

Chapter One

I met Eben Pulsifer for the first time in years when Elaine and I drove to Millard Circle for our class reunion. He invited me to see him at his office in downtown New Corinth. We never knew him well and our last meetings had been more cool than friendly, businesslike rather than cordial. Since then, Elaine and I hadn't visited the high places that he frequents. I had no idea what he wanted from me.

"I've thought for a long time about who I'd ask to write the story of the university during the time of the great scandal and when Daniel Morley was on campus." Pulsifer was an old man and looked as if he wanted help remembering his days of most usefulness. "That story has been told many times, but never from the inside or emphasizing personalities."

"I can suggest a couple of people, sir," I replied. Despite the fact that I've done better in the last twenty years than I ever expected, I still had the habit of deference.

"I've read some of your essays. I like your academic thrillers. You understand university life well enough without working on any campus. I want you to do the work."

"I'm honored that you ask me," I said in what I hoped was a quiet, noncommittal way.

"If you do a good job, it will make your name."

"The only way it would do that is if I uncover something major about the scandal that no one else has noticed or else stretch the truth and get myself in trouble, which I'm not inclined to do. Besides, my memory twists everything."

"You remember Sonja, I'm sure."

"Of course." He meant Morley's widow, whom he married. "I'm glad to hear you're still together – if that's the case."

“It is, I’m happy to say. She asked me to find out if you’re available and willing. We’re hoping to start a revival of interest in Daniel’s work. We’re planning an exhibit of pictures he painted when he was with us. We want a written account to go along with it. You were there; you knew the people. What do you say?”

“A qualified yes,” I said. “I’ve never done anything like that. I’m not sure how to proceed.”

“Talk to other people. Use your imagination. Invent things if you have to, but don’t overdo. I’ll back you up. Put in side stories, too – to establish a setting. You didn’t mention money. I’ll pay you if no one else will.”

“You may not want to when you see how my work turns out,” I went on. “What if I say stuff you don’t like? Especially about you.”

“You’re a fair-minded man. As for me, I’ve often made myself look ridiculous, but I haven’t broken many laws. Who knows how much longer I’ll live? Say whatever you please. And be sure you get Harriet Perkins in, too,” he said cheerfully, like a man who didn’t know the meaning of the word “grudge”.

This was the first time I ever actually liked Eben Pulsifer. I took up the assignment also because I suspected that Elaine would like to re-establish our roots in Millard Circle now that our children are away at schools of their own.

My name, by the way, is Roland Yardley. I come from Winnipeg. The fact that I’m Canadian has little bearing on this story. I simply mention it for background. I’ve been in the U. S. for two and a half decades. There are places here where most urban Canadians would feel at home. Millard Circle is one of them.

Many of us who were there in the early 1960's will remember what the neighborhood and the university were like before the area became expensive and exclusive and the school found new leaders and adopted ideas that looked fresh but weren't and money flowed into its various accounts.

No one forgets their early twenties. We re-evaluate. We find good in things we once didn't understand. We regret that very few folks are interested in what we have to say about the old days when life was new and we were fresh. Pulsifer gave me a chance to tell a piece of that hidden story. I knew I'd enjoy working on his project.

So come with me to an office in Rutherford Hall. It's a Thursday in July. Harriet Perkins looked out the windows onto the quadrangles to see Daniel Morley puttering away with his sketchbook. She wasn't interested in him, though. She hardly knew who he was. She had another male in mind, a colleague, a friend of her middle age.

I wonder why Max Erickson hasn't called me, she thought. I haven't seen him pass by on his bicycle for three days.

Concern about Erickson's absence came back at noontime when she learned in the faculty lounge that he hadn't shown up for his morning classes and no one knew where he was.

If he's sick, his housekeeper would have called the English department. When we talked in the library on Monday, I saw no signs of illness. Probably AWOL with a new girlfriend. I'll have to see Macbeth with someone else.

Talk in the lounge turned to a survey that circulated around the campus. No one knew where it came from. The main question went like this: "what would you do if you learned that a comet would destroy the earth in thirty days?"

