

## Chapter 18

Bo woke up to the sound of the alarm on his phone. It was playing some random song from Pandora that sounded like it belonged in a Eighties era disco. As he walked across the room to turn off the screaming techno-beat, he wondered yet again why his wife refused to use her own account and kept polluting his Pandora selections with this garbage.

Once the phone was quieted, he looked at the time. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, the time he usually woke up since the Sheriff banished him to the mid-night to eight in the morning shift. He could smell something cooking in the kitchen. Mary always tried to cook an especially good meal for him on Saturday afternoon. He was trying to sort out the odors when the house phone rang. He left it for Mary and started picking out clothes to change into after he showered.

After six rings, Mary's voice echoed through the house. "Pick up the phone, lazybones. I hear you back there and my hands are covered with grease and flour from whatever this Southern-fried whatsimicallit is that I'm making because you like your arteries clogged."

Bo smiled. Most of the week she made him eat healthy food (at least at home). But once a week he got real food and he would go to some lengths to preserve his Saturday feast - even answer the phone. He grabbed the handset next to the bed.

It was Clyde Mullins. The Mullins were a significant family in Bartlette because they owned the two Hardees in the county and seven banks there and elsewhere. However, Clyde was best known for being the head of the local Democrats and after exchanging a few pleasantries, he got directly to the reason for his call.

"Bo, I heard about what happened yesterday. You got royally screwed."

"The Sheriff has every right to run for office again." Bo replied in a neutral tone.

"No. No, he really doesn't." Clyde said. "We all know about his health problems. He's not fit to hold the office anymore. And everyone knew you were the next in line. Now, because you had the gall to survive an attack by his deputies, he's pissed at you. He's not only stuck you with the worst duty he could find, he's also messing with your future."

"Clyde, what do . . ."

"I want?" Clyde continued, rolling right over Bo. "I want you to announce that you are running for sheriff on Wednesday just like you planned. Only, I want you to announce as a Democratic candidate."

Bo sat down on the bed. He'd never even thought about running for office as a Democrat. He'd grown up in Bartlette and could not remember the last time a Democrat held a significant elected position. He must have remained silent for a while because Clyde started asking if he was still there. After he grunted something, Clyde went on.

"Look, I know I've kind of sprung this on you, but I'm going to need an answer. You're the best

choice, but at least one of the Mahans is a Democrat and I've got to call him if you won't step up. And, I think you should know that we've already got a really good candidate for Commonwealth Attorney. Yusif has agreed to run."

## Chapter 19

Yusif woke from a nap to the sound of someone knocking on the front door of his apartment. He looked up at his computer and the screen saver told him that it was 3:42. He usually slept at least another hour before he got up, ate, showered, and went out for Saturday night activities.

He walked over to the door, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. As he did there was another knock and he hollered out "Yeah. Yeah. I'm coming." Then he opened the door and found Madeline Mullins smiling evilly up at him.

"Well, I hope that I'm not supposed to take that statement at face value."

Yusif froze and started to sputter something as she laughed and walked past him into the apartment. Into his uncleaned, unprepared for company, apartment. Which had not been vacuumed for at least a month. Which had the remnants of last night's Dairy Queen supper and today's Sir Pizza lunch on the coffee table. He walked past her and grabbed them off the table and tossed them in on the counter area in the kitchen part of the room. Because he thought as he looked at the unwashed dishes this drew his attention to that makes things so much better. He turned back around to find Maddy with the same impish smile. And, it was a devastating smile.

Madeline "Maddy" Mullins was about five foot two, with curly black hair that went halfway down her back and a body that tended toward fat. She obviously knew this and worked out for hours every day to keep it under control. Whenever Yusif went to the local hole-in-the-wall gym he saw Maddy there riding the stationary bike or jogging on the treadmill. All that working out didn't make her skinny – nothing would ever make her skinny - but it kept her right in that hourglass zone which drove men nuts. At least it drove the guys at the gym nuts. As the truck driver whom Yusif usually worked out with put it. "Once she settles down with a guy and pumps out a couple youngins, she's gonna swell up like a tick on a hound. But up to that point, that boy's gonna have himself one Hell of a good time."

Today she was dressed in a sky blue dress that fit just tight enough, and had just enough décolletage, to accentuate everything she had without quite crossing the line into sluttiness. The girl definitely knew how to maximize her assets. And she was standing in the middle of his apartment. And Yusif had probably never been quite as intimidated by a woman as he was at that moment. And she knew it.

"Um, Yusif, aren't you going to offer a girl a drink? Or at least a seat?" She looked around the living room and realized that the only place to sit was the beat up old futon with his blanket strewn across it. "Although, I doubt that thing has enough space for the two of us to sit on it. I may have to sit on your lap instead."

Yusif could actually feel himself blushing. Then he could feel himself starting to get angry. And that finally made him able to speak.

“Why are you here? What are you doing here?”

She gave him a stern look that was colored with a bit of humor. “It’s called flirting, Yusif. You should try it some time. It’s fun.”

When he didn’t react she continued. “Anyway, I’m here for two reasons. First, we’re going out next Friday night. I’m tired of all this dancing around at the gym. You look at me; I look at you; you look at me; nobody does anything. That’s just plain stupid. Next Friday. Dinner. Someplace decent. And I mean a place that serves wine, not a kicker bar with only Bud and Jack behind the counter.”

Yusif started to snap something, but his brain engaged just in time. A date with Maddy Mullins was not a bad thing. He started to regroup and think it over in his head. When he was quiet too long she gave him a look, nodded her head, and went on.

“Okay, that’s settled. Don’t you want to know what the second reason is?”

He nodded slowly, a cautious look in his eyes, and she went on.

“We’re going to run you for commonwealth attorney this year.”

“Wait! What?!? We?” The fog in Yusif’s brain burnt away as his super ego and survival instinct combined to stomp his libido. “What are you talking about Maddy?”

“We, the Democratic Party of Bartlette, are going to run you for commonwealth attorney.”

## **Chapter 20**

Maddy gave her best smile and wave as she turned away from the apartment door and walked down the hall toward the stairwell. She made sure to keep that little extra swing in her step until she was halfway down the stairs and out of sight. Then she relaxed.

Thank God she got him to agree to go out before she started talking politics. She’d come armed for bear and had a twenty dollar bet riding on whether she could actually get the guy to go out with her next Friday. She even wore the damned spiked heels. Not the ones which had platforms in front – the ones with her toes on the ground and her heels pushed far too high in the sky. They were down right painful, but they presented her assets so that no man with a drop of testosterone in his body could ignore her. When she got back to her car she slipped off the heels and slipped on a pair of boat shoes for the drive home. Unfortunately, she couldn’t do anything about the Spanx; she would just have to tolerate her stomach being crushed into her spine until she got back and could change into a sweat shirt and comfortable pair of jeans.

