

Ambush in Bartlette

Chapter 01

Brad Dollerby looked up at the jurors sitting in front of him. It had taken two and one half days to select the people who would sit on it, which was an unusually long time in Virginia. In Virginia most jury trials were finished in the first day and jury selection was an hour of that day. Selecting this jury had been a nightmare because the defendants were the sons of Martin Pahl, one of the five or six richest guys in Bartlette County. He owned at least twenty eZee Stops, the BartMart (the biggest store this side of the Wal*Mart in Norton), and he was probably the biggest local donor to the Republican Party. Everyone did business with Martin or owed him a favor.

The defense attorney tried to get the trial moved to another county because the local paper, the Weekly Mountain Democrat, published six front page stories about the Pahl brothers. Brad also urged the judge to move the case because he was worried about Martin Pahl's influence in Bartlette. Judge Isom would not have any of it. He made it very clear that there was no way the trial would be moved to another county unless they absolutely could not seat a jury in Bartlette. Then he ordered the circuit court clerk to assign two hundred people to jury duty for the term of court from January through March and to summon all two hundred of them to jury selection. One hundred and forty two actually showed and it had been a close question as to whether the jury would be seated. By the time all the jurors who had some sort of bias from the paper or who knew the Pahl family were removed and both sides did their peremptory strikes, one hundred and seventeen jurors had been dismissed. However, there were now nine women and five men sitting in the jury box. If nobody got sick or disappeared, two of the jurors were alternates, but no one would know which two until they were randomly selected at the end of the trial. He glanced one last time at his notes and began.

"'Ah Hell, they ain't nothing but money hungry pill whores.' That's what Justin Pahl said when the deputies arrested him and his brother Kyle chimed in, 'Yeah, them bitches didn't get nothin' they didn't want.'"

"On the twentieth of June last year, the Pahl brothers went to Finch's Pub and Grill in Saint Minas. They picked up four women - Kayla Mullins, Maggie Forwith, Kate Young, and Marla Tate. They all went back to the Pahl brothers' house and spent the night drinking, snorting pills, playing around in the hot tub, and having sex. We're not prosecuting them for any of that today."

"The reason we're here is what started the next day and went through the following week. When the women woke up the next day they were in a couple bedrooms on the third floor with a bathroom shared between them. The doors to the bedrooms were locked from the outside with deadbolt locks that could only be opened by key. The only windows were a couple skylights which were through the roof and out of reach. For the next eleven days Kayla, Maggie, Kate, and Marla were held against their will. They were only let out of the bedroom one or two at a time and only to have sex. When the they refused to come out, those two," he pointed at the defendants, "refused to give them any food. When a day of that didn't work, they cut off the water, electricity, and air conditioning to the third floor. The temperature outside was in the eighties; inside the temperature got much hotter. By mid-afternoon on the third day the women gave in."

"For the remainder of the eleven days the two of them would choose whichever woman they wanted and order her to come out of the rooms. They'd do whatever they wanted to that woman and then lock her back up. Finally, on the eleventh day, a day before their father got home from his vacation in Gatlinburg, they let the women out of the rooms, gave them a bottle of oxycodone pills and five thousand dollars. Then they dumped them all back in front of Finch's. Kayla and Maggie wanted to forget it all, but Kate and Marla refused to let them get away with it. They went to the Sheriff's Office in Mount View the next day and reported it all."

"Justin and Kyle Pahl are charged with abducting these women and various charges of rape, sodomy and object sexual penetration. At the end of this trial you'll see what those men did and we trust you'll hold them responsible for their actions."

As Brad returned to his seat, Grant Lasley, the defense attorney for Kyle Pahl stood up and started his opening statement with the traditional formula.

"May it please the Court, Learned Counsel for the Prosecution, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, this is the story of four prostitutes who got upset because they didn't get the money they expected . . ."

Brad half listened to Lasley's opening. He knew what Lasley was going to do in this case. He was going to do what he did every time - blame the victims. The evidence was overwhelming about what the Pahl brothers had done, so the women must have actually wanted it done. Furthermore, the victims were terrible persons who deserved what happened to them, and the defendant was the actual victim because these women were persecuting him. There were rape shield laws in Virginia which were supposed to stop that sort of thing and Brad argued before the trial that these arguments should be barred, but Judge Isom overruled him. Now Lasley would spend the next three days of trial slandering these women.