“Preposterous,” Harriet said, sorry that she was drawn into a discussion she thought was beneath her dignity. “Likely to stir up trouble. We didn’t ask questions like that when I was starting out. No one knows when the end will come. What are they getting at?”

“They’re thinking about nuclear weapons,” Julian Drake said. “I’ve also heard rumors of students involved in idol worship.”

“How does that fit in?” Harriet asked.

“I wish I could tell you,” Drake replied.

“Idol worship,” Harriet exclaimed. “What’s happened to the admissions department?”

Julian looks sneaky and evasive, she thinks. I wonder what he gets involved in these days. I don’t need to know. Whatever friendship we had is over.

Had she had even an inkling of what Drake had been up to and was coming to regret, she would have cast him into an even deeper darkness than she found for me. She had her reasons for disapproving of me, and if I could return to what I was then with what I am now, I’d no doubt share her severity, though I’d take into account the fact that we sometimes act like idiots to get what we want.

The only reason Harriet was aware of me is that Elaine Hambleby, whom I was beginning to date, was her teaching assistant, with whom she’d formed a friendship. She thought that Elaine needed to be protected from the likes of me.

“I’ll be leaving the school, you know.”

“I had no idea,” Harriet said, but she was pleased. She went back to her office to grade papers.

“A post in southern California,” he replied, beaming. “Lucky me.”

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Elaine told me that when she stopped in to her office at three, Harriet was looking through a stack of applications and recommendations, for she served on the search committee for a new president for the university. “I can’t see any of these people doing a decent job. Why did 80% of them allow their names to go forward?”

“I’ve heard people say that you should get the job,” Elaine said.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Harriet replied. “If you stay around for another year or two, someone will put your name in, too.”

“I suppose you’ve heard that Julian Drake is leaving,” Elaine said.

“Just today,” Harriet replied. “A gregarious man. He tries to compensate for what he lacks as a scholar by spreading charm.”

“I used to think he’d ask me out on dates,” Elaine said, “but he never did. I guess that’s a good thing. I’m not sure I want to get married. Some women live fulfilled lives without a husband.” Elaine looked at a tiny bust of Emily Dickinson on a table beside the phone”

“You should marry “ Harriet said. “It’s better than turning into a fidgety old maid. What about companionship and having someone nearby who loves you? And the question of children.”

“Yes, I’d like children,” Elaine said. She told me that she considered mentioning my name just to see what Harriet would say, but I could have told her.

“If you decide not to marry,” Harriet said as she walked to the window, “you take on a special burden or two, and the compensations are not immediately obvious.” She squinted at some of the younger couples strolling through the quadrangles. She also saw Daniel who’d returned to the bench he’d occupied in the morning and now chased away three undergraduates who’d been pestering him. “What on earth is happening out there?”

Elaine moved to the window. “That’s Daniel Morley the painter. It looks like those undergrads were bothering him.”

“That didn’t happen in my day,” Harriet said. “We always respected our elders. And we were in awe if we got near someone who could do something really well. Anyhow, back to what we were saying, the world is set up to accommodate married people. If you’re not married, be prepared to live as an outsider. How do I know? I was married for a few years. Why didn’t I marry again? I needed to help my mother. Marriage with the right person is best. I’ll give it another try if I have the chance.”

“What’s the point if an atom bomb really does blow us up?”

“Learn to control your fears. It’s best to love if only for a short time.”

Elaine now brought my name into the conversation.

“Roland Yardley?” Harriet wrinkled her nose. “If you can marry, I advise you to do so. But not necessarily that man. Find someone steady, who knows how to make a good living, not a hanger-on who fancies himself a composer in a dying art form. He spends too much time in the shadow of Oswald Mandrake.” An unjust comment all the way around, as you’ll see later on.

. “Roland has good points,” she said to Dr. Perkins. “I know he cares about me.”

“Be very careful. I can tell you about the consequences of hasty decisions.”