As she drove away, she reflected on how quickly everything slipped out of her control once the topic had changed to politics. Up to that point she’d had Yusif off balance and completely under control. In fact, that had been the plan. Every woman in the county knew this guy was a disaster when it came to dealing with women and she had every intention of using that to keep him off balance while she got him to agree to be the Democratic candidate for

commonwealth attorney. But the moment she said they wanted him to run the giant boy who was clueless what to do about her - maybe even with her - was gone.

The man who replaced him was all business. He knew that the Democratic Party intended to run C. Mansford Sifford for the office and wanted to know why she was talking to him. The reason she gave was that Brad Dollersby was going to lose the next election. No commonwealth attorney could win without the support of the Sheriff's office - if for no other reason than that there were so many deputies, and family members of deputies, who would vote for the candidate they thought would best prosecutor for the Department. The Sheriff was clearly at war with Brad and that meant Brad would lose. The Democrats wanted to make sure that the man who filled the slot knew what he was doing and Mansford was mostly a civil attorney who would handle a traffic ticket every couple months. Yusif would be a far better fit.

The real reason was that Mansford was a blithering idiot. However, he was a blithering idiot who had given lots of money to the party over the years and he was Daddy's friend. And Daddy was the Democratic Party in Bartlette County.

When she'd come to her father with the proposal that they recruit Yusif into the fold she expected a fight. Instead, she found out that her father had already tried to recruit Yusif. He called in a favor with some people he knew in Roanoke and they sent a lawyer who did a lot of work for the Party to talk to him. The meeting never really got off the ground and the lawyer went back to Roanoke. A week or two later a deputy from Bartlette went to Roanoke and beat the poor guy half to death. Her father backed way off after that. Still, when Maddy asked if she could take a direct shot at recruiting Yusif, her father had been game. In fact, the only question he asked was when she planned to talk to him.

Maddy left her father's house with a feeling he was up to something. She wasn't sure, but decided to leave him to his own devices. After all, she hadn't been completely straight with him either. Her main purpose for going to talk with Yusif wasn't to get him to run for office. He was one of maybe five single guys this side of Bristol who wasn't divorced, didn't snort pills, had a decent job, and had a graduate degree. He was also tall, dark, and had an exotic look to him that wasn't at all hard on the eyes. She'd been playing with the passive aggressive playbook for months now and it had failed miserably so she decided to just go for straight aggressive. All she'd needed was the excuse to corner him.

When he accepted her invitation to run, and started talking tactics and strategy, she was the one caught flat footed. She'd known that getting him to run was a long shot and figured that if he did it would be because she got him off balance and fast talked him into it. Instead, he started asking questions about funding and advertising on local radio stations and what the laws were for placing road side election signs and at least a dozen other questions.

She hadn't known the answer to a single one of the questions and it was her turn to stumble through an awkward conversation as she made guesses and semi-promised things she wasn't sure she could actually provide. Yet, that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was that when he started to plan his political campaign he got comfortable with her. And it wasn't a good comfort. Once he got his feet under him, the idea of running for office completely eclipsed the fact that a smoking hot woman, dressed to kill, had cornered him in his apartment. In effect, she was completely neutered - and she did not like it.

The next thing she knew, she was leaving the apartment, making promises to set up meetings with the bigwigs in the Democratic Party as soon as possible so that things could get rolling. He actually shook her hand as she walked out of the apartment. Shook her hand. In a fit of pique, she seriously thought about jumping on him and giving him one helluva kiss. She knew that would rock him back on his heels.

However, she had promised Daddy a candidate and she didn't want to scare him off - from either the campaign or the date next Friday. So, she left with a smile on her face and plans in her head - a few of which even had something to do with politics.

## Chapter 21

It was Sunday night and Brad was sitting at Yusif's desk. He had just spent the last two days going over as much of the evidence in the murder cases as he could. He started with the materials that Yusif had stacked around the desk and then worked through as many of the boxes as he could. The room was filled with even more piles of papers than it had been when Brad came up to do his own evaluation of the evidence.

It was not good. There was evidence that Jeff Sanger was involved, but it was tenuous. The tapes sealed it, but they could not stand alone. There was no way that a jury would understand them without someone to put them in context. Damn it, Brad thought, Yusif was right.

The only way to put the evidence in context would be to put Sanger's co-defendants on the stand to explain the conversations. And the only way to do that would be to make a deal taking the death penalty off the table. That meant Brad would have to decide whether he wanted the death penalty for the two guys who actually did the killing or the guy who sent them to do it. Of course, there really was no choice. If he went after Ian Minor and Dave Jordan he would almost certainly get the death penalty for both, however Sanger would go free. If he went after Jeff Sanger he might get the death penalty, but he would have to agree to take the death penalty off the table for at least Minor and probably Jordan. The first option was emotionally more satisfying because he would be guaranteed that two of the murderers would get the punishment they deserved. But, it wasn't really an option. He couldn't let Sanger walk free from murders which he had ordered. That meant Brad was forced to take the second option. He would pursue the death penalty for the man who ordered the killings and who was ultimately responsible for everything that happened.

The second option also had some collateral benefits. While it was too late for Brad and Sheriff Minton to ever be allies again - or even friends - reducing the punishment of Dave Jordan to life in prison might placate him enough that he would stop trying to hurt Brad politically. As things currently stood the Sheriff's political allies were beating the bushes to find someone to challenge Brad for the Republican nomination in the coming election. No one had stepped forward so far, but the Sheriff would eventually find someone willing to take a shot. Not that any this would have stopped Brad from pursuing the death penalty for the Sheriff's stepson if the circumstances allowed it. But, it was the only possible upside that Brad could think of.

Brad also had to figure out what he was going to do about Yusif. That whole line about Yusif going to a church which opposed the death penalty was bullshit. Brad had gone to Saint Berlinda with his wife for years and seen Yusif in the pews twice - maybe three times. It was

an excuse that Yusif was using to avoid prosecuting Jeff Sanger. Yusif didn't like the fact that Brad was prosecuting anybody from the local Sheriff's Department and he had argued several times to Brad that they should ask the judge to allow their office to withdraw from the case and appoint a special prosecutor. Now, Yusif had apparently decided, despite the evidence, that Jeff Sanger was completely innocent.

Yusif couldn't be trusted to do any more work on this case. That meant he would probably end up doing all the misdemeanor work in the general district and domestic courts while Brad handled the smaller number of felonies in the circuit court. Brad needed the reduced case load if he was going to handle the murder trials by himself. Of course, all this meant that Yusif would lose his office. There just wasn't room anywhere else for all the evidence in the murder cases. Monday morning's conversation with Yusif was not going to be pleasant.

Brad's cell phone beeped and a message from Maggie popped up. "Check out the Facebook page of Clyde Mullins' wife."

