

Characters clash in satiric novel at university campus in Texas.

PROT U

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CHAPTER ONE

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Mike Carter didn't intend to let the screen door slam when he dashed from the house carrying his coffee cup and backpack, but he forgot the spring was broken and the door swung shut with a bang. He winced, hoping it hadn't awakened his mother, who had just gotten to bed after her night shift at the hospital.

I better fix the damn thing this weekend. Mike crossed the small yard, burned dry and brown from 54 days of summer drought, and stuffed his six-foot frame behind the wheel of his rusting 12-year-old Ford Escort. He wore a tee shirt and shorts, and the vinyl seat covers, hot from the morning sun, nearly fried his legs. The floor of the car was littered with fast-food wrappings and

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soda cans. A stack of overdue parking tickets gathered dust on the dashboard.

Mike coaxed the car to life and switched on the radio to catch the morning news from NPR. Ten minutes later he was on the six-lane freeway heading for the university, a trip that should take less than 40 minutes, but the traffic congestion of the sprawling Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex tripled the drive time. Mike loathed starting the day this early and commuting during the rush hours that began at 6:00 a.m., but he had no other choice. His schedule was crammed with classes in the morning, work at the video store all afternoon and editing the campus newspaper each evening.

Stuck in the slow-moving center lane, Mike waited for a chance to move left, where a steady stream of vehicles rushed by doing 85 or more, the unofficial minimum speed. Mike tried to be patient. This road was a death trap, and if a speeding SUV or pickup didn't get you, cutting someone off could bring on more than an obscene gesture here in the birthplace of road rage and home of the concealed weapons law.

Approaching a major merge from the north, traffic in the middle and right lanes were now bunched up like cattle in a slaughterhouse chute. Mike glanced at the side-view mirror and took advantage of a brief break in the speeding traffic to bolt left. The pace picked up for a while, but soon the left lane was also crawling, slowed by an elderly driver in an older model Cadillac de Ville a few cars ahead. The driver of a BMW behind the Cadillac was tailgating and flashing his headlights, growing increasingly impatient.

Suddenly the BMW driver swerved left onto the median, passed the Cadillac, pulled in front of it and came to a dead stop. The man emerged from his car, a scowl on his face and a gun in his hand. Mike heard the screech of tires and saw the taillights of the cars ahead of him in time to veer right, barely missing an oncoming semi in the center lane.

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His heart pounding, Mike drove on as he heard bumpers colliding and metal buckling. When he realized how close he'd come to having an accident, his hands trembled and he felt weak. He took several deep breaths and tried to focus on the day ahead – the start of his senior year.

After earning an associate degree at the local community college, Mike had transferred to Prot U four years ago, where he attended classes part time and worked as much as he could to pay tuition. It was an exhausting lifestyle, but he consoled himself that this was his last year. With his journalism degree and experience as editor-in-chief of *The Crimson Crusader*, he'd get a real job after graduation and have a more sane life. He just had to get through this year.

Now he was worried that he'd made a mistake in accepting the editor position, which could complicate his senior year. Sure, he wanted to run a paper that sought out and reported news and issues that were important to the campus, but he had to be careful. If he wanted the year to go smoothly, he'd better avoid any confrontation with the administration.

Three years ago, when Mike joined the paper's staff as a beat reporter, he'd seen what happens to student editors who take risks. The editor had allowed the advertising manager to run a display ad recruiting waitresses for a topless men's club in Dallas. The Prot U president at the time, who tried to preserve the university's image as a traditional Christian school, was furious and demanded the editor's resignation. Mike resolved not to let that sort of thing happen on his watch.

Mike's musings were interrupted by the acrid odor of the polluted air, and his eyes started to burn. He cursed the million cars and trucks that filled the roads each day and the state's lax air-quality standards, which made the region's air among the worst in the country. Mike rolled up the window and resigned himself to

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enduring the heat inside, wishing he could afford to get the car's air conditioner fixed.

Mallory Moore heard the mockingbird before her digital alarm beeped. The bird's loud, persistent song, repeated incessantly from the pecan tree outside her dorm window, had shattered her slumber every morning since she'd arrived at Prot U.

God, how I hate that bird. But never mind, I can't be late today, and I need more time to work on my hair and make-up.

When she swung her legs over the side of the bed and hit the lump on the floor, she remembered last night. *Shit. He's still here.*

What was his name? Something with a "J." Jeff? Jason? A sophomore on the football team. She'd met him at the Greek mixer last night and after a few beers he was all over her. Not exactly her type, but he was a Rho Alpha Zeta. That might score her a few points with those who noticed such things.

