

Chapter 1

My cell-phone rang while I was deep into a game at the Silver Acres Chess Club. I swore silently and mumbled an apology to my opponent, Wesley, who was trying to fork my king and rook with his knight. This was not the time for interruptions, but since only a few people knew my cell-phone number and they had been warned not to use it short of a dire emergency, on threat of disinheritance, I figured I'd better find out who was calling.

I located the phone in my purse and said hello.

"Lillian, it's Mark."

The voice of my granddaughter's happy-go-lucky boyfriend sounded so strained that I was immediately concerned. Anyone who saves my life, as Mark had, earns the right to have my cell-phone number and also my full attention, day or night.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, gripping the plastic phone tightly and hoping I could make the problem go away with a wave of my hand.

"Yes. I...it's..."

Mark made a few more sounds, but didn't produce any intelligible sentences. This must be serious, indeed, since he had never been at a loss for words as long as I had known him. I looked at my watch. Four o'clock. "Can you meet me here for an early dinner?" I asked.

"I'll be in the front lobby in an hour."

I said goodbye and disconnected.

"Is there a problem?" Wesley asked. He had started exercising since his wife had died, several months ago, and he had lost some weight. He didn't look too bad for an old guy.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but I'm going to have to cancel dinner."

"I heard. That's okay. I'll eat with Tess."

If Wesley meant to make me jealous, he failed. Tess, my best friend at the Silver Acres Retirement Community, had no interest in Wesley, except for conversation and tax advice.

“Let’s finish the game,” I said, turning my attention to the board. But my concentration didn’t return. Wesley not only succeeded in grabbing my rook, he soon launched an onslaught against my king. I resigned, not very gracefully. I am a bad loser. I excused myself and went back to my apartment.

Mark was true to his word. He came through the doorway into the retirement community’s lobby promptly at five o’clock and gave me a hug, but not his usual smile. As we walked the short distance to the dining room he said, “I needed somebody to talk to.”

Meaning that he hadn’t talked to Sandra, my granddaughter. And he didn’t say anything more to me before we arrived at the dining room a few minutes after it opened for dinner. Only a handful of the residents had preceded us and we should be able to converse without interruption. I chose a table for two, which would further assure our privacy.

I observed Mark as he absently glanced at the day’s computer-printed menu. Lines had appeared on his handsome face where I had never seen lines before. When our waitress, a pretty and petite black girl in a ponytail and a dark miniskirt, came to fill our water glasses, I watched him again. He had an eye for the ladies, but he barely glanced at her.

We went to the salad bar and returned to the table with plates loaded. I couldn’t contain myself any longer. “Mark, what is the matter?” I asked.

He looked as if he was trying to think of what to say, then blurted out, “I’ve been accused of sexual harassment.”

“Harassment?” It took several seconds before I processed that. “By whom?”

“By a student at Crescent Heights College.”

He had just started teaching at the small private college north of Durham at the beginning of the second semester a few weeks before.

I sat there with my mouth open, not knowing what to say.

“Lillian, I didn’t do it.” Pain showed in his dark eyes.

“Of course you didn’t.” Mark was a flirt, but he would never do anything to hurt a woman. I asked, “What, specifically, are you accused of?”

“I...I haven’t seen the actual charges, but I think they include rape.”

“When did you find out about this?”

“Today. The school has established what they call the Sexual Misconduct Office of Crescent Heights. The students call it SMOOCH. The head of this office called me in.”

In my long teaching career, I had never heard of such a thing. I said, “What happens next?”

“I have a week to prepare my defense.”

“We’ve got to get you a lawyer.”

“I can’t have a lawyer with me at the hearing.”

This was getting worse and worse. “At least you need a lawyer to discuss your defense with and to educate you on courtroom procedure, such as cross-examining your accuser.”

Mark shook his head, morosely. “I can’t face my accuser.”

“What about your constitutional rights? What about trial by jury?”

“Since Crescent Heights is a private school they make their own rules. The Bill of Rights doesn’t apply to them. And this is billed as an informal inquiry, not a legal procedure.”

“But it can get you suspended.”

“Or possibly fired.”

“Did you know about this...policy when you went to work there?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think I would have a problem. Besides, I needed the job.”

Mark had completed work on his Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina last fall. His preference would have been to get a job at UNC, here in Chapel Hill, or Duke, in nearby Durham, where I had taught, but he wasn’t able to land a teaching position with either of them.

“Do you at least know who filed the charges?”

“Yes. But I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t? Or won’t because you think I would make trouble.” I have not been known to sit idly by when things go wrong.

“I’m under a gag order.”

“I assume your accuser is a woman. At least you can tell me that.” Start with the basics.

“Yes, a female student in my beginning Physics class.”

Our waitress came and served the main course, halibut for me, a beef dish for Mark. We both took the fried apples, which were very good here; they smelled and tasted of cinnamon. I let Mark take a few bites of his food. He needed the nourishment. A disaster like this could end his teaching career almost before it started. But it wasn’t going to happen without a fight. Mark wasn’t a quitter, and besides, I wouldn’t let him give up. But first I had to find out what had happened between him and this...ungrandmotherly epithets came to me.

