning community events, you'll brainstorm together, identifying where his expertise overlaps the common good." He adjusted his glasses. "Your superintendent gave glowing reviews of your classroom performance. I'm guessing you miss the classroom?"

She shuddered inwardly. Was this a veiled attempt to learn why she'd left her previous job? No way would she allude to her burnout due to marital problems. On top of his emotional abuse, Vic had an affair. Leslie left him after one year of marriage. Spiteful, he milked her for every shared penny. Her life spiraled out of control.

What had Vic texted earlier? She'd have to block his new number.

"I miss the student rapport," she replied. "As Instructional Designer, I enjoyed writing the mental health curriculum."

Though another teacher implemented it when she couldn't. "But I was ready for new challenges. While teaching, I'd accumulated enough accounts to freelance in writing grant proposals." And considered supplementing her income by bagging groceries. "I love helping people submit proposals that contribute to community welfare."

Provost Martin explained more about the grants officer role. She'd facilitate proposals of 150 full-time faculty members in all departments, tracking deadlines and submissions for federal and privately funded sources. "Instructors are welcoming someone to spearhead the grant supervision. With your skillset, Leslie, you've much to offer Raymond University. On behalf of President Wilson and myself, I'm delighted to offer you the role of grants officer. And social media overseer for one." He presented a contract.

A real contract—finally! Did the room just brighten from her grin? "Thank you. Which professor will I work with, regarding outreach?"

He clucked his tongue. "The most reluctant one, but he's motivated, just one semester from becoming full professor. Dr. Gregory Stafford."

What? She blinked as if nudged from a dream. Anyone but him. Shame flushed her face from his crisp greeting earlier. And the patronizing way he'd turned down her interview request. Would he remember? Her saving grace was that she'd used her married name then. Leslie Rinaldi. Since they'd only emailed, he wouldn't recognize her.

"Does he know you're hiring me to assist him?" Plebeian doughnuts. Stale ones. Without any chocolate frosting, glaze, or sprinkles.

"He knows he'll have help but doesn't know who'll have the pleasure."

Great. Pleasure was not the word that came to mind. “Any suggestions for warming him up to the idea?”

“That’s in your wheelhouse. No doubt you have the savvy for such a task.”

She eyed the contract again. No obligation to sign it.

He stood. “Before you go, I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Stafford.”

Her heart thumped her rib cage as if seeking an escape. But how could she refuse without resembling a timid dog slinking away?

They donned coats for a brisk January walk. Outside, the provost pointed out campus landmarks. Leslie’s head spun.

In Worthington Hall’s English Department, they stood at an office doorway. And there he was. Gregory Scott Stafford stepped toward them. His tousled hair, bristly chin, and two parallel ends of a plaid scarf lent an air of avant-garde and youth, despite his forty-plus status. The walls boasted a combination of literature quotes and baseball hats. Milwaukee Brewers pennants cascaded from the ceiling as if celebrating the accomplishments heralded by three framed diplomas—from Duke, Harvard, and Oxford.

Near the bookshelf, looking out of place, hung a rustic metal rooster. Odd.

Provost Martin gestured. “This is Ms. Leslie Wickersham, our top candidate for grants officer, soon to join us, assuming I’ve been convincing enough.” He introduced Dr. Stafford, professor of twentieth-century American literature. “And avid Brewers fan.”

The professor’s seafoam eyes mesmerized her. He offered his hand. “And in dire need of a grants officer so I can continue following my passion. I saw you earlier. You’ll be a welcome addition.”

Would he recant once he recalled their email exchange?

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Assuming he remembered. Engulfed in his spicy cologne, Leslie reciprocated, her fingers lost in a warm, firm handshake. “A pleasure to meet you, Dr. Stafford. Are you referring to your research on the Linus Fritz Buckwalter family?”

“Ah, you’ve done your homework. Yes, I hope to follow one more family branch to complete my extensive, certified biography.” He’d been working on that biography four years ago. And she knew exactly which branch he referred to.

“When did you start researching the Buckwalters?”

“It’s a lifelong dream, ever since reading *The Broken Weathervane* as a teen. I was smitten. Have you read his works?”

“Yes, all twelve novels. He’s a fascinating man. I’m guessing you know which aspects of his life experience wound up in his fiction.”

“With his tendency to exaggerate, it’s hard telling. As good ole Fritz said, ‘Hyperbole is wed to one’s deepest dreams. The more far-fetched, the more tethered to reality.’”

One of many familiar quips. She gestured toward a photo on the wall, two men shaking hands. “You got to meet him.”

The provost intervened. “Good to know you have common ground. That’ll aid you both in community outreach and building your social media platform.”

“What?” Greg’s eyes widened. “I thought Ms. Wickersham would oversee proposals.”

“She’s multi-faceted.”

Greg ran his hand through wavy hair and loped back to the desk. “We’ll talk later.” He plunked on his chair without another glance.

Chuckling, Provost Martin waved her into the hallway. “You just witnessed resistance to new ideas in action.”

“I see my work is cut out for me.”

“And for him. Little does he know.”

That wasn't all Dr. Greg Stafford didn't know, besides good manners. Her hands fisted. She possessed plenty of Buckwalter information he lacked. Facts he'd likely trade his mother for. But no way would she reveal such coveted intel, even though she craved learning details he alone knew. Could she work with the professor and retain any self-esteem? And if she finally obtained key information, would she be sorry?

Like Moby Dick to Captain Ahab, Dr. Stafford could be her bane.