Her single bed was OK for a quick hook-up but not a good night's sleep for two, so after a beery performance that did nothing for her, she'd pushed him to the floor. Now she nudged him with her foot.

"Hey, time to go." No response. She leaned down and shook his shoulder. "Come on, you need to get out of here." His only response was a grunt.

Mallory couldn't waste any more time on him. She assumed he'd eventually wake up, remember where he was and leave. She climbed over the hulk and went to the window to peep through the mini-blinds. The searing Texas sun, already climbing above the trees, promised another scorcher. Mallory sighed and hurried to her closet to check her supply of summer dresses for one she hadn't worn since arriving on campus a week ago.

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God, if this heat drags on much longer, I'll have to make another shopping trip to Neiman Marcus. I can't wear the same dress twice – they'd notice. And no shorts this week.

Mallory headed for the bathroom she shared with her suitemate, a quiet, boring type from Lubbock. She couldn't wait to get her bid and move to the Gamma Alpha Beta sorority house where she'd have a more appropriate roommate, someone classy and popular, with contacts in all the right circles. She just HAD to pledge GAB, her mom's sorority and the most popular one on campus. The anticipation was almost unbearable. This was the most important week of her life, so far.

Mallory locked the bathroom door in case the jerk woke up and got the idea to try something in there. She turned on the spigot, stepped into the shower and let the tepid water cascade over her shoulder-length blonde hair and down her slim, tanned body to her scarlet painted toenails.

An hour later, with her gleaming tresses gathered by a scrunchie, manicured nails and understated make-up, Mallory emerged from the residence hall, a fragrant aura of freesia body wash surrounding her. She wore a size 4, white, halter-top sundress to set off her tan and sported strappy sandals on two-inch platforms. It was crucial to look good this week; they would be watching her.

Her short skirt brushed her smooth thighs as she strode confidently to her new forest green Land Rover in the parking lot, a graduation gift from Daddy. She was in love with it. She'd filled it with all the essentials of college life – TV, microwave, DVD player, mini-frig, stuffed plush animals, and piles of clothes and shoes – and driven it up from her home in Houston last week. Mallory slid onto the smooth leather seat, turned on the AC full blast, popped in a Dixie Chicks CD, and drove the quarter mile to the mostly empty parking lot behind Commons. To avoid putting

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on the dreaded “freshman 15,” she’d limit herself to her usual breakfast of dry wheat toast and diet Dr. Pepper.

Mallory was ready to start her freshman year at Protestant University of the South. More importantly, she was ready for Rush Week.

Isabel Romero’s dark eyes were closed and her chin was slipping slowly to her chest when the bus jerked to a stop. Her head came up and she reached for her tote bag, stuffed with her lunch of beans and tortillas. She dragged her tired body to the front of the bus and slowly descended the steps.

As she walked down College Avenue toward campus, a familiar refrain coursed through her head. *Mi Dios, it’s hard to start every day so tired. Nothing ever changes. Get up before dawn, ride the bus for an hour, work all day at the university, ride home, work some more at the taqueria.*

It had been like this for four years, ever since Isabel at age 19 was smuggled across the border near Laredo with her sister, brother-in-law and their two young children. The family quickly slipped northward undetected, joining the millions of undocumented immigrants from Mexico who come searching for a better life in the United States, swelling the Hispanic population in Texas to one-third of the state’s total. Now the family shared a tiny rented house on Stockville’s south side, where chickens scratched in bare yards and Spanish music blared from portable radios.

Struggling together and pooling their income, the family managed to earn enough money to cover rent, food and bus tickets, but little else. Isabel’s brother-in-law found work in housing construction, where few questions were asked and crews worked from dawn to dusk filling the North Texas prairies with new gated

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enclaves of McMansions. But the work was temporary and provided no benefits or job security.

Isabel's sister cared for the children and ran a makeshift taco stand set up in front of their tiny house. Isabel found work at Prot U, where the personnel department conveniently overlooked her lack of a green card. She relieved her sister at the taco stand each evening when she returned from her cleaning job at the university, the only job, she was told, that she was qualified for. Her dream of going to college to study pre-med was evaporating as fast as morning dew in summertime.

