

CHAPTER THREE



S eated across from Gregory Scott Stafford's desk, Leslie grasped her notebook of brainstorm, including strategies to win him over to embrace her ideas. She also needed to secure his trust for sharing Buckwalter intel. *The wooing starts now.*

He should have come to her office but refused. At least the view here offered points of interest, whereas her own walls awaited decorating. While he leisurely shuffled student papers at his desk, she surveyed blue and gold baseball paraphernalia alternating with literary quotes. The rustic metal rooster probably once topped a barn roof. Outside the window, stone and brick buildings featured unique diagonal patterns and arched walkways. In a few months, ivy would climb the sides of the oldest structures.

Greg finally looked up, sporting the windswept look with a plaid tan scarf. If he weren't so arrogant, she could be smitten by those seafoam eyes and ruggedly handsome features with enough crinkle lines to prove he smiled. Though no smile emerged now.

“How may I help you, Ms. Wickersham?” He folded his hands and glanced at the clock. “In ten minutes or less.”

She’d signed up for fifteen. “Two things, Dr. Stafford. First, thanks for emailing your grant proposal. I have questions.”

“Fire away.”

She glanced at page one of the printed proposal. “After investigating Dritelein Fellowship’s website, I called about recent programs they’ve funded but hadn’t posted on the web. Turns out they’ve changed their focus.”

He pursed his lips as if repulsed by the notion of her knowing something he didn’t.

“No doubt you already knew that. This lowers the chances of obtaining funds, so I suggest targeting a different source.” She awaited affirmation.

“And your esteemed recommendation is ...?”

Sarcasm already? Her throat tightened. “Experience dictates it’s far better to shift direction and check off all the boxes rather than expand the vision in meager hopes of a yes. So, after some online exploration and more calls, I propose we kill two birds with one stone.” Why was she out of breath? The room grew stuffy, reflecting his demeanor.

One brow raised. “Which two birds are those, Ms. Wickersham?”

“First, tying your goals to department goals and further melding them to the funder’s objectives and application rubric. Secondly, seek community versus scholarship funding, to foster community relevance.”

He tapped his chin, setting it up a notch. “You do realize my project is an *academic* endeavor. Or did you not read past page one?”

“There’s no doubting the academic merit, Professor. But Provost Martin tells me that future projects must promote

community interests.” She dared not mention social media yet. One limping step at a time.

“Most local funding lacks the prestige of scholarly funds.”

“Like eating plebeian doughnuts rather than French croissants.” There! Take that!

He knuckled his desk. “A fitting metaphor. It’s like requesting Burger King to fund research on Mark Twain rather than soliciting from the Berkhof Foundation.”

“Dr. Stafford, I found three well-suited local foundations.” Leslie set a paper on his desk. “This highlights how their vision and assets dovetail with your plans. I’ll email you additional information.” She barely caught her breath. “Meanwhile”—she pulled out another sheet— “please compare this summary to yours on page two. I experimented with fewer details and less literary jargon. If we appeal to a local foundation, the style must be tailored to the audience.” She set it on his desk. “Our mission statement must be obvious, not lost in the—”

“Weeds?” He cocked his head without a glance at the paper.

“Not weeds. Shuffle. Not lost in the shuffle.”

“Ah-ha. Because shuffle is much less insulting than weeds.”

“No insult intended, Dr. Stafford. I’m also suggesting a different format.” She handed him another page, which he ignored. She set it before him. “If you compare this to your page three, you’ll notice a lot more breathing space”—unlike this room—“with more white space. Bullet points, headings and subheadings, along with graphs, diagrams, and photos, will add visual appeal over long, rambling paragraphs.” *Oh, dear.* That spilled out.

“Rambling?” His brows arched. “Like you’re doing now?”

“This is for reaching a different audience, not someone living in an ivory tower.”

“Is that all, Ms. Wickersham? Or do you have other insights I failed to glean?”