Of course, technically Grant Lasley represented only Justin Pahl. Squire Tolliver represented Kyle. However, Squire was not going to be the attack dog, slandering the woman and trying to get improper evidence admitted. Instead, he would do the "not in anger, but in sorrow" part of the show. Indeed, as soon as Lasley finished Squire stood up to start his part of the double team.

He looked for all the world like a country squire from a BBC show about 1940's England standing there in his tweed suit and sorrowful face. "Ladies and Gentleman, I am Keith Tolliver, but everyone's called me 'Squire' for the last twenty years. Not sure why." He smiled at the jurors as though sharing an inside joke. "We're not here because we hate these girls. However, because we believe that our clients are falsely accused, we are going to have to tell you some bad things . . ."

As Squire droned on, Brad thought about the evidence he would present today. He would probably only have time to call Deputy Mullins and if he had to he would call Investigator Powell. He would put off calling any of the victims until tomorrow or Friday. He looked at the time on his computer. Four-seventeen. If opening statements went much longer Judge Isom might not let him call any witnesses at all today and the last impression the jurors would have would be the defense attorneys' openings. However, Squire was already at least five minutes beyond the fifteen minutes Judge Isom allowed for an opening statement. As if on queue,

Squire wrapped up and walked back to his seat.

Judge Isom looked at Brad. "Commonwealth, call your first witness."

Brad stood. "Your Honor, Commonwealth calls Deputy Sergeant Tom Mullins."

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It was six-forty seven when Brad got back to his office. The questioning and cross examination of Deputy Mullins took about an hour and then the judge let the jury go. As soon as the jurors left the courtroom, Lasley made a motion for a mistrial on the grounds that Brad had irreparably prejudiced the jurors because he repeatedly referred to the four women as "victims" rather than "complaining witnesses." They argued for another forty-five minutes about that before the judge shut it down, ruling that the defense was not entitled to choose the words the prosecution could use and was not entitled to sanitize the trial by removing words a normal person would use. Then the judge adjourned for the day. The deputies had not yet started putting the shackles on the Pahl brothers, so they could be transported back to jail, when Brad grabbed his files and left the courtroom; in fact, the brothers were saying a prayer with their uncle when he left. The uncle was a Catholic priest who had driven down from New Jersey and sat in the front row, behind the brothers, for every minute of jury selection and the trial so far. Brad disliked that bit of staging, but he could not think of a viable way to stop it.

The lights were still on in the office when he got there. His office was up the stairs in the old balcony of the courtroom, which had been converted into two rooms. The first room had two desks in it. One was for Paula, who filled the role of secretary, receptionist, and paralegal. The other was for Jeanna, the victim-witness advocate. If you walked between the desks through the door behind them you were in his office. It was not an opulent office. There was barely enough room for two bookshelves, his desk, and a couple chairs in front of it for visitors. In fact, his deputy's office was three times the size of Brad's, but it was also in the bell tower even further up the stairs and was basically an converted attic.

Brad walked through the empty office and sat at his desk. There were at least twenty phone messages stacked neatly on his computer keyboard. Paula did not trust that he would find them anywhere else amidst the piles of papers on his desk. He picked them up and looked through them. There were three that required an immediate phone call; one from Delegate Pierce, one from the Governor's office, and one from the Bristol newspaper. There were about six from salesmen trying to get him to buy law books or computer programs - those could be ignored. The rest were from various people who did not have emergencies and probably would not appreciate him calling them in the evening anyway; he would leave a message for his deputy to call them tomorrow. He picked up the phone and dialed the Delegate's number. It went right to voice mail and the message had just beeped . . .

Pop. Pop. Pop. . . . Pop Pop Pop Pop

He had not heard that noise since Iraq. He dropped the phone and reached for his pistol. Then he realized he did not have it; during a jury trial, Judge Isom forbade anyone to be armed in his courtroom other than the bailiff. His pistol was locked in the desk. He grabbed for his keys and fumbled to get the right one.

A massive blast hit him from the left side. He was thrown to the right and he tumbled to the floor still in his chair. He saw the wooden bookshelves which were next to the the wall bounce against it and rebound, falling over top of him. Then everything suddenly went black.