## Chapter 22

Bo looked around at the crowd. He was on the small stage at the end of the park between Mount View Methodist and the Food Time grocery. At least two hundred fifty people had the little park filled to capacity. He recognized the publisher of the local newspaper and a reporter from the Bristol paper in the crowd. There was also the unlikely presence of four different television crews. Two were from Tennessee, one was from Virginia, and there was even a camera from the Hazard, Kentucky station. When Clyde told Bo that he was going to invite every newsman in a triangle from Lexington, Kentucky to Knoxville, Tennessee to Roanoke, Virginia Bo had shrugged it off. In the entire history of Bartlette County no television reporter had ever come to a campaign announcement – much less four.

Of course, the people on the stage with Bo had something to do with that. Yusif was on the opposite side of the stage from Bo with Clydes's daughter, who seemed to be assigned as his keeper. In between them were two U.S. congressmen, six members of the Virginia House of Delegates, two state senators, and the lieutenant governor. In the last three days, Clyde Mullins must have called in every favor owed him by a bigwig in the Democratic Party.

Clyde might have been responsible for the presence of the politicians and the reporters, but Bo was responsible for most of the local people in the crowd. He, his father, and his brothers called everyone they knew and told them to come to the announcement. As he looked around the ones who stood out were those he played high school football with (and against), his brothers' hunting buddies, and his dad's poker crew. Bo smiled as he saw his dad working the crowd wearing his one and only suit – a seersucker that had been the Father's Day gift all the boys and (mostly) Mom had pitched in to buy him at least fifteen years back. Grady Ross was having a blast. He might not be a sophisticated politician like Clyde Mullins, but he'd drunk a beer with every man in the county over forty and lost at poker to most of them. For every vote Clyde could deliver Bo's dad would bring in three.

Bo wondered whether the Old Man would be able to get as many votes for Yusif. When he told Dad that the plan was to run him and Yusif as a team, the first words out of Dad's mouth were, "You mean that Muslim boy who goes to the Catholic church?"

They were standing on the front porch of Dad's house drinking a couple beers and Bo took a long draw on his while he considered all the things wrong with that statement. He knew Dad was just trying to make sure they were talking about the same guy and the Old Man didn't have a mean bone in his entire body. If you didn't mess with his family, land, cattle, or maybe his weekly poker game, Grady Ross would classify you as "good people" and you had to work hard to get yourself classified as "hateful." Still, Bo was going to have to have a talk with Dad because he knew if that was how the Old Man was talking to him much more interesting descriptions would be used at the weekly poker game and the barber shop and wherever else Dad hung out through the week.

Before Bo could put his beer back down, Dad went on. "Yeah. I think it's a good match. Anybody else would look tiny next to you in all the photos. It'd look silly. I think that boy might even be bigger than you. And he's good people. He'll probably keep you from doing too many stupid things once y'all get elected, 'cuz I can't see him being scared of you. Outside your brothers, he's probably the only guy in four counties who can stand nose to nose with you, tell you you're an asshole, and not be too worried that you'll flatten him with a single punch."

"Course," Bo watched as a grin crossed Dad's face, "It takes more than three an' I might have to put you back to working the cows to toughen you back up."

The smile faded and a serious look crossed Dad's face as he pointed at Bo.

"Only problem is, you can't run him under that name. Everybody's got weird last names, so that's okay, but that boy's Christian name is gonna send people runnin'. There are a lot of idiots out there and they hear that name they'll think he's gonna blow up the courthouse – or worse, their trailer." Dad rolled his eyes. "Cuz we all know that Bartlette is the center of the universe and all them terrorists just gotta blow up Mabel Taylor's double-wide. Morons ain't got the sense God gave turkeys standing in the rain."

"Anyway, you need to change that boy's name."

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Maddy stood next to Yusif and watched as Daddy introduced the lieutenant governor. He was absolutely glowing. Never in Clyde Mullins' wildest dreams had he thought there would be a night like this in Bartlette County. They planned this like every other "big" Democratic event in the county and expected maybe thirty of the party faithful along with a smattering of others. Of course, on Monday morning they sent out email invites to every news reporter in Virginia and to a bunch in Tennessee and Kentucky too. They also sent invites to all the major Democratic politicians in the Commonwealth. They did these things every time and nothing ever came of it. Except this time.

By Monday afternoon, the congressmen from Northern Virginia were the first to accept. By five that day, the lieutenant governor had accepted. The next day and a half, every state level Democrat this side of Roanoke sent in his acceptance. The reporters hadn't bothered to accept their invitations; they just showed up. There were camera crews and guys from papers and a woman who showed up with the congressmen was actually from the Washington Post. Every Democratic politician and wannabe from the surrounding counties caught wind of what

was going on and they had swelled the crowd to over a hundred people.

Then the Rosses arrived – and more than doubled the crowd with a herd of good ol' boys, their women, and kids of all ages. Some of them even showed up with hand drawn signs proclaiming “Vote Bo and Joe.” The politicians went into a feeding frenzy. Up to that point they had all agreed to speak for five minutes and clear the stage. However, after realizing the size of the crowd, none of them had spoken less than ten and the second congressman had gone over half an hour telling the crowd how important diversity was and how impressive it was to find it in the mountains. It came across as patronizing and Maddy translated it as “It’s good you lily-white, ignorant, mountain hicks have seen the light.” Thankfully, as Maddy looked around the crowd she saw that most of the regular folk had tuned out that clod and were talking among themselves; only the political diehards were making a show of watching the speech.

The Lieutenant Governor was doing a good job of bringing everyone’s attention back to the stage. The congressmen had been younger men with the lean, hungry look that young politicians often have. They were sharks. The Lieutenant Governor was an orca - a giant, graceful killer whale. His tone and sing-song manner caught the ear and he engaged the crowd. Somehow he knew the names of several locals and he even pointed out Grady Ross, praising him for wearing a suit bought by his children. “At least your kids buy you things you can wear in public. I’ve not yet found the \*ahem\* proper opportunity to wear the purple and green sports coat my kids bought me.” Pause for laugh - move on. The man’s mastery of the podium was amazing to watch.

After about ten minutes of reeling the crowd back in the Lieutenant Governor turned to the point of the night.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he paused meaningfully and hooked a thumb over his shoulder while he winked at the crowd, “and politicians,” another pause for the crowd to chuckle, “this night is not about us. This night is about the two amazing men who are going to be your next sheriff and commonwealth attorney.”

“I get asked to introduce a lot of political candidates and every time I get told how that person is a big man in his community. However, it isn’t usually quite as true as it is today.” He glanced back and forth at the two men towering on opposite ends of the stage while the crowd laughed. “At six foot two, it isn’t often that I have to look up at anyone I’m introduced to, much less two people in the same day.”

More chuckles. Now, he had everyone's attention as he waved the two men in toward the center. “I’m told that nobody has to introduce Bo Ross. His family has been in Bartlette County since before there was a Bartlette County. He has been a law enforcement officer since he could pass the height requirement – which judging from the looks of him must of been about the third grade. He’s good people and he comes from good people. We all know he’s the best man for the job.”