“One more thought. Regarding the Outcome/Impact section, I’d like to try a little storytelling. My success with grant writing revolves around the emotional appeal, utilizing the five senses, emphasizing the project’s impact on the community.” *Whew.* Her breath rattled as if she’d just completed a 5K.

Greg leaned forward. “You mentioned two things to discuss. Have we only covered one, or have we taken liberties by rounding up to ten?”

“That was one item, the proposal. My second question is, well, I’d like to see your syllabus. Syllabuses, rather. Or syllabi.” Sweat formed on her brow. “Whichever word you prefer.”

“Did Provost Martin hire you as an educational consultant too?”

“No, sir. This is to learn more about your personal style and approach in the classroom.”

“For what purpose?”

“Familiarity with your content will aid me in seeking out appropriate venues for community events.”

He rolled his eyes. “Ms. Wickersham, I regret I have no syllabi to offer you.” In the unmistakable tone of *bug off*. “Syllabuses, either.” He smirked. “My print copies are gone, but you can pick one up at the dean’s office.”

“Then may I attend your class?”

“Have you paid tuition?” he snapped. “I prefer not to be observed like an animal at the zoo, but if the dean believes it’s necessary, then I’ll permit it.”

“Thank you. I’ll attend as your virtual assistant. Which includes taking advantage of social media for strengthening your platform.”

“I have all the platform I need with readers prominent in

their fields. Surely Provost Martin gave you a litany of my scholarly publications.”

“He did. He also instructed me to further your reach. To the less scholarly among us.”

“Of which you stand first in line.”

Leslie bristled, then reined herself in. “May I please have a do-over?”

He winced as if offended by her bourgeois choice of words. As if she’d handed him plebeian doughnuts. “A do-over?”

She groped for a baseball analogy. “Like calling in the pinch hitter. I’ve obviously approached this all wrong. We’re supposed to be on the same side.”

“Is that so? I was confused.” He blinked, those blue-green eyes like a piece of distant sea, flashing in sunshine. Such beauty seemed wasted on this toad.

“I’m also wondering about your preferred approach on social media, topics to raise, and profile details. And your Buckwalter biography.” She squinted at the clock. “But our time is up. Let’s meet after you peruse my suggestions.” She stood.

He stood, too, surely an attempt to hasten her departure. “I may have a spare ten minutes next week, Tuesday.”

Unbelievable! She gritted her teeth. “All right, then.” Turning, she noted a plaque above the doorway, a quote by eighteenth-century author Horace Walpole.

Imagination was given to man to compensate him for what he isn't. A sense of humor was provided to console him for what he is.

In his case, a schmuck. Lacking both imagination and humor.

THE BROKEN WEATHERVANE

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In her office, Leslie scanned the bare walls. The little window only afforded a parking lot view, but at least it lured pale sunlight, combating January doldrums. Though longing for spring, she was thrilled about a new start here at Raymond U. Its location in the town of Avondale made Wisconsin seem as cozy as her grandmother's afghan.

Despite the damper of Greg Stafford's arrogance, coming to work was a joy. She'd soon decorate her office with lithographs of literary scenes she'd previously hung in her classroom. But no family pictures. Nothing tying her to the Buckwalters.

At her desk, she googled Greg's name. A Wikipedia article carried a short summary with a list of articles and book titles with embedded links to scholarly sites or Amazon. But no website or Facebook page. Clearly the guy didn't want to be online, satisfied to merely occupy the annals of academia.

Well, that would change today. She created his Instagram account with a new email account to verify things. Oh—she forgot to ask which handle he'd prefer, Doctor or Professor. Better go with the more highly esteemed Doctor for now.

Temptation taunted. Instead of typing PhD, she typed in Greg Stafford, Curmudgeon, hashtag Scrooge, hashtag Uriah Heep. No, Uriah Heep was too harsh. So were Mr. Hyde, Captain Hook, and Long John Silver.

Besides, his specialty was American authors. Hashtag Dr. Frankenstein, Captain Ahab, Tom Buchanan, or Rhett Butler.

After reckless fun with nicknames, she deleted them and started over.