Chapter 02

Yusif Habib walked toward his boss' room at Mount View Hospital. It took the Sheriff's Department over three hours to find him and tell him about the gunfight and explosion. The 911 office in the Sheriff's Department had his cell number, but the explosion caused the ramshackle old inn next to the courthouse which housed the Sheriff's Department and the offices of the clerks of the various courts to catch fire. It burned to the ground long before the volunteer fire department got itself together. Thankfully, the building had been mostly empty and everyone got out, but the 911 office went up in flames with it. Of course, getting in contact with Yusif was not a high priority either.

Paula finally called him about nine-thirty, ten minutes after Rare Dare, the movie his date had chosen, started. He was at a theater in Bristol and dropped his date off at her place before he drove back. He did it in less than ninety minutes and it was something of a miracle that he did not wreck his car driving the curved roads of Southwest Virginia at night at the speeds to which he pushed his little Hyundai. Mount View Hospital was immediately next to the exit from 23E on the first Mount View exit so Yusif pulled into the hospital immediately without going into town. He could see lights flashing further up the road, but he was going to check on Brad first. He knew that Mount View Hospital was really just a glorified clinic and there were only two types of patients who stayed the night - those who had no real problems and those for whom nothing could be done. Anyone else was sent on to one of the big hospitals in Tennessee. He was going to make sure into which category Brad fell.

As he approached the door he heard Brad's voice raised in irritation. "Dammit, Maggs, give my phone back!"

A female voice replied tartly. "Don't you Maggs me, Nickel. All you were doing was annoying any deputy dumb enough to answer his cell. You are supposed to be resting. I'll let you know if anybody calls about anything important."

Well, that was a good sign. If Brad's wife was picking on him then his injuries could not be too serious. The two of them kvetched at each other constantly, usually because Maggie was pushing Brad to do something he ought to and he was resisting. When she really wanted to get his goat she started calling him "Nickel." Of course, everyone in Bartlette County called Brad "Nickel", but Maggie was the only one who did it to his face - usually with a fierce grin on hers while she did so. Brad hated the nickname which came from his years on the high school football team. He played football because his father made him and Coach Huggins had screamed at him over and over again "Dollerby you ain't worth a plugged nickel!" By his junior year everyone at Yared High called him Nickel. In his senior year, the local newspaper was running weekly sports stories about "Nickel" Dollerby which culminated in a front page headline when the Yared High Black Cats won the district championship over the Pound Wildcats and Brad ran for three touchdowns: "Nickel Worth More Than Pound!" Brad had been mortified and he still hated the nickname.

Walking through the door, Yusif saw Brad sitting up in bed with a bandage covering his right

ear and Maggie sitting in the chair next to it. Brad saw him first. "Yusif, would you tell this insufferable woman that I need my phone?"

"Umm, no thanks boss. I learned a long time ago not to get in between a man and his wife. Nothing good can come from it."

Brad waved his hand and Maggie turned to Yusif. She was thin as a rail and had flaming orange hair. She pointed at her husband. "He gets no phone before eight tomorrow morning and I don't want to hear that you gave him your phone either. No damage to the courthouse and this idiot still manages to get himself hurt and when I come tearing up the four lane to get here I found out that all that really happened was that he got his bell rung and had to have a scratch in his ear stitched up." She turned back to Brad. "Now that Lurch is here, I am going to go get some coffee. He can keep you company for an hour or so while I call everyone and make sure they know you are safe." As she started to walk out of the room she stopped and looked up at him. "Al-telephone mamnooa. Tafemni?"

Yusif stared at her blankly for a second. "Uh, no telephone?" She nodded sharply and walked out of the room. Yusif walked over to the bed. "Y'all have known me for over ten years, since our first year of law school, and she still doesn't believe I don't speak Arabic."

Brad adjusted himself in the bed, pushing a button to make it incline further. "Hell, Yusif, the reason she made us track you down at that mixer was that she saw your name on the list of new students and wanted to practice our language skills. I'm pretty sure she's never forgiven someone named Yusif Habib for not speaking Arabic."

Yusif chuckled. "I grew up in Winchester, Kentucky. The only person who spoke Arabic in my house was my Giddey and he died when I was eleven. Now, if you ever need a translator of Kentuckyese, I'm your man."

They both smiled. It was a familiar bit of patter - a joke the three of them had been sharing since they met at the mixer for first year law students at the University of Kentucky. It was also a favored way of dissembling when they did not want address a difficult topic. As the conversation lulled, Yusif took a deep breath.