Not wanting to get her pay docked for punching in late, Isabel quickened her step as she crossed the Prot U campus past the white colonnaded buildings gleaming in the morning sun. Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead and trickled down her nose and cheeks. Under her arms, half moons of sweat stained her blue cotton work uniform. She hated this hot weather, so unlike the cool climate in her native village, perched high in the foothills above Monterrey.

Except for the cheerful morning songs of finches and chickadees, the campus was quiet this early, most students still asleep behind closed blinds in their dorm rooms. A food service truck was parked behind Commons, delivering frozen burger patties and chicken strips to the cafeteria. The smell of frying bacon wafted from the kitchen's exhaust fans. Busy squirrels bounced like ping-pong balls across the grass, gathering the acorns and pecans strewn on the ground.

As Isabel neared the grassy quadrangle at the center of campus, she spotted her friend Ramos Flores adjusting one of the many lawn sprinklers that had kept the grass lush and green through the summer, running daily despite the city's water use restrictions during the drought. She waved, but the Mexican groundskeeper didn't see her at first, and when the sprinkler suddenly shot out water in her direction, she hopped to one side to

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avoid getting soaked. She welcomed the few drops that reached her and trickled down her warm face and arms.

“*Lo siento!*” Ramos called when he saw her. “*Buenos días.*”

“*Buenos días, Ramos,*” she called good-naturedly. She couldn’t be angry at the new immigrant, who knew little English and was having trouble learning how to manage the automatic sprinkler system. She worried that he might be fired if he didn’t learn soon how to control it.

Poor Ramos. At least I know enough English to get by. And I know how to clean toilets and wash floors. I shouldn’t complain so much.

Isabel cut across the quadrangle and hurried toward the maintenance building at the north end of campus. When she started to cross the circular drive, she was startled by a green SUV that was barreling toward her, and she had to jump back onto the curb to avoid getting hit. The blond girl behind the wheel didn’t even see Isabel. Her heart was still pounding when she punched in with her timecard and started her workday.

On campus at last after his harrowing commute, Mike began his daily quest for a parking space. He had a parking permit, but it was a standard joke on campus that the worthless privilege, which cost \$100 a year, provided only a license to hunt. Resident students who insisted on driving to class took up most of the slots intended for commuters. By mid-morning, drivers lined up their cars and pick-up trucks at the lot entrances, their CD players and air conditioners cranked up to soothe their impatience, as they waited for classes to change and slots to open up. This morning, a shiny, red pick-up truck with a gun rack and fitted tool box behind the cab blocked one entrance, filling the neighborhood with twangy country-western music.

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Mike drove to every campus lot and cruised the nearby city streets. All the legal spots were filled. Half of one parking lot was closed off and reserved for trustees attending the board meeting today. A campus police officer guarding the lot waved him away. Mike raked his fingers through his sandy-brown hair in frustration.

Mike was growing desperate as he heard the chimes in the chapel tower begin to strike nine. He returned to the lot closest to the building where his class was held and pulled into the space marked *Fire Lane - No Parking*. This would probably mean another ticket that he couldn't afford, but it was a chance he had to take.

The new university president was reluctant to face the coming day. The start of the school year filled him with trepidation as he imagined what it might hold. Though he had been appointed to the office more than a month ago, he was not yet comfortable in his role as head of one of Texas' leading private universities. The tale of his ascension still left him stunned.

As he had done on previous mornings when he awoke early and found himself in the immense master bedroom of the president's mansion, Elmer Weeken rehearsed that astounding story to assure himself that it had happened and that he, indeed, belonged here.

A quiet, unassuming biology professor with a Ph.D. from UT-Austin and tenure at Prot U, Elmer was content to go on teaching forever, facing lecture halls full of disinterested students, reading from the same yellowed notes year after year, and going home to his empty apartment and simple supper. There, in peace, he could indulge in his only guilty pleasure, reading science fiction novels.

Then the day came when the Letters and Science dean called Elmer to his office to tell him that he was appointing Elmer chair

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of the biology department, simply because none of the other faculty was willing to take the tedious and thankless job. Of course, the dean omitted the real reason for the appointment, and Elmer was not only surprised but considerably flattered. He was also able to mask his utter incompetence at managing since the department secretary kept things organized and told him exactly what needed to be done. That left him free to focus on the one biology class he continued to teach.

The study of living organisms had always been Elmer's passion, ever since he'd caught his first tadpoles as a young child. His mother, a high school English teacher, and his math professor father had urged him to direct his interest toward a teaching career, which they saw as a safe and secure role for their nerdy son.