“And then there's Joe Habib. His family chose to come to America because they believed in the American dream and they worked hard to live up to that dream. Through his parents' hard work and sacrifices, they were able to send their son to college and he did so well there that he was able to go to law school. He worked as a private lawyer for a few years, but he gave



all that up and came to Bartlette County to serve its people. He wasn't born here, he chose to come here and now his heart is anchored right here in the place he has chosen to live with the people he has come to love.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, Bo and Joe!”

“Bo and Joe! Bo and Joe! Bo and Joe!”

The chant seemed to go on forever.

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Bo stood next to Yusif at the podium. They had decided to do their speech together in a mutual recognition that while Yusif was a far better speaker, the crowd would be there for Bo. It also played into the mutual campaign strategy that had been cooked up.

“Hi, I'm Bo.”

“And, I'm Joe.”

“I'm a-pickin'.”

“And, I'm a-grinnin'.”

The crowd roared in laughter, much to Bo's surprise. He had argued against starting the speech with that. After all, how many people under fifty had even heard of Buck Owens and Roy Clark? It was Yusif who insisted on including it; Lord knows where he had ever seen Hee Haw. Bo lost the argument when his father weighed in on Yusif's side. Those two met for the first time on Tuesday morning and hit it off right away. Dad was outraged that Brad Dollerby fired Yusif on Monday and pretty much adopted the man into the Ross family. Right off the bat they started plotting political strategy. The only thing they argued over was calling Yusif “Joe.” Yusif said it made him sound like a Lebanese used car dealer. The Old Man asked Yusif what he thought a politician was if he wasn't a used car dealer and they both laughed. Yusif resisted for a while longer, but Dad had won the moment he got that laugh. And now Bo was on a stage filled with politicians delivering the two person speech those two had cooked up.

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Maddy watched in horror as the two most important candidates the Democratic Party of Bartlette had come up with in the last two or three decades did a comedy sketch in front of the most important politicians to ever set foot in the county and a reporter from the Washington Post.

They introduced Mary Ross by comparing Bo's marriage to big game hunting. “Well she came out here from Boston looking for elk, but couldn't find none. So she decided I was big enough that she would settle for mounting my head on her wall instead.” They joked about Mabel Taylor calling the Sheriff to report that a giant Arab was walking down her street and going to blow something up. “Now, I don't blame Mabel. I'd only been here a couple weeks at the time and no one knew – and Mark over there can testify to this – that I am terrible with any kind of mechanical thing. Mark's seen the condition of my car's engine – more than once – and he

can tell you I can't change a sparkplug, much less build a bomb. Too many wires and springs and such." They joked about Yusif not being married. "Here he is folks, a giant Arab man who can't even build a bomb. No wonder he can't get a woman. He ain't got no skills."

It went on and on and on. It was a nightmare. She was certain everyone in Virginia, no, everyone in the country would see this on YouTube. Her father's face was frozen in rictus. She could see the shock in his eyes. The congressmen had retreated behind frozen smiles and the other politicians were following their lead. The Washington Post reporter was madly scribbling something on her ipad with a stylus.

It was a fiasco. The two of them had refused to run their speech past her or her father and now she understood why. They would have never allowed this travesty. Finally, it ended and the Lieutenant Governor stepped between them, grabbed Bo's left hand and Yusif's right, raised them skyward, and led another chorus of "Bo and Joe!"

As the yells finally died away everyone on the stage exchanged a series of polite, but stiff, handshakes and the politicians left as quickly as they could without looking too unseemly. They were rats fleeing a sinking ship and Maddy could see her father's spirits being crushed as the most important night of his life ended with all the important people brushing him off and distancing themselves from the evening's events.

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Yusif sat across the table from Maddy at the Olive Garden in Bristol. Things were definitely not going well and he wasn't sure why. As promised, he had shown up at six and picked her up. He had been concerned that she would wear something fancy, so he wore his best khakies and a dress shirt. He even had a jacket and tie hanging in his car - just in case.

It turned out that he was the one who was overdressed. She was wearing a blue sweatshirt, black jeans, and granny shoes. Her hair was even up in a bun. On top of all that, she had barely spoken more than fifty words so far during the forty-five minutes it took to get here and the next thirty while they waited for their food.

He tried yet again to start up a conversation. "So, you graduated from Virginia Tech?"

"yeah."

"You must be a football fan then."

"no."

The table fell back into a sullen silence. Yusif had pretty much run through all his conversation starters and everything got the same sort of flat, disengaged answers. He was through trying. This evening was over as soon as they finished the meal. He had tickets for a play at the Barter Theater in Abingdon, The Last Train from Tazewell, but there was no way he was spending three or four more hours sitting with this walking cold front.

He was through with this. At first he thought he had done something to upset her, but he ran through everything that happened over the last week and she had nothing to complain about.

He agreed to run for commonwealth attorney out of a sense that things were going wrong in the office. Then he showed up on Monday morning and found all his diplomas and personal items from his desk in a cardboard box outside his office. He didn't know how Brad found out so fast, but the message was clear. He took the box and walked right back out of the courthouse. He dedicated the next two days to making sure the rally on Wednesday went well and it did. The crowd ate up every bit of the speech Bo and he gave in tandem. The Lieutenant Governor had even pulled Yusif and Bo aside afterwards and complimented them on it. Over the last couple days, everywhere he went in the county people he had never met before were calling him "Joe" and repeating some of the jokes he and Bo had told back to him. He had done everything she could have possibly expected when she asked him to run last Sunday.

And maybe that was it. She got what she wanted so she no longer had to persuade him. The more he thought about it the more certain he became. The only reason she came to his apartment last weekend was to get him to run for office. The sexy dress and the date were just ways to manipulate him - and they worked. As soon as she finished picking at the twenty dollar steak she had ordered, but did not seem more than slightly interested in eating, she was going home.

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What the Hell? Maddy looked around at the road they were on. He's driving back to Bartlette.

She knew he had tickets to a play. He'd called her on Thursday night and told her that. However, this was not the road to Abingdon. This was the road home. And she hadn't noticed until they were a good half way there.

What should she do? She glanced at her watch and realized that even if they turned around they would never make it before the play started. So, she sat in silence - trying to figure out what to do next.

She hadn't really thought it through completely before. The basic plan was to make him realize that he had screwed up and then forgive him. She would have probably started the forgiveness by holding his hand during the play or maybe even cuddling around his arm. The explanation of what he had done wrong would come on the way home and any wounds caused by that would be healed with a good night kiss.

As she was thinking things through she realized that he had turned off into Saint Minas and were about a minute from her house. She started thinking furiously. She could probably still salvage the night when he walked her in. She could talk to him about how he had embarrassed her father and what they could do to fix it. And any wounds from that conversation could still be healed with a good night kiss - or maybe a little more.