Harriet was back at her desk quick as a wink and looking at exam papers. Elaine took this as her clue to leave. When I saw her later that afternoon, she had on her green blouse spotted with yellow flowers that matched the gold of her hair. Her freckles, too, gleamed in the sunlight. She had no idea of the effect she had when she looked her best – times when she felt sure of herself and confident about her ability to choose what was right. She would listen to your advice, but she would never let you make up her mind for her

Eben Pulsifer knocked on Harriet's door moments later. He'd put himself forward as a candidate to lead the school, but the truth is he was more interested in reviving an old friendship with Harriet. He knew she'd have to think about him if he submitted his name to the committee. Besides he had ideas about what the school needed and considered himself qualified to lead.

"I've had two wives and several romances," he said. "Nothing lasted."

"Examine your soul," Harriet told him. "There may be something wrong with you."

"That goes without saying," Pulsifer admitted. "I'm in the process of rethinking."

Harriet thought he'd make a horrible president, but she'd agreed to the interview and couldn't very well show him the door. "What problems do you think the university will face in the next few years?"

"Money, academic standards, attracting faculty. The moral strength of the community. Many – students and faculty – worry about the threat of nuclear weapons. What will people do? Have a good time or sink into despair? I've heard reports of idol worship. Here of all places."

"That's quite a list of problems," Harriet said. "What are your plans for addressing them?"

"People say the school has hit a low point. I've wondered about recreating the Exposition of '93 on the Esplanade – in time for our hundredth anniversary – to bring us back to the sturdy confidence of our beginnings."

"It sounds like speculation and entertainment," Harriet said, "not a way to enhance education."

"I propose to encourage the arts," Pulsifer went on, "our weakest area. I was the one

who brought Daniel Morley to the campus. I foresee that he'll do well while he's here, make a lasting impression."

"Eben, you could bring Picasso and Stravinsky and the Comedie Francaise and they wouldn't do a thing for us." She looked at him across the table with what most people would call a scowl.

"I'll be at Macbeth this evening," Pulsifer said after a bit more chatter, "would you care to join me, my dear?"

"If you don't call me 'my dear' every five minutes."

She went back to looking at her students' papers, but not with the concentration that had been her hallmark

I've been in one place for two decades, too long, and the routine parts of my calling have become a burden. Against my better judgment, I'm envious of the escape Julian maneuvered. He's been wild – are stories of misbegotten children true? Lately, though, he's been more courteous and finds ways to get me to laugh. He'll have better weather in California, anyway. No one ever came here for the weather.

The sun fell on an engraving of Aristotle her grandfather had given her just after D-Day and then on a pencil drawing of Shelley and on a bronze bust of Jane Austen, the immemorial stillness of which didn't suit the vibrant author. Harriet had built her reputation on studies of the six novels. She had nothing to complain about, nor she hoped, did Jane Austen.

She gave a start when she saw the door, which Pulsifer had left ajar, yawn open and Julian Drake came in. "Hello, there."

He looks abashed, shamefaced. His hair is slicked down and he has on a tie, which presses against a closed and buttoned collar. There's something of the boy about him that isn't seemly.

"I wasn't kidding when I said I was leaving. I wanted to be sure to stop in to say good-bye."

He uses too many words. At least he's trying. I remember what he did to make me dislike him. No one would trust a man with the face of a weasel. What on earth is he hiding?

"I'll miss the people here," he said.

"Why leave then?"

"I grew up here," he said. "The school filled my mind. From freshman through graduate school to the faculty. I still have a tweed jacket I bought twenty-five years ago with money my mother gave me. Hard to leave, but I have a feeling it's the right time. Plus the dangers of the neighborhood that I'm becoming aware of. Whoever you choose as president will have some nasty matters to deal with."

"Will you consider making a report on that to the committee?"

"I'll have just time enough to get one together before I leave."