"What the heck happened, Brad?"

"Well, you have to understand that I didn't see any of it. I was in my office, prepping for the next day of trial, and there was gunfire and a massive BOOM." Brad waved his hands in the air emphasizing the point. "Maggie's right. There's no damage to the courthouse, but that didn't keep me from having a bookshelf fall down on me. The next thing I remember is waking up in this bed a couple hours later with a bandage on my head where they sewed a rip in my ear back together." Brad rolled his eyes. "First thing they did after I woke up was try to give me an oxy. I don't remember much, but I understand I cussed the nurse out and told her where she could shove her oxys, tabs, and percs. Damn doctors hand those pills out like they're candy. Then I passed out again and when I woke up Maggie was here. She let me make a couple calls and then, when I wasn't looking, she grabbed the phone. You showed up while we were discussing that."

"Have you been into town yet?" After Yusif shook his head, he went on. "Okay. As best I can

tell sitting here, the deputies were walking the Pahls over to the holding cell in the Sheriff's Department. Lasley, Tolliver, and that priest from up north were walking with them. They were in the alley between the buildings when someone opened fire on them. The deputies returned fire and everybody ran back toward the courthouse door. The propane tank was at the end of the alley and as the deputies rushed everyone back to the courthouse it was between the them and their attackers. Don't know who shot it, but the tank let out a big cloud of propane gas which filled the alley and then blew. It was basically a fuel air explosion. The courthouse is made of granite pulled out of the Yared quarry. Other then blowing out windows and causing furniture to fall over, the explosion didn't affect the courthouse. The old inn didn't make it. The part facing the courthouse collapsed and it caught fire. They don't think anyone was in the building but the two women working dispatch in the 911 center and it was on the other side; they got out."

Brad paused and when he did not resume Yusif prompted him. "Who were the attackers? Was anyone hurt?"

"No idea who the shooters were. Everybody in the alley was medflighted to Tennessee. They're all in bad shape. Burns, bullet wounds, and concussive injuries. The door to the courthouse closed and locked behind them and the alley's door to the Sheriff's Department was twenty feet down the alley, in the direction of the shooters. They got back to the courthouse door, but they didn't get it unlocked in time."

"The only reason we know as much as we do is that Bo was trying to get the door unlocked and he got hit by four bullets right before the explosion. Three hit the back of his vest, but one hit him solid in the right arm. He got knocked down and fell in the middle of those trash cans they keep back there. Apparently, they absorbed most of the heat and explosion. He got bruises and a concussion, but was able to tell what happened before they sent him off to one of the Tennessee hospitals for surgery."

Brad motioned Yusif closer and lowered his voice. "You need to get over there. The last I heard, Major Harvey had broken into the empty store across from the courthouse and set it up as a headquarters. Get over there. Try to keep them from doing anything we, and they, will regret later. Don't be stupid about it though. I've seen what's going to happen here in Iraq. Before tonight the deputies knew they were the toughest, meanest, and most untouchable people in Bartlette County. Tonight, three of their people were are in a hospital and their headquarters is a pile of smoking rubble. These men are going to be scared and angry. That makes them dangerous. Try to keep a handle on things. The last thing we need is for the Sheriff's Department to go on a witch hunt, breaking down doors and rousting people because they've given the deputies trouble before and therefore they might be involved in this. We want to be able to prosecute the bastards who did this and if the deputies run wild they'll fuck it up."

Yusif nodded. He was unsure what good it would do to send him over. His working relationship with the deputies was good, but if they were going to go as wild as Brad feared there was no way they would listen to him. They would not listen to an outsider who moved into the county three years before to take the assistant Commonwealth Attorney position the way they would Brad, whose family had lived around the town of Yared for longer than anyone could remember. Still, he had to try.

As he turned to walk out, Brad must have seen his concern because he held up his hand in a halting motion. "Just hold the line until tomorrow morning. I'll be out of here as soon as I can and I'm coming straight over, no matter what Maggie says. Now, go do some good." As Brad smiled grimly, Yusif completed his turn and left the hospital room.

Chapter 03

Father Jerome Tolton stood outside the shuttered doors of the building which used to be the Archangel Michael Church in Richmond. The diocese still owned the land, but the Bishop decided to close the church when its regular attendance at its one mass