They pulled up in front of her house and Yusif walked her to the front porch. Then he turned and walked away, wishing her a good night as he walked briskly back down the sidewalk. He made it back to the car before she could react.

"Wait, you're just leaving?"

He paused with the door open. "Yeah. Don't worry though, I'll keep running. You got what you wanted and I got the message."

With that he got in the car and drove away while Maddy stood on her porch stunned.

## Chapter 23

Bo pulled up to the entrance to Dryhook Hollow. It was the Saturday afternoon after the Democratic primary and he and Yusif had won their unopposed elections. Now, they were canvassing as much of the county as they could.

Yusif, in the passenger seat, looked dubiously at Bo. "You can't be serious. There can't be many people living up that dirt road."

"Yeah," Bo said, "There are at least a hundred up there - probably more like two. That road goes back in there at least fifteen miles and there are houses and trailers along side it the whole way. There's even a stocked catfish pond up there you can pay twenty dollars to fish in."

Yusif shrugged and Bo turned his SUV onto the road. Dryhook was a strange part of the county. In a few places it widened out a little and two or three houses and trailers would be on a bit of a field. However, for most of it the mountains hugged both sides of the road and the full growth trees on them made it clear that most of the homes in Dryhook never saw unfiltered sunlight.

Bo wondered, not for the first time, how these people could live without sunlight. Still, there were decent people back here and he and Yusif set about introducing themselves. Actually, most of the people already knew Bo. They fell into a pattern in which Bo would park the SUV, get out of the car and spend the next few minutes glad-handing and introducing Yusif. Per the game plan, everyone in Bartlette County was getting introduced to "Joe" Habib.

After about a two hours they pulled up to a tiny wooden house on the right side of the road. As they got out of the car a woman in her sixties walked out on the front porch. Megatha Marlene Manson, jokingly known as "Triple-M" (not to her face), was a force to be reckoned with in Bartlette County. If she said the people in Dryhook would cast their votes for you they did, although there had been a question in the last election over whether some of them actually made it to the polls or had a thoughtful individual pull the lever for them.

Bo investigated the claims, along with Investigator Kilgore from the Virginia State Police, and they couldn't prove anything, but they'd come awful close. One old codger, who hated Megatha from way back, had sworn that he hadn't gone to a voting station for the last twenty years and he "sure as Hell didn't vote for that snake." Unfortunately, the man had cancer and died shortly after giving the statement. Without him, they never did develop enough evidence to prosecute.

"Well, Robert Ross, as I live and breathe. Never thought I'd see you up in Dryhook again. What brings you to these parts . . . and out of uniform?"

There was no doubt that Megatha knew why they were there. This was the eleventh house they stopped at in the hollow and Megatha had probably gotten at least five calls telling her they were coming. Still, Bo had to play the game.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Manson. How you doing today?" She bobbed her head and he went on. "We're going through the holler introducing ourselves and letting everyone know that we're running for office. Me for sheriff. Joe for commonwealth attorney."

'Joe, huh?" She looked Yusif up and down. "Well, he surely is as handsome as everyone says. No wonder that idiot girl is all tied up in knots over him."

She turned to Yusif. "What's your real name, boy?" When Yusif paused she prodded him. "C'mon, what'd your mamma name ya?"

Yusif looked her straight in the eyes. "My mother calls me Yusif. It's the Arabic word meaning Joseph."

She looked back to Bo. "I like him. He's got some backbone and he don't put up with any guff about his mother. " She emphasized the word mother. "Where's he from Robert?"

"He's from here, Ma'am. He's lived here for over five years now."

She rolled her eyes and turned back to Yusif. "Good luck with that, honey. I married Harold and moved here when I was sixteen. That was maybe forty years ago now. His mother ain't ever forgive me for not being born here in this holler. That old biddy is going to outlive us all and 'til her dying day she'll call me 'that girl from Cincinnati."

"Yusif, you come on up here and have a seat. We'll drink a little tea and talk a little about your cluelessness about women. Robert, you go on up the holler and talk to some more folk. Come back in about an hour. Don't you stop at that green trailer on the left though. Momma Manson figures out you're a Democrat on her porch she's liable to shoot you through the screen door."

When the men paused, she made a shooping motion with her hands. "G'on now. Do as your elder tells ya."

Bo looked over at Yusif and the other man nodded. With a smile on his face, Bo got back in the SUV. He wouldn't trade places with Yusif right now on a bet. That old woman was going to spend the next hour putting him through a ringer. As he drove away, Megatha's high pitched voice carried part of the conversation he was leaving behind to him.

"So, who was it decided to call you Joe? Clyde's too dumb for that and Robert's too straight to think of it."

"Grady? Shoulda knew. Y'know that old coot owes me a dinner . . ."

## Chapter 24

Yusif blinked as a flashbulb went off in his face. As his vision cleared he looked and it was an actual flash bulb. Somebody on the first row looked as though his camera might actually still use film and it had a giant bulb on top. As Yusif looked it flashed again, even further blinding him.

Blinking, he looked past the front row of folding chairs at the rest of the crowd in the firehouse. As the purple spots slowly faded from his vision he saw that every single chair was filled and even more people crowded in around the sides and in back. Despite the fact that it was mid-October, both of the firehouse's big doors were open to allow more people to see and to let the heat generated by the crowd to escape. The trucks normally in the bay were parked out on the street.

The firehouse was the only available place large enough to for everyone to come see the debate. It was too cold to use the park and the minister had flatly refused to let them use the Methodist church. Looking out at the crowd, Yusif was pretty sure the minister made the right call.

Nothing productive was going to come out of this debate. In fact, the only reason Yusif allowed himself to be talked into it was that every single candidate for every county election was going to be there. Skipping would have made him stand out like a sore thumb and made him look scared.

All the candidates were sitting on folding chairs along the back wall. The first hour or so had been all the unopposed candidates, mostly Republicans, standing up and giving five minute speeches. Then the two guys running against each other for a spot on the school board gave dueling speeches. Currently, the second man running for Yared's spot on the county board of supervisors was giving the world's most bland speech.

Next up came Brad and Yusif and then the speeches would end with Sheriff Minton and Bo. After that would come one question to each of the candidates in a contested election from Jacob Newberry, the head of the local Chamber of Commerce.

Yusif came out of his thoughts as the speaker finished and Brad rose from three chairs to his left and walked to the podium. Brad carried no papers and skipped right over any niceties.

“Loyalty. Serving as a commonwealth attorney is about loyalty to the community. I was born here. I was raised here. I joined the Army from the recruiting office just down the street. And I came back here, got married to my beautiful wife, bought a house, and started serving as your commonwealth attorney after Ned Begley retired. I'm loyal to this community. This job isn't just a stepping stone for me on the way to a bigger political office. I live in Bartlette County. I serve Bartlette County. I am loyal to Bartlette County.”