Though a lackluster lecturer in the classroom, Elmer's enthusiasm was rekindled each summer when he led a group of biology majors on a two-week field trip to the wilds of West Texas in search of the elusive horned toad, the ugly, spiny lizard once prominent throughout Texas. For Elmer, the annual event was the highlight of his year, and although his students made jokes about "Elmer's horny trips," many returned with a new appreciation for their meek professor and his knowledge of the natural world.

Still, there were students each semester who complained about the biology teacher's uninspiring lectures. It wasn't until one group of them presented the dean with a petition calling for Elmer's replacement that his career really took off. Unwilling to create an unpleasant situation that would surely reflect on his own judgment, the dean appointed Elmer to the new post of Assistant Dean. Elmer was reluctant to accept the promotion and politely expressed his misgivings to the dean, who assured him that the move, with its salary bump and higher status, was in his best interest. Freed from teaching altogether, Elmer was tucked away in a side office where he was given voluminous reports to read and student schedules to approve. There he was almost forgotten.

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But not entirely. Some months later, when the university president had no choice but to fire that same dean after three female students filed a sexual harassment charge against him for fondling them in his office, the low-profile and harmless former biology teacher seemed a natural for the dean's post. Subsequently, in his three years as dean, Elmer earned the praise of the administration and board of trustees by never asking for anything and always doing what he was told.

Noticing this trait, several board members saw in Elmer the potential for higher office. That path was suddenly opened to him when the president, an affable octogenarian and former clergyman, was struck with a massive heart attack and died while delivering the graduation address last spring. A hasty national search for his replacement was conducted for the sake of appearance, but a majority of the board, meeting in secret, had already made their choice. In Elmer they had a president they could easily control.

Despite a feeble and inconsequential protest from a handful of trustees who questioned his qualifications, Elmer was appointed president of the university in July when the campus languished in the heat and the summer session population took little notice.

This morning, after dallying in his bedroom as long as he could, Elmer went downstairs to the dining room, where Maria Gonzales waited to serve him. The odors of her cooking assaulted him and turned his stomach queasy.

"Good morning, *Señor* President," said the Mexican housekeeper and cook, who was on the university payroll.

"Good morning, Maria." He forced a faint smile.

She set a cup of steaming tea before him, along with a plate of tortillas filled with scrambled eggs and spicy sausage. Elmer was not a big breakfast eater, but he nibbled at the food so as not to hurt her feelings. The plump, middle-aged woman loved to cook as well as eat, and he suspected that she finished off all the leftovers.

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Each time Elmer took a sip of tea, Maria refilled the cup. It began to look as if he'd have to sit there all morning trying to empty the cup. Elmer had lived alone all his adult life, and Maria's presence and constant attention made him uncomfortable. But having a housekeeper was essential, as somebody had to take care of the 14-room mansion, built during a previous administration at a cost of \$3.5 million. Maria was also responsible for serving at fundraisers and receptions that the university held in the mansion's public areas on the first floor.

"*Señor* President, the car is here." Relieved at not having to drink more tea, Elmer got up from the table and took a few deep breaths to steady himself for what lay ahead. He straightened his bow tie at the hall mirror and picked up his briefcase, which was empty except for the latest issue of *Journal of Biology*. He stepped outside, where a Mexican driver waited in the university's Lincoln Town Car, ready to drive the president to the nearby campus. Elmer had never owned a car or even learned to drive, so he gladly accepted this perk of office.

As the car approached Prot U, one thought was paramount in Elmer's mind. He wished he were heading for the biology lecture hall instead of the Board of Trustees meeting.

Hoping he wasn't late for the board meeting, Mike rushed up the stairs to the third floor of Harken Hall, the administration building. Like most buildings on campus, it bore the name of a corporation that had purchased naming rights through an innovative fundraising project conceived by Prot U's development office. There was Enron Engineering, Arthur Anderson School of Business, Halliburton Science Center, Martha Stewart Residence Hall, and so on. Because of the terms of the agreements, Prot U was stuck with the monikers for the life of the buildings, even

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though financial scandals had sullied the reputations of many of the companies.

Mike hadn't expected his morning class to go the full hour, but that new poli-sci prof didn't seem to know about the Prot U tradition of dismissing class early the first day. Mike was almost breathless when he reached the reception room of the trustees' suite. Behind the receptionist's desk, the door to the board room was closed.

"Good morning," he blurted. "I'm Mike Carter, editor of *The Crimson Crusader*, here to cover the board meeting for the paper. I hope I'm not late."