I picked at my food, not eating much. Finally, I said, “Tell me as much as you can about this girl.”

Mark finished chewing his mouthful. "She's a sophomore. I believe she's twenty. I think she's bright, but she's cut class a couple of times. The lecture is at eight o'clock and not all the students are early risers. At least once I noticed her sleeping in class."

"What does she look like?"

"Like our waitress, only lighter."

He had noticed her. He wasn't dead yet. "Lighter in weight or in color?"

"She's white."

"Rate the looks of this white girl on a scale from one to ten."

"That's politically incorrect."

"Don't make jokes, Mark. This is serious."

"She's an eight, easily. She might be a nine, dressed up, especially later in the day."

That wasn't good. The story of a beautiful girl was more likely to be believed than that of Raggedy Ann. Or was it? Perhaps the plain girls got more sympathy. "Tell me what happened between you two."

"Up until last week I had just answered questions for her in the lab. Of course I do that for everybody. But last week she came to my office."

"Lil, you didn't tell us you were going to have dinner with Mark." I looked up at Tess and Wesley, who had just come into the dining room together. Tess had an eye for younger men. I didn't blame her; I do too. Since they both knew Mark, handshaking and air-kissing went on for several seconds.

"So why are you keeping Mark all to yourself?" Tess persisted.

I love Tess dearly, but sometimes she can be awfully nosy. "We're talking about family matters," I said, hoping she would go away.

“Are there wedding bells in the future?”

Meaning between Mark and Sandra. I said, “I’ll tell you all about it later.”

Tess looked miffed, but at least Wesley could take a hint. He guided her to another table.

“Where were we?” I asked, turning back to Mark. “Oh, yes, you were telling me about the time the white girl went to your office.”

Mark collected himself. “She came in just as my office hours were ending.”

“What was she wearing?”

“Uh...jeans. And a sweater, I think. And a jacket. It’s still winter.” He paused.

“Okay, go on. I won’t interrupt again.”

“She came in and closed the door. I told her my office hours were over. She said she just had a quick question. I said I kept my door open when I had visitors.”

“Especially female visitors.”

“One of the tenured professors told me to do that. But she ignored the hint and sat down.”

I remembered I wasn’t going to interrupt, so I kept quiet as Mark took a breath.

After a few seconds Mark continued. “She did ask a question, but nothing very earth-shaking. In fact, I don’t even remember what it was. Then she stood up and I thought she was going to leave. I was sitting in front of my computer, but I got up to see her out the door. She went to the door and turned around. I was a couple of steps from her. She came toward me and...” Mark faltered, then continued, “She kissed me hard—on the mouth.” Mark stopped, unable to continue.

“What did you do?”

“I pushed her away—gently—and said something stupid like, “I’ve already got a girlfriend.”

“That wasn’t stupid.”

“When I pushed her my hand may have brushed against her breast. Anyway, she stood looking at me, and with a straight face she said, ‘Now you know how I feel about you.’ Then she turned around, opened the door and went out, closing it behind her.”

“Did you try to follow her?”

“No. In fact, I didn’t move for about five minutes. I had that horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach, the one you get when you’re sure something terrible is about to happen. Unfortunately, I was right.”

I had the same feeling. I asked Mark a few more questions about the incident to try to find out whether he had forgotten any details, but apparently he hadn’t. What now? I said, “Have you told Sandra about this?”

Mark shook his head, looking miserable. “I’m afraid she won’t understand.”

With reason. Sandra had shown annoyance with Mark’s flirting in the past. No telling how she would respond to this. Still, she had to be told. I said, “What’s your current status at Crescent Heights?” You haven’t been suspended yet, have you?”

“As of right now I’m still teaching. In fact, I have two classes to teach tomorrow. The eight o’clock and a one o’clock.”

We needed a plan. I knew some lawyers, but I didn’t see what a lawyer could accomplish in the short run. And apparently, we didn’t have a chance of getting the policy declared unconstitutional. What could we do immediately? “Take me with you, tomorrow,” I said. “I want to sit in on your class. And look around the campus. And maybe talk to some people.”

Mark hesitated. “I leave here at 6:30.”

“I’m an early riser. You can pick me up and jump on the Interstate.”

“What about King?”

King was my part-husky dog. I had named her after the lead-dog of Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, the Mountie on the old-time radio show, in spite of the fact that she was female. I usually walked a mile with her in the morning. “I’ll take her for a short walk and leave her outside with food and water. The cold doesn’t bother her. I’ll ask Tess to take her for a walk later. King likes Tess because Tess gives her cookies.”

Mark acquiesced. He knew I wasn’t completely useless, as I had proven before. But I wanted to make sure he was going to do the right thing. I said, “Now you go home and explain the situation to Sandra.” Mark had been living in Sandra’s condo for a while, with Sandra and her two-year-old son, Winston. “And, hopefully, everything will work out.”

Mark smiled, wanly. “But first, can I have some dessert? I saw on the menu they have do-it-yourself sundaes tonight.”