As Brad turned and walked back to his seat he glared at Yusif. There was no doubt what the actual point of that speech was and there was no way Yusif could let it stand. Yusif walked to the podium stuffing the index cards with his prepared words into his pocket. Then he let months of frustration speak.

“Justice. Being the commonwealth attorney is about law and order – justice – doing the right thing. You'll notice my opponent didn't say a single word about that.” Yusif paused and gave the crowd a serious look. “A commonwealth attorney can't go after one person who is innocent because he is obsessed with vengeance. A commonwealth attorney can't let others get away with it because he has a bloody single-minded obsession with vengeance. If you can't see past vengeance you cannot be trusted to be commonwealth attorney. Bartlette County deserves a commonwealth attorney who will do the right thing - who it can trust. I will do the right thing. I can be trusted.”

As he walked back to his seat, Yusif focused a glare of his own on his former boss.

## Chapter 25

Maddy watched as the debate broke up and people started glad handing and politely saying nothings to each other. She started to wander out toward her car, waving at her father as she went. Daddy was putting on a brave face, but he was not happy. He had not been happy since the night Bo and Yusif announced their candidacies.

Daddy's main hobby, for as long as Maddy could remember, was to run the Democratic Party of Bartlette. It was his little club for which he provided well over half of the funding and, as the power behind the Party, Daddy got a certain amount of respect. However, that respect came with something of a caveat. Daddy and his party would be the loyal opposition; they would not buck the status quo too much.

Generally, that meant one or two members of the county board of supervisors would be Democrats and the same number would be on the school board. There was one Democrat on the town council in Mount View and none in Saint Minas. Yared was the only part of the county which was solidly Democratic, which was nothing to brag about since every significant political figure from Yared was now in a federal prison cell.

When election time came, a couple of Daddy's cronies would run an ineffectual campaign for one or two of the county wide constitutional offices. Usually some sacrificial lamb ran for commonwealth attorney and another for sheriff - a couple times someone even ran for county treasurer or clerk of court. The Democratic candidates would show up at public get togethers and make a nice speech in the debate, but they would never seriously pose a threat to anyone.

When Daddy pulled in Bo Ross to run for sheriff and agreed with Maddy that they would run Yusif Habib for commonwealth attorney it was a huge deal for him. He was pushing past all the boundaries and running candidates who could actually win. At first he was caught up in the excitement. Then, as the reality of a actual political contest hit him he became far less happy. Maddy knew her father was losing friends because of this election. So far, the worst was Paul at the Mount View barber shop. Daddy had been getting his hair cut by Paul every two weeks for more than fifteen years, ever since Emmet retired. A week after “Bo and Joe” announced their candidacies Paul put a sign up on the wall of his shop - right where anyone sitting in the seat would have to stare at it the entire time his hair was being cut.

We don't cling to guns or religion.  
We EMBRACE  
Our constitutional right to bear arms  
and  
Our faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour.  
We shall not be unarmed slaves.  
Godless Democrats  
NOT WELCOME HERE.

Daddy came back stunned from his next hair cut and it took Maddy days to find out why. When she did, her reaction did not help. She went right down to the barber shop and gave Paul a piece of her mind in front of a shop full of waiting customers. Now, Daddy went over to Wise County when he could find the time and got his hair cut by some stranger.

On top of all the garbage Daddy was going through in the community, Bo and Yusif were not involving him in the campaign. They insisted on setting their own strategy and writing their own speeches. Daddy would have never have agreed to this dual candidate strategy, if for no other reason than that he thought Yusif was dragging Bo down. And he would have never agreed to the type of speech which Yusif gave today.

The two "speeches" by the candidates for commonwealth attorney would have been more appropriate as rants on the internet. Brad Dollerby all but called Yusif a backstabbing Yankee. Yusif came back at him - basically accusing Brad of prosecuting an innocent man for the courthouse murders. Anybody in the county who did not understand why Brad and Yusif went from best friends to political and personal enemies had no doubts after tonight.

Maddy sat in her car until she saw Yusif leave with the Rosses. She had hoped to grab Yusif for a few hours tonight, but after seeing Daddy she decided that was a bad idea. At the moment, she was torn between Yusif and her father. Even if she was able to pry Yusif away from the Rosses she would probably end up nagging him over about how his campaign was affecting her father. Their relationship was not yet strong enough to stand up to much of that.

She still wasn't sure why Yusif had called her and asked for another date. It really hadn't mattered. She screwed up the first one by assuming she had him hooked before she did. The second time she made no such assumption. She wore a bright yellow minidress that would show just enough to catch his eye whenever she moved around and she laughed at every stupid joke he made. Most importantly, she made sure she had him committed to a second date when he dropped her off at the end of the night. It took her over a month of working on him and six more dates before she finally got him into the sack. Even then she practically had to club him over the head and drag him into the bedroom. And the sex was terrible. Yusif knew what went where, but he had obviously spent his time at college actually studying rather exploring human anatomy as thoroughly as Maddy had. It also didn't help that she had to get him, and consequently herself, incredibly drunk in order to get past his inhibitions. Of course, even terrible sex was sex, and Yusif was a guy, so she had him hooked after that night.

Meanwhile, everybody in the county figured out that she and Yusif were a couple. Most of them probably knew before Yusif did. The problem was that now she had him she didn't know what to do with him. While she was putting so much effort into landing him she never gave a thought to what would happen after. He was cute and smart and the sex was slowly getting



better. He was a good catch, probably the best catch she could get in any of the surrounding counties. The only problem was the politics.

Yusif had the bug in a big way. All he wanted to talk about was the campaign and it really wasn't going well as hoped. Bo was cruising toward an easy victory and Yusif was drafting along behind him. The question was, how far behind? The Dollerbys were a big name in Bartlette County - probably enough to cancel all the good will and support Yusif was getting from the Rosses. Brad Dollerby had the advantages of being an incumbent and a Republican in a heavily Republican County. However, firing Yusif was a stupid move on Brad's part. Yusif was out in the county almost every day, going door to door and introducing himself to everyone. On the other hand, Brad was stuck at the courthouse, doing all the work for district court, domestic court, and circuit court. As well, Brad was spending a lot of evenings and weekends preparing for the murder trial of Jeff Sanger. Tonight was the first night that anyone had seen Brad at an event outside the courthouse for at least a month.

When she was honest with herself, Maddy knew that it would be better for her if Yusif lost. Yusif would be crushed at first, but she would help him get past that and, once he was set up in private practice, a quick trip down the aisle would be arranged. They could settle into a very comfortable life together.

If Yusif won, she could probably still get him down the aisle, but she had little illusions about being a politician's wife. The only thing that had its hooks deeper into Yusif than she did at the moment was the political race and if he won she figured he would start looking around for another race to feed his addiction. If Yusif became a state delegate or senator or, God help her, a congressman, Maddy would spend inordinate amounts of time meeting with garden clubs and red hats and whomever else she had to meet with to bolster the cause. Meanwhile, Yusif would be in Richmond or Washington playing politician and having affairs which she would be expected to ignore as long as he was discreet. A couple of Maddy's sorority sisters from back at Tech were already living that life and Maddy wasn't so sure she was willing to live as mercenary a life as they were.