The receptionist raised her bleached and bouffanted head to look up from her desk. She did not smile.

"I beg your pardon."

"The board meeting. I'd like to sit in. For a story for the campus paper."

"I'm sorry, that's not allowed. The meeting is closed to the press. This IS a private university."

"But last semester--"

"Chairman Lynch has a new policy. Good day." She returned her eyes to the work on her desk.

Mike stood still for a moment, flustered and unsure what to do next. *Shit, there goes the lead story for tomorrow.*

"OK, but, umm, will you ask the chairman to give me a call at the newsroom after the meeting?"

"I'll give him the message," she replied without looking up.

Mike thanked her and left. He had hit his first stone wall as editor. He wondered what Woodward and Bernstein of Watergate fame would do. He had to figure out some way to scale this wall of secrecy. But that would have to wait. He glanced at his watch. Maybe he could still make it to his media ethics class before it was over.

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“The meetin’ will come to order.” Marlin Lynch, chairman of the Board of Trustees of Protestant University of the South, rapped the gavel on the oversized walnut table. The chatter subsided at the sound of the man’s booming voice, and 14 heads slowly turned to face the chairman seated at one end. Tall, tanned and surprisingly fit for a man in his 70s, Lynch’s very stature carried authority.

President Weeken, seated at the other end of the table, was already at attention, his small frame almost swallowed by the stuffed leather chair. He kept his balding head slightly bent, avoiding eye contact with Lynch. The president’s report to the board, prepared by his administrative assistant and neatly typed, was set before him. He folded his hands and laid them on the report in an attempt to keep them from shaking. He hadn’t faced the full board before, only the chairman and search committee when he was appointed.

“Our first order a’ bidness is to officially welcome President Weeken,” Lynch drawled. “Ah do believe y’all had the opportunity to meet him at the barbecue shindig in Joo-lye. Ah think he’s gonna work out jus’ fine.”

Weeken managed to flash a wan smile and nodded as the trustees turned to him. He was relieved when Lynch dispensed with the reading of the president’s report and ordered it entered into the minutes. The chairman already knew its contents and was eager to direct the board’s attention to two important items.

“Now y’all know what we’re dealin’ with heah. Enrollment’s bin goin’ down and those damn alumni ain’t givin’ what they oughta.”

The news surprised no one. Both enrollment and giving had been slowly eroding for years at Prot U, and Lynch was certain that the main reason for the slump was the football team’s lousy performance. For the last three seasons, the team had won a grand

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total of only four games, and most of those were close calls. It was an embarrassment for the university.

The solution was obvious, Lynch told the trustees. Field a good team, have a winning record, get national exposure, and the students and money will flow in.

“We gotta build pride and respect with this team,” Lynch said. “Jus imagine what a conference win and a bowl invite would do.”

Fourteen heads nodded in agreement. Prior to this, Lynch and his supporters had never been able to convince the administration to spend more money on the football program. With a puppet president now in place, the way was clear.

A second reason for the slump, Lynch believed, was the location of the campus itself. Founded immediately after the Civil War by Congregational missionaries from New England on what was then range land, the university had grown over the years, as had Stockville, the neighboring town. The school’s religious origin was now buried in history and its denominational connection largely forgotten or ignored, as evidenced by the low attendance at weekly chapel services. Many students were not even aware that the statue of the grim-faced woman that stood behind the chapel was Prot U’s principal founder, the once-renowned suffragist and abolitionist Abigail Toogood.

In its early days, Stockville was a nondescript stopover on the longhorn cattle route to the stockyards at Fort Worth, but as the town grew, it annexed the surrounding land and was now a municipality of 300,000 people. Its central city butted up against the Prot U campus, bringing with it all the woes of urban life – traffic jams, crime, gaudy billboards, tacky storefronts, homeless transients. College Avenue, the city’s main street, once a dusty cattle trail, now seared the eastern edge of the campus like a branding iron. The pristine and pastoral setting of the campus, with its Tara-style buildings, graceful magnolia trees and manicured

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lawns, was threatened by the ugly encroachments of the untamed city.

“The situation has become critical,” Lynch told the board, rising from his chair and leaning over the table. Image was everything, he said, and unless something was done soon to attract and keep students, Prot U would continue to lose recruits to its two main competitors in the area, Southern Methodist University and Texas Christian University.