He looks at me with an elfin smile and I remember his good side: thoughtfulness, sometimes; willingness to go out of his way to help, sometimes; generosity a few moments each week, which is more than most of us can claim. He never mocks my beliefs. Can it be that we've been brought together one more time so that he may sit for a moment in a peaceful atmosphere before he heads off for whatever complications he'll create in California? What I didn't like about him now comes to mind: he's intense, ruthless about developing his mental capacity, secretive, overly engaged in his career. He's made a bit of money from a textbook and thinks of

himself as at the peak of success, so he's more difficult than ever to contend with. I've known him for more than ten years. Had we married one another, as I once thought possible, we'd be bringing up children now, but his demands drove me away and I suppose mine pushed him. It's likely we won't meet again.

"I wish you well, Julian." She held out her hand.

"Let me know when you find a new president. You'll need a brave person."

"I'm sure we'll be all right. And you'll do fine, too – if you pay attention to what they pay you to do."

"Oh, if I can't play the game by now," he said, "I deserve to be in trouble."

"Is that what it is for you, Julian?"

"Everything's a game at least part of the time. You have to know what to take seriously."

"And what do you take seriously?" Harriet asked.

"In a word, love." He blushed a light pink and then went on. "You must have noticed that I'm a different man from what I was several years ago. Inclined more to think of others than I was. Won't you join me for Macbeth this evening I have some ideas that might interest you. An anthology we could work on together, for one."

"I plan to be there," Harriet said with a hint of frost. "We'll have a chance to talk."

She went back to grading papers. During her break, she took a copy of Macbeth from the shelf to refresh her memory.

The weird sisters, Lady Macbeth, and the male characters. As I turn the pages, I realize I've stopped asking questions that perplexed me years before. Luxuriating in Shakespeare's mastery, I let myself swim about in the safe, freshman-level observation that people will never be

much different from the way he portrayed us, though many of us at the university like to think we do better than kings and politicians.

What do I have I to do to recover fading powers of concentration? she asked during a late-afternoon walk across campus between thoughts about dinner and the show. *What do any of us do when we discover that our brains no longer work the way we want them to?*

I rehearse my thoughts in a muttering timbre as I step over rain puddles and bunches of fallen leaves. After passing several colleagues, I reach the corner of University and Vine where I come across one of the undergraduates I advise and ask insanely if he is happy, satisfied with the way things are going.

Charles Blackford is different every time I see him. Now he's practicing a tentative, uncertain manner that can change to its opposite in half an hour – part of the illness of the world. Blackford's family lives in modest circumstances, he's told me. And the discovery that he must make his own way brings a burden he isn't up to yet.

“How are you coming along with Shakespeare?” she asked.

“There's a lot to it, Dr. Perkins. I'm going to see Macbeth this evening. I was just now reading up on it.”

“And?”

“You know, it would be good to have some people to talk about his plays with.”

Blackford avoids the issue and gives way to his nostalgia for home and the inclination to resist hard work.

“You can always find someone to talk to,” she said. “That's one of the benefits of being here.”

How can he miss the obvious? He might do best in some minor public office in a small town, such as dogcatcher or ambulance dispatcher. I've seen his like many times, lost, puzzled, self-indulgent. I don't feel kindly toward him.

"Oh, there's plenty to talk to," he said, "but sometimes it feels like I'm living in one of his tragedies."

What on earth is he nattering about? I've heard most every excuse. This kind is among the most lame.

"Do you need to visit the Baird Clinic?"

"There's idol worship going on and other creepy things," Blackford gazed uncertainly as the sun came from behind a cloud.

"Vague statements don't help at all," Harriet replied. "If you know about incidents of idol worship, report them to someone and keep away yourself."

I'd swear that Mr. Blackford is trying to fool me with an immature daydream if Eben hadn't mentioned idol worship an hour ago. And then Julian.

Blackford said that he needed to get back to Dullworthy Tower so he could shower and have a nap before Macbeth.

I've often bemoaned the fact that I spend more time than I like with people who don't inspire their neighbors. What passion Shakespeare's characters had; zest for life was his greatest gift. What about me? Has work swallowed my appetite for being alive? A faint glimmer of unlikely matrimony crosses my horizon from time to time. I remember Eben. It's a blessing I can be busy most of the time.

She crossed the street and walked to her apartment building, the Pegasus, where Daniel Morley and his wife Sonja also lived.

