

Chapter One

Devon tilted his head. “You got reprimanded?”

Maggie sighed, “Yeah, a formal verbal reprimand. And was told I’m lucky it wasn’t a formal *written* reprimand that would go in my personnel file.”

“I don’t get it. Why were you reprimanded?” Mike asked, as he poured more merlot into all three glasses.

Devon smiled, then asked, “So, start again. Start to finish, what happened today with the Dean and President?”

Maggie stiffened. “Stop sounding like a lawyer.”

“I *am* a lawyer. And knowing you, I may have to defend you in a labor lawsuit at some point, so I want to make sure I have my facts straight.”

Maggie took a sip of wine. “It’s a long story.”

Devon looked at Mike, who shrugged, “We’ve got time.”

She smiled, “Does it ever occur to the two of you that our social lives suck? That *this* is the extent of our social lives?”

Mike chuckled, “You mean that after almost twenty years of friendship, our big social event is getting together every month to eat pizza and drink wine?”

Devon’s eyes clouded with sadness, “It used to be the four of us.”

Maggie squeezed his hand, “And she specifically told us she’d come back to haunt us if we didn’t continue the tradition.”

Devon continued, “So explain what happened.”

“Oh, the whole day sucked. It started badly...”

The day *had* started badly. Maggie awoke in a fog, smelling coffee. She usually woke early to work out, her coffee pot set to start automatically while she showered. Smelling coffee clearly meant she was already running at least an hour behind. Damn!

Twenty minutes later, she poured the liquid java into a travel mug. As she stepped over the toys scattered across the rug, her heart constricted. It always felt so weird when the boys were away. But, at least this morning, she could probably still make her meeting relatively on time, since she wouldn’t have to stop at daycare.

Five minutes later, she pulled into the lot and grimaced to see another car occupying her normal spot. After three futile circuits, she finally pulled onto the grass at the side of the lot, hoping Security would ignore her car this one time.

She hopped out of the car and yanked her bag from the passenger seat, breaking into a jog toward the Commons Building. How could she be late for the most important faculty meeting of the year? With any luck at all, she could duck in the back door and find a seat without anyone noticing.

No luck. The open door cast a spear of sunlight across the otherwise dark room, prompting most of the audience to turn and stare back at her. Dean Anderson smiled smugly from the podium

next to the overhead of the projected budget for the next year. “So nice of you to join us, Ms. Erickson.”

Her face burning, Maggie slid into the nearest empty seat, wishing she managed to be there at the start of the meeting, twenty-five minutes earlier.

At the end of the meeting, the Dean raised his hand to signal for attention. “I hope you all have a happy and relaxing spring break, and we’ll see you all next week. Please remember to check your email for faculty updates. And, Ms. Erickson, I’d like a word with you.”

Maggie stood warily, her stomach churning in anger. In the back of the room, her two assistants and two classroom teachers waited, silently lending their support.

Anderson smoothed a wrinkle from the sleeve of his navy blue blazer. “I appreciate you bothering to show up for this meeting. After all, you referred to it yesterday in the snack bar, as, I believe, ‘the biggest waste of time’ since you took the oral exam for my South African history class. However, it would have shown a minimum of professional courtesy on your part had you arrived on time.”

Before Maggie could answer, he continued. “While I realize you believe it is acceptable for your staff to be a bit lackadaisical, I expect when I call a meeting, you will attend on time.”

Swallowing, Maggie tried to keep calm. “Sir, I certainly intended to be here for the start of the meeting; my alarm didn’t go off. I got here as soon as I could.”

He snorted. “And what was the excuse for missing the meeting last month? I believe you had a sick child and weren’t able to attend.” Tipping his head slightly, he raised one eyebrow. “I find it fascinating how often your children are sick on faculty meeting days.”

Maggie struggled to keep her voice level. “I have never abused my privileges, and have never missed a meeting without a good reason.”

He stroked his long, graying handlebar mustache carefully. “It’s certainly regrettable that you missed the start of the meeting. I announced an adjustment to your program. Beginning in the fall, you will have student teachers for six weeks, rather than twelve. This will mean we can offer endorsements in Special Education for twice as many students.”

“What? That means the students, I mean the high school students, will have to adjust to twice as many staff, and you know they can’t handle a transition like that. You *know* that.” Maggie’s cheeks colored with her rising voice.