Now, with Lynch as chairman and Weeken in the president’s office, the time had come for decisive action. In fact, Lynch had a committee working on a plan since May when he was elected chairman. The master plan was now ready. Its very name lifted spirits and inspired visions: Future of Protestant University of the South, which conveniently could be shortened to its acronym FOPUS.

The university’s problems would be attacked on two fronts, with major changes the likes of which the university had never seen. It was time to turn things around.

“This time, my friends, nothin’s gonna stop us,” Lynch told the board, pounding his fist on the table.

The day had begun on a high note for Assistant Professor Angela Goodwin as it usually did at the start of a new semester. She felt as though she were standing on a precipice, gazing ahead at 16 virginal weeks, as yet unsullied by the frustrations and disappointments that, despite her hopes, would invariably fill her days. But maybe this year would be different.

Angela sat at her desk studying the class lists for the three journalism courses she would teach: Introduction to Mass Communication, Media Writing, and Advanced Reporting. She recognized only a few names on the lists, those students assigned

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to her for academic advising and ones who wrote for the campus paper. With some of the trendy names chosen by Boomer parents - - Madison, Skyler, Conner – it was impossible to determine gender. She had no problem picking out the African-American students: Laquecia, D’Jhon, Neferra, Quantel. Angela appreciated the creativity of their parents but knew that such made-up names branded these kids with race and class. If she ever had children, she vowed she’d give them commonplace names like James, John, Mary and Susan. Her own parents, in a burst of optimism during the heady days of the civil rights movement, had named her after black activist Angela Davis, a fact she never admitted to anyone.

As Angela studied the lists, sounding out unfamiliar last names, she tried to imagine what each student was like. Who would be the high achievers, who the slackers, the clowns, the timid? In which ones would she ignite excitement for journalism? Who would challenge her knowledge and authority, questioning what a young, black, female assistant professor from Chicago could possibly teach them? She would soon meet them all, and, despite her efforts not to make early judgments, by the end of the first week she would know.

Angela turned to the computer to check her e-mail. She skimmed through a long memo from the president’s office exhorting the administration and faculty *to adhere to the timeless traditions and sound policies that have put Protestant University of the South at the pinnacle of academic excellence in the state of Texas* and reminding them that *in the interest of frugality, photocopy use in the academic units will be restricted to 50 copies per faculty member per month, and anyone exceeding that limit will be charged five cents a copy.*

Angela shook her head in disbelief. *This is outrageous. The football coach earns enough in one hour to pay for all the university’s copying needs for the whole year.*

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The next memo was from Mallory Moore, a freshman girl enrolled in the Mass Comm class, informing Angela that she would miss the first week because she was *like, totally busy* with Rush Week activities and asking if she could please be excused from any assignments that week. Angela sighed. The battle with frivolity had begun.

The third memo was from the journalism department chairman, welcoming back the faculty and reminding them of the importance of attending the department's faculty meetings, which now would be held bi-weekly instead of monthly. Angela groaned. She considered the two-hour meetings a waste of time, governed by an excruciatingly detailed agenda and filled with rambling pedantic discussions that got nowhere but gave the faculty a forum for displaying their *sagesse*.

The chairman's memo also included the announcement that he had appointed Professor Goodwin as the new adviser to *The Crusader*, the twice-weekly student newspaper. The previous adviser, an advertising professor, had resigned last spring, lured away from academia by a Dallas ad agency. Angela, under the influence of idealism, had volunteered to take on the extra duties as adviser, thinking this might provide a way for her to have a positive influence on the student staff. Besides, reasoned her more practical self, this service would look good on her *curriculum vitae*. Now in her second year at Prot U, it was time for her to begin laying the groundwork for a tenure application.

But as reality began crowding into her consciousness, Angela realized the downside. The new duties meant more work and no additional pay. She was already beginning to feel overwhelmed, and a chunk of the morning's high spirits plopped down like a cow-pie on the prairie.

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Cornelius T. Bragg, Ph.D., English department chairman, snapped shut the brass latches on his leather briefcase, lifted it from his desk, and grabbed his suit jacket. It seemed foolish to wear a suit and tie on a hot day like this, but he always tried to make a good impression on the first day of class. He called goodbye to his wife of 26 years, and hurried out to his car.

The Braggs lived in a stately Tudor-style house on a shady, picturesque street just three blocks from campus. Cornelius could easily have walked to his office in the liberal arts building, but he didn't want to work up a sweat. Besides, it gave him a feeling of importance to slide his shiny black Mercedes into the space permanently reserved for him in the parking lot next to the building.