When I started at the university, I felt a daily, unrelenting hum of tension I never got used to. I was never so thankful as I was when times of peace and fruition finally arrived and I felt at ease with what I was doing.

She took an evening paper from the vending machine outside her building, half expecting to see a familiar face looking at her from between columns of newsprint – the victim of a crime.

The pictures are of senators and diplomats and a foreign general who looks as if jungle fighting is his preferred activity. War rumors are in the air again. Do I need to pay attention?

She could smell the steam from the radiators as she walked into the lobby.

Recalling Max Erickson and Julian, Elaine and scores of other academic people I know, I realize that compared with diplomats and politicians we're on the sidelines of conventional society, which often looks down on us, and yet people like us work to prepare youngsters to live in society. An anomaly that amuses me almost as much as the irony in the texts I work with: I and my ilk understand how humdrum society works better than the ones who lead it do.

Sitting in her easy chair, she felt darkness close in around her and savored a moment of solitude. She looked ahead to the evening. Eben had suggested a late supper somewhere. She might not be back till one, and so she'd have to put off to the next day her research for a piece about Mansfield Park.

What a strange and wonderful life. I may have had arguments and lost friends, possibly even Max Erickson because of a disagreement, but never mind. I love this University.

She took a Waldorf salad from the refrigerator and wondered where Eben had in mind for them to go after Macbeth.

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Elaine was pleased that I'd agreed to write about Morley and Millard Circle and the days when she and I were there, practically as toddlers. "You'll give the story a human aspect, dear, and we'll use the money to pay for the summer cottage."

Others have told the story more expansively than I intend to do. Even so, I offer my version as a vital part of a diverse picture. As I told Pulsifer, I'm not used to this sort of writing, so I've had to battle to keep the narrative from getting away from me. It's likely that I've brought in more about Elaine and me than Dr. Pulsifer may have expected. Where's the harm in that? You see, something happened to this narrative as I worked on it that I never expected – that it became as much about my thoughts and my imaginings and my way of seeing life as it is about the people Eben said he'd pay me to describe.

As Pulsifer hinted, Daniel Morley's paintings and watercolors and works he kept to himself have begun to receive favorable attention after two decades of neglect. A recent biography of him argues that because his father had close ties to the university and Daniel spent his childhood in Millard Circle, he was part of the school whether he wanted to be or not – never mind that he spent his adult life in Europe and made his name far from the shore of Lake Otrabe.

He sat on a stone bench in the main quadrangle. He had on a wide-brimmed straw hat he'd bought in Italy and tinted glasses, a more recent purchase, to temper the rays of the mid-day July sun. He felt an inner warmth, too, a sign that he'd found a pathway through the Antarctica of negativity he'd been trudging around on for days. What's more, he still received the benefits of a thaw with Sonja his wife.

Students passing by stopped occasionally to watch as he drew lines in his sketchbook – exciting for them to stand near the radiance of a man from the legendary great world about which

they dreamed. Feelings would pass quickly, but the memory of the sight would stay for decades, for they were keen and retentive of mind – except for three young males who will play a part in this story.

They were enrolled at the school, though not students in the usual sense of the word, for along with their studies, they acted as agents of an international cult that schemed to embarrass the university and thwart its work. Now, they gathered around Daniel to snicker and mock until he shoo'd them away. If they'd looked hard enough they might have appreciated the antic quality of the picture he was drawing, though they might not have understood what he meant by it. And if they'd taken the time to find out what he was doing, they'd have his love for life and might have adopted similar ways of thinking and spared themselves a dreadful disaster.

Why did he draw a herd of cattle charging through one of the arches between the library and the classics building to romp around the quadrangle? He would have told us that he'd imagined that an evil spirit that disliked the university and its achievements had turned itself into a stampede. Who was the bad spirit? He would have thought for a long time before he admitted that it came from himself. Not a picture he could have asked Eben Pulsifer to pay him for so he put it away with private work that no one but he saw.