About to start her car, she glanced back at the firehouse and saw her father folding up chairs and loading them onto a truck. She sighed. Daddy was so desperate to have something to do in the campaign that he was doing scut work. She put her keys back in her pocket and got out to help him.

## Chapter 26

Bo was standing at the side of the road giving a pillhead, with residue from snorting the crushed pill still on her nose, a field sobriety test. The girl was making her third attempt to say the alphabet from C to M when he heard a helicopter flying by. However, it wasn't enough to distract him from hearing "H, I" pause "K, M, L . . . No, L, M."

Bo pulled his handcuffs out and told the girl to turn around. Instead, she stuck her breasts in his face and tried to proposition him. It would have been more impressive if she wasn't so messed up that only about half her words made sense. When Bo put a hand on her right shoulder a sloppy leer came across her face. When Bo spun her around and started applying the cuffs that expression quickly transitioned through shock into rage. Then she started

screaming at the top of her lungs, “Queer! Faggot!” That, of course, came out clear as a bell.

About half way to the magistrate’s office the girl stopped yelling and Bo was finally able to think. A helicopter flying by at two-thirty in the morning could only mean one thing. Somebody was being air-evaced from Mount View Hospital to one of the bigger hospitals in Tennessee. That wasn’t too unusual, but Bo hadn’t heard anything over the radio and that was. Almost every air-evac was preceded by a 911 call reporting an accident, an overdose, a rape, a shooting, or something else requiring a deputy as well as an ambulance. Of course, it was always possible that someone came into the hospital thinking they had the flu and turned out to have bubonic plague or something. Not probable, but possible.

The magistrate’s office was colocated with the new dispatch center at the old Starline Bank building on the opposite side of Mount View from the hospital. Bo went straight to the building and told dispatch to call and ask if a nurse would agree to take the woman’s blood so it could be sent to the state lab for analysis of its contents. He already knew they wouldn’t, but he had to make sure the question was asked. Everyone in Virginia theoretically agreed to a blood test just by driving on the road, but after three nurses were subpoenaed to court on the same day all of the nurses were now refusing to draw the blood of intoxicated drivers.

Once the hospital refused to take a blood sample Bo contacted the magistrate. There wasn’t actually a magistrate at the Bartlette County office at night so he had to wait forty minutes before a magistrate in Bristol was able to do a video conference. Thirty minutes of explanation and faxes later, the magistrate faxed Bo a signed warrant for driving under the influence of drugs. Then he had to wait another hour for the van from the jail to arrive and take the girl, who was now almost catatonic, off his hands.

It was well after five when Bo got back in his car. He was driving back through town when he saw lights on at the Sheriff’s Department. In fact, the whole place was lit up. That didn’t usually happen until eight when the daytime staff showed up. He pulled his car into the parking lot behind the courthouse and noticed that it was half full and that the Major’s car was parked in its reserved spot. He parked in the shift leader spot and walked across the street.

Bo used his keycard to get in and past the reception area. Six deputies were sitting around the big table in the ready room; none of them were in uniform.

“What’s going on guys?”

“Is that him?” An angry voice came from down the hall and Bo turned to see Major Harvey come charging out of his office. “What the fuck are you doing here, you fucking traitor? Get the fuck out! You’re fired!”

Bo stepped back. It wasn’t that he was intimidated by the Major. Greg Harvey was a five foot seven inch skinny guy in his mid-sixties. However, the sheer wave of hate that hit him was overwhelming. He stumbled for something to say.

“Uh, Greg, you can’t fire me. Only the Sheriff can fire me.”

“I’m the Sheriff now, asshole. You killed him so now I’m Sheriff. Get. The. Fuck. Out.”

## Chapter 27

The Democratic Party meeting was being held in the Bartlette County courthouse and Yusif was amazed at the sheer amount of hatefulness in the room.

Two days after the debate, Sheriff Minton had suffered a massive heart attack while asleep. Rather than calling dispatch, his wife called his chief deputy, Greg Harvey, who took the Sheriff to the hospital in his personal car. Mount View Hospital got him on a chopper as quick as they could, heading for one of the better equipped hospitals in Tennessee, but it was no use. The Sheriff was dead before the helicopter got half way there.

Major Harvey immediately fired Bo. That was Thursday morning. The Sheriff's wake was Friday and Saturday and his burial was on Sunday. On Monday an emergency meeting of the Republican Party announced that Major Harvey was now the Republican candidate for sheriff. On Wednesday the weekly county newspaper, the Star Sentinel, published letters to the editor from Greg Harvey and three other deputies blaming Bo for Sheriff Minton's death. No one at the paper even called Bo to get a rebuttal letter or a reaction.

Now, on Thursday the Democrats were meeting to figure out a response. Everyone in the room knew that substituting Greg Harvey this late in the race was illegal. Nevertheless, Clyde was trying to get them to leave it alone.

And the party faithful were going nuts. For an hour people spat vitriol at Clyde. Then Mansford Sifford stood. Mansford was Clyde's friend and staunchest ally in the party, which was why it was shocking when he joined the dissenters.

"We cannot allow this to stand. This is not just about this election. If we don't stop this now, the next time we shan't be able to because we will have established a precedent. We need to file a cease and desist order in this matter immediately."

Oh my God, Yusif thought to himself, How does that guy make a living as a lawyer? Everything Mansford just said sounded legalish, but none of it actually made sense if you understood anything about how the law worked.

As Mansford droned on, Yusif looked around the room. The numbers were against Clyde, but looking up at the party chairman, Yusif wasn't sure he knew it. Clyde looked angry. It was pretty clear that as soon as Mansford yielded the floor Clyde was going to rip into him and probably lose even more of the crowd.

Yusif looked over at Bo, who was sitting in the second row with his wife. The man had become taciturn over the last week. Greg Harvey's attempts to blame Bo for the Sheriff's death shocked him and put a massive amount of guilt on his shoulders. Worse, word around town was that when he called the Sheriff's wife to offer his sympathies she had cursed him and told him he was not welcome at the funeral. This was the first time Yusif had seen Bo outside his house in days and he looked unkempt and unfocused. Unfortunately, Yusif was going to have to use this man to stop all the stupidity in this room.

Mansford was winding down. ". . . and in conclusion, I must, with great sadness in my heart, oppose the Chair's motion for inactivity and conclude that the Democratic Party of Bartlette

County must immediately file an action of determent to stop this illegal candidacy.”

Yusif saw Clyde draw in a breath to spit something back at Mansford and jumped up before those words came out.

“Sorry, Mister Chairman, but as the man running for commonwealth attorney I thought I ought to address some of the legal points raised by Mister Sifford.”