Cornelius stopped by the English department office to pick up his mail and new class enrollment lists. The department secretary, a shrill, grey-haired woman hired decades ago by a previous chairman, was at her desk talking on the phone.

"Good morning," he mumbled. He avoided using her name, which he could never remember. Was it Alvina? Elmira? Imelda?

She glanced up, gave a slight wave and went on talking. "So what time did he wake up? And he stayed dry all night? Aw, lemme talk to my little sweetie."

As she paused, Cornelius tried to get her attention. "I need —"

"It's Nana, honey. Can you say 'hi?' What a big boy you are! Nana's so proud of you. Now give the phone to Mommy. Go on, Tommie. Give the phone to Mommy now and say 'bye-bye.'"

Giving up, Cornelius walked over to check his mail slot, where he found several interoffice memos and some textbook advertisements but no class lists. More irritated now, he returned to the secretary's desk and leaned toward her. "I need my class lists, NOW," he said.

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“Hold on, honey,” she said to the phone. She put her hand over the receiver. “The registrar’s office just sent ‘em over this mornin’. They’re right here.”

She handed him the stack and returned to her conversation. Cornelius had to shuffle through the pile before he found his lists. He threw the pile back on her desk, but she didn’t seem to notice and went on talking.

Cornelius shook his head as he left the office. *That woman is useless. Why the hell doesn’t she retire? Then she could talk to her grandchildren on her own time.*

He scanned the enrollment lists as he walked to his office. As chairman of the department, he was required to teach only two courses each semester. The graduate seminar on the post-modern non-novel would be a snap. The dozen grad students would be responsible for the readings and class discussions, and he’d assign just one major paper. It was the freshman composition class that he dreaded. He glanced at the class list – 150 freshmen, most of whom probably couldn’t write a literate paragraph. His blood pressure rose just thinking about it.

It’s an abomination the way the university packs liberal arts classes and refuses to hire more faculty. This doesn’t happen in the business school. They wouldn’t stand for it.

Cornelius believed a tenured professor with almost 30 years teaching experience shouldn’t have to teach freshman composition. But the former university president had this crazy notion that undergraduates should have more class time with senior faculty. Last year a group of trouble-making students complained that tenured faculty spent more time on research and publishing than on teaching. Hence the new policy that tenured faculty increase their classroom time and teach at least one undergraduate class a year.

But Cornelius had a way out. He had a graduate assistant. She could handle all the paper-grading and other routine chores. That would give him time to complete the manuscript for his new

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textbook and meet the publisher's deadline. The new TA could even help him finish up the research. She'd better be good.

Margaret Galsworth had been awake for hours, unpacking the last of the boxes that had filled her small studio apartment since yesterday. Her clothes were already neatly hung in the closet and folded in the dresser drawers. The biggest problem was the books – she never seemed to have enough shelf space for the volumes of novels, poetry and criticism she'd been collecting since high school. When the two bookshelves her dad had made for her were filled, she lined up the remaining books on the wide window sill. She flattened the last of the empty cardboard boxes and stuffed them into the closet to save for her next move.

Her framed diploma from Trinity University in San Antonio leaned against the wall atop her bureau. She walked over to it and read once again the ornate script on the parchment: *Bachelor of Arts, summa cum laude*. Margaret smiled, absorbing the boost of confidence those words gave her, which she needed even more today as she began her graduate studies in 17th century English poetry at Prot U and her work as assistant to the chairman of the English department.

She picked up the glossy Prot U marketing brochure lying on the bureau. Its description of the university had influenced her decision to enroll here, along with its proximity to Shreveport, her hometown in Louisiana.

Protestant University of the South is situated in the vibrant, rapidly developing plains of North Central Texas, just minutes away from the economic and cultural center of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. Opportunities abound here, and the area's year-round mild temperatures make it an ideal location for work and study. The university's historic tradition of academic excellence,

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eminent faculty, low teacher-student ratio, excellent facilities and affordable tuition cannot be surpassed.

It sounds perfect, Margaret thought, and she was eager to begin her work and study. She hadn't yet met Dr. Bragg, but they'd talked by telephone after she was accepted for the program. She knew he was a respected scholar in his field of post-modern fiction, and she'd read a couple of his scholarly articles. She felt privileged to have been chosen as his assistant.