Besides that, he remembered a bullfight in Spain and a stampede he'd heard about when he was a child during a visit to his uncle's farm forty miles west of New Corinth. It was his earliest memory of being away from Millard Circle, where he lived with his parents. Outdoors, close to the earth – long hours of moving, bending, lifting, reaching. He absorbed what his relatives said about money woes in lean times, debt, discussions with bankers, who tried to understand but had to go by their guidelines. Strong people, not easily moved, who had little interest in the higher levels of schooling. Why should they? The earth was solid under their feet

and they knew how to make it produce. Little interest in the arts either, a disposition harder to understand, but he took note.

He wouldn't forget the young people – sensual, earthy, profane, while he himself was scrawny (he filled out in later years) and reticent, with feelings easily aroused that floated to the surface like bubbles. Things they would take in stride frightened him – loud voices, horseplay, rough treatment of animals who weren't pets. City things scared him, too, though he would never talk about that, because he knew that Ma and Pa wanted him to be strong.

It didn't bother him that his relatives on the farm probably forgot him as soon as he drove home in the back seat of his father's Pierce Arrow after Mr. Morley loaned them enough money to keep on going, but he remembered them and mulled over his visits there in quiet moments later when he lay in bed at night.

The mind and its creative powers have their uses and their victories, sometimes delayed for decades – as now, when Daniel was able to turn his suspicion and distrust into belated admiration for his cousins' strength and compassion for their struggles and thankfulness that they'd introduced him to their way of life. He'd heard that countless young people longed for rural environments. His son, for example, grew lavender in Provence and spent the proceeds at card tables.

Maybe Sonja and I will retire at that farm and turn it into a place for the arts. We can sell what land we don't need.

Daniel could dream in that way and make plans because his mother had renewed the loan several times that his uncle couldn't repay and received the farm after he died. Now it belonged to Daniel.

He recalled farms in Europe, too, and others he visited during travels that I'll mention in their proper place.

The revolt of the cattle charging through the gates was destined to fail – they had no grazing land and faced the implacable enmity of the two-legged creatures who held the territory for now. The livestock would either pass through the campus or die there.

There'll always be cattle, he said to himself, even in times of austerity, if they return. Who can say what will happen in the weeks before the world ends and creation reaches out for restoration?

I want to learn about the force of nature that rushes and pulses through creation, to which many of us pay little attention. The university's people knew a lot about that and would happily share their learning with an eager student. In return, I'll give demonstrations in what I know about color, form, and design and hints of a realm beyond material things that people who are willing perceive with a spiritual kind of sight.

At any rate, the cattle charged out an eastern gate and disappeared. Daniel was the only one to see them, so he put them down quickly in his sketchbook as evidence for the future. He smiled to himself as he worked, because he recalled a later conversation with his farmer-uncle, who thought he understood him and predicted he'd end up working with numbers for an insurance company. His smile disappeared as soon as he closed his sketchbook.

Had he come back to Millard Circle only to dwell on old slights and misconceptions and even a tragedy I'll soon tell you about? Of course not. Was it the prospect of seeing Macbeth for the first time in decades that reinforced his sour mood? Or a memory-shadow of the three young men who taunted him while on the way to their deaths?

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I was in Millard Circle at the same time as Daniel. I was several decades younger than he, of course, and my brain was more nimble, but I lacked his knowledge of life and his strength. This is where the school helped me by giving me a platform to stand on. It also taught me how to know when my brain was working well and when it was sinking into a pit that nature never made.

I knew some of the people Daniel included in his Millard Circle paintings – he put me in two, in the background at a track meet and as the central figure in a depiction of the Day of Judgment because I'm sure he wanted to tease me. I got my own back by looking at his subjects from a different angle than he, less crotchety, not so inclined to set myself up against them, for I admired people blessed with sharp, purposeful, well-filled brains who were able to establish themselves in their fields.

I didn't agree with people who said the university was in a lull and drifting just because the previous generation of great experimenters had faded from the scene, for at such times undistinguished people like me can thrive and keep bustling. I was one among many who were eager for the high-wire intellectuality that the university offered even in those days.