Without waiting for a reply, he walked to the center of the front row of seats and drove on.

“Yes, the Republicans are cheating. And, yes, they are doing everything they can to ruin Bo’s reputation. I take it nobody in this room will disagree with me when I say that’s pretty much the normal way they do things?”

Sullen faces looked back at him.

“There are three reasons we can’t file a writ of prohibition even though we are absolutely right. First, we are better than they are. We don’t cheat. We don’t do lowlife stuff like this. And, we don’t have to. Bo’s going to win. Maybe not quite as big as before, but it’s not going to be anywhere near close. Greg Harvey won’t get a single vote for himself. Nobody likes Greg. He’s hateful. The only way he gets any votes is the way he’s trying now. He has to lie about Bo. It ain’t gonna work.”

“If we file to keep Harvey off the ballot we look as petty as him and his party. It’ll make Bo look petty too and start his time as sheriff on a sour note. He doesn’t need that.”

“Second, we can’t get the writ filed in time. We’d file the papers tomorrow and schedule a hearing on Monday. None of the local judges will agree to hear something this political, so a substitute judge will have to be appointed by the Virginia Supreme Court. I’d say the earliest that happens is Monday afternoon and there’s no way that judge can be here before Tuesday. And, Tuesday’s the election. Can’t stop that once it’s started. It’ll be too late.”

“Third, the Party can’t file for a writ of prohibition in this matter. Technically, the Party does not have standing. The only person who could file this would be the person in the election and I’m pretty sure that Bo doesn’t want this lawsuit.”

Every eye in the place turned to Bo. It was a gamble throwing this on him without speaking to him first, but Yusif had not realized beforehand how out of control things would get in the meeting.

Bo stood. “No. If I lose ‘cuz the Sheriff died, I lose. If I can’t get the job from the people, I don’t want it from the court.” With that, he turned and walked out of the meeting.

## Chapter 28

On election night, the Republican Party of Bartlette County met at the Oak Mountain Inn. A somber crowd filled the restaurant to capacity. One wall had two giant televisions on it. The first had Mountain 7 News and the second was hooked to a computer showing official election results out of Richmond.

It had been a terrible idea to substitute Greg Harvey as candidate for sheriff after Riker Minton died. No one liked Harvey and the man spent every waking moment of the last week and a half screaming at the top of his lungs that Bo Ross killed Sheriff Minton. By election day people were starting to remember that the Sheriff had suffered two or three heart attacks before and really should not have been running for another term. To no one's surprise, it became clear almost immediately that Bo Ross had the election in hand.

The election for commonwealth attorney was much closer. Brad carried Saint Minas by a wide majority, but lost Yared by an even wider gap. The votes from the precincts outside the towns had balanced everything out and given Brad a fifteen vote lead. Then everyone waited for the votes out of Mount View.

Two hours later, they were still waiting. At eleven-thirteen Brad was talking to Karen Layle, who had been unopposed in her re-election as County Treasurer, when he heard a commotion. Turning, he saw people congregating in front of the television with the computer results. He walked a little closer so that he could see. Then one of the people standing in his way moved aside and Brad saw the screen.

Mount View's results were posted. Brad Dollerby - 286 / Yusif "Joe" Habib - 313.

He felt some grab his arm and looked over. Maggie was leading him to a chair. For the next few minutes Brad listened to person after person offer him condolences. When the commiserants were gone, Maggie handed him his cell phone and whispered into his ear that he needed to call Habib and congratulate him. All Brad did - all he could do - was hand the phone back and say "Not happening." Judas may have gotten his thirty pieces of silver, but Brad would go to Hell himself before he'd congratulate the bastard for it.

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Everyone was cheering and congratulating Yusif. The Democrats had all gathered at Clyde Mullins' house to await election results. Early in the evening everyone had cheered when Bo Ross' victory was confirmed. Now they were almost delirious with joy. For the first time in anyone's memory, the Democratic Party won two of the constitutional offices in Bartlette County.

For most of the evening the prospects seemed gloomy. Dollerby had a slight lead over Yusif and the only precinct left to report was Mount View. Mount View was a Republican bastion and in the last election the closest any of the Democratic candidates had come to victory was more than a hundred votes behind the Republican. Yet, there had been some reason to hope. At least half the Sheriff's deputies lived in Mount View and they were not happy that Dollerby was prosecuting deputies. As well, Greg Harvey was unliked by the deputies because he was the person who did all the Sheriff's dirty work, including punishment and firing.

Then the results came in and Yusif carried the town by twenty-seven votes.

The beer was flowing freely from the kegs in the kitchen and everyone was walking around with blue solo cups. The music was turned up, the lights in the main room dimmed, and it seemed like everyone under the age of fifty was dancing in the main room.

Yusif was outside with some of the older men, most of whom were smoking cigars. He could see the giant "Elect Bo & Joe" sign down by the road. His feelings were mixed. He was flush with victory, but also recognized the price. His relationship with his two best friends had been sacrificed for principle and a political job.

Brad did not call to concede or offer his congratulations. Maggie called. She was terse and cold, giving a formal congratulations and hanging up even as he thanked her.

As he stood there studying his ambivalence, the music in the house stopped and a chant of "joe, joe, Joe, JOE . . ." broke through his thoughts. He turned toward the house just as Maddy opened the door. "You better get in here, "Joe", before this gang rips Daddy's house apart looking for you. I think they want a speech from the conquering hero."

Yusif put his arm around Maddy and they walked back into the house together.

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It was late and Jerome sat alone, reading Interior Castle, in a little chapel attached to Saint Mary of Serenity church in Fairfax. It was separated from the church proper by a small glass wall and had just enough room in it for the tabernacle and four small pews which might seat sixteen people. It was a place for prayer and reverence. Jerome hoped it would serve as a sanctuary as well.

He knew he was asleep when a voice came from behind him.

"Really? Jerome, has He ever stopped me from talking to you before?"

"I don't think it's the Lord's fault that I cannot rid myself of you." Jerome replied. "It's my lack of faith. Were I able to embrace the Holy Trinity more fully there would be no room for you."

"That's a mighty convenient excuse. If they don't act it's because you failed them. Your Trinitarian God never seems to take responsibility for its own failures."

"Speaking of failures," the voice continued, "have you seen the result of your own failure yet?"

"That was no failure. It was merely an election result."

"Sure about that, are you? Even after I told you of all the good Dollerby could have done without your interference?"

"All you told me was that he would become powerful. And all of that power would have been founded in the blood of a man Brad caused to be killed."

"You are good at rationalizing things, Priest. You can't see the trouble you've caused yet."

Jerome's anger flared. "Free will. It is given by God to everyone and everyone in Bartlette was exercising their free will. You cannot lay this at my feet!"

"I don't have to, Priest. You'll do that all by yourself. You know you are responsible for the things that are going to go wrong, whether you will admit it to me or not."

When Jerome woke, he spent a long time with his head bowed in prayer.