“Frankly, it’s not my business how well they adjust, that’s your job to handle. My concern is how many college students earn the endorsement, increasing the viability of the Teacher Education program.”

“Sir, with all due respect, if those students don’t adjust to the changes in staff, your future teachers won’t stay in a classroom; they’ll leave running and screaming.”

“Then you’ll have to make sure that doesn’t happen. If you can’t serve the best interests of the college students, perhaps you need to think about another line of work. Or at least another *place* of work.” He smiled, his eyes narrowing. “It was my decision to make this change. It’s in the best interest of the college. *Your* function is to work with your staff to make sure it happens, and happens well.”

Ever since she was a baby-faced freshman of eighteen, Maggie struggled to bite her tongue when Dean Anderson belittled her. For the last four years of meetings and appointments, she managed to stay cool under his disdainful eye, but she couldn’t take it anymore. She snapped. “Oh, bite me!”

His voice rose to a mosquito-like whine. “Did you just say ‘bite me’?”

“Yes, I did, you sanctimonious piece of shit. How dare you insinuate I don’t care about this college, or that I won’t do my job to the best of my ability?”

“Excuse me? Did you just curse at me? I guess I’m not surprised; belligerence is exactly what I’d expect from someone who works with the type of children you do.”

“You asshole. *That’s* what this is about. I work with kids you think should be neglected, and you can’t stand it. Aren’t you the one who once told our representative that only college-educated people should be allowed to vote? You hate the fact that the program works, and the college could actually be seen as welcoming to someone outside of the affluent, blonde elite.”

“Ms. Erickson, your obscene insubordination will be reported, and you can expect the appropriate sanctions to soon follow.”

Maggie was beyond caring. “Whatever,” she said, and peevishly spun on her heel.

Back in the kitchen, Maggie grimaced, “And that is how my day went.”

The two men sat across the table regarding her silently. Sipping his wine, Mike swallowed before saying, “I guess you’re not up for Employee of the Year anymore. Do you still have a job?”

“Yeah, I still have a job, but about an hour later I got a call from Priscilla.”

Devon’s face lit up, “How is she? I loved working for her!”

“Priscilla’s fine, but she called and said I needed to be in the President’s office in fifteen minutes, so I had to jog across campus to get there in time. I figured the Dean would be there too, but when I got there, I was just meeting with the President.”

“And?”

“He sat me down, looked at me, and gave the biggest sigh I ever heard. Then he told me I was frustrating the hell out of him; that he loves me, he loves what I bring to the college, and he loves the program, but we were meeting in private so he didn’t have to worry about being politically correct. He told me flat-out I’m a pain in the ass.”

Mike nodded, “True.”

Maggie glared, not finding the humor, “That I am wholeheartedly devoted to my students, both the college students, and our clients.”

Devon nodded, “Also true.”

“That I have great trouble accepting authority, which he finds interesting, since I grew up in a military family.”

Before either man responded, Maggie snapped, “I know, *true*. Then he said that no matter how much he loves me and wants me at the college, I have to learn to get along with the Dean, period. He said the severity of this incident would normally mean I’d receive a formal written reprimand, but since it was the first time it rose to this level, he was giving me a verbal warning telling me I need to get my shit together and stop reacting to Anderson.”

Devon queried, “Is he noting the verbal warning in your personnel file?”

“No, as long as I don’t have another issue this school year, it’s done. If I tell him off again, it’ll be noted in the file and then I’ll get written up. Mind passing the merlot?”

“You got off easy, you know that, right?” Devon impressed, passing her the bottle.

She sighed, “Yeah, I know. If Jason wasn’t the President, I’d be screwed right now.”

“So over all, that ended better than it could have. What about the rest of the day?”

“My mother called four times to tell me everything I forgot to send with the boys, as if the world would stop turning if they didn’t have their own toothpaste. Couldn’t they use hers? *It really* helped to have her remind me today that on top of everything else, she thinks I’m a shitty mother.

And just in case I wasn't already looking to punch somebody, I got a parking ticket from Campus Security."

Maggie rolled her eyes as she picked an olive off her pizza, pausing a moment before flicking it into the empty box. "And I *told* them no olives, because I really didn't need any fucking olives today. All in all, the day sucked." She flicked another olive, "But I forgot to tell you the best part of my meeting with the President."

"What's that?"

"I get to attend five anger management sessions; starting tomorrow night."

Both men struggled to keep straight faces, but their guffaws soon filled the kitchen.