Quickly glancing in the bathroom mirror, she ran a brush through her cropped auburn hair and tucked her shirt into her khaki slacks. She picked up her backpack, secured the straps snugly over both shoulders and maneuvered her bicycle through the apartment and down the stairs to the first floor lobby. When she opened the door, she was momentarily blinded by the bright morning sun. She slipped on her sunglasses, mounted her bike and headed for campus five miles away.

It was past 6 o'clock when Mike got back to campus after working four hours at the video store. As usual, the only elevator in the WorldCom College of Communication was out of service, so he bounded up the stairs to the fourth floor. *The Crimson Crusader* newsroom was located in what used to be an attic, down one end of a poorly lit hallway next to the room that held janitor's supplies and dusty boxes of long-forgotten files and student records.

The newsroom was bustling. Several reporters sat at computer workstations typing stories. Elvis Costello music downloaded from the Internet wailed from one of the computers. "Hey, could you, like, turn that down?" yelled one girl, holding a notebook and pencil, with a phone tucked between her shoulder and ear. Two

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reporters tossed a Nerf football back and forth across the newsroom.

The managing editor and campus editor were huddled over a desk, discussing the news budget, a list of stories slated for the next day's paper.

"Whatta we got?" Mike asked as he came up to them.

"Not much," Managing Editor Jenny Lofton answered. "There's the new faculty profiles, the police story on a car break-in, pix from frosh orientation, the week's menus from Commons – that's about it.

"Oh, and we've been working on the Weeken profile and trying to get an interview, but his secretary's been putting us off," Jenny added. "She says he's too busy. It's kinda' hard to do a profile when the person won't see you. All we got is the bio from the PR office."

"Pretty lame for the first issue," Mike said.

"Yeah. I'm really sorry, Mike. We did our best."

He had no doubts about that, at least regarding Jenny's part. She was the hardest worker on the staff and the only one besides himself who was serious about a career as a print journalist. Mike first noticed her when she worked as a general assignment reporter in her freshman year. He was campus editor then, and he'd learned to count on Jenny's reliability, whether for last-minute breaking news or some trivial sorority feature that no one else wanted to do. And Jenny, a double major in journalism and Spanish, never complained about too much work. In fact, she didn't say much of anything at staff meetings unless she had something significant to contribute.

Mike looked into Jenny's deep blue-grey eyes, now serious and apologetic. They had a mesmerizing effect on him, and he wondered what else they might reveal. But who in this business had any time for a social life?

"Awright, we'll manage. Did Lynch call?"

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“Nope. And we’ve been here all afternoon. And I almost forgot. The computers were down for a coupla hours, so we’re already over deadline.”

“Damn!” Mike plopped down in the chair behind his desk, covered with a scattering of memos, phone messages and newspapers. *What else in this day could go wrong?*

“OK. I’ll try Lynch at home, if I can find his number.”

“Good luck,” said Jenny. “Oh, that new adviser came by. Professor Goodwin? She looks pretty cool with her short ‘fro and big earrings. Said she’d like to see you.”

“Yeah, I know her. Had her for reporting class last year. She’s OK.”

“Mike, we’re gonna grab some dinner at Commons. Can we bring you anything?”

Mike hesitated a moment, putting his hand over the bulge at his waistline, which had added a couple of inches since he’d started working on the paper. He knew his fast-food diet and lack of exercise were to blame.

“Yeah, you can bring me some chicken strips, fries and a Mountain Dew.”

Then he grabbed the phone book and thumbed to the Ls, only half expecting to find a listing for the board chairman. He didn’t. He knew the chairman had a cattle ranch somewhere west of town, but he wasn’t sure where. He dialed President Weeken’s home number and got a recorded message. He sat thinking for a few minutes, twirling his pen between the fingers of his right hand, a nervous habit he’d developed recently.

As a last resort he called the Prot U public relations office. The director had left for the evening, but an assistant offered to fax Mike a press release on the morning board meeting. She apologized for forgetting to include *The Crusader* on the media distribution list. Mike wasn’t surprised; that was SOP for the campus flacks.

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Minutes later, Mike was reading the release, a worthless bit of fluff that he suspected was written before the meeting. A few paragraphs stated that the board had met, welcomed the new president and approved goals for the year, with canned quotes from Lynch and Weeken, but nothing specific.

Mike slammed the news release down on his desk. "This is a bunch of crap!" he shouted to no one in particular. With nothing more to go on and no one available for comment, he reluctantly sat down at a computer to write the superficial story.

He felt sure more had happened. Otherwise why was he barred from the meeting? What were they hiding?

Characters clash in satiric novel at university campus in Texas.

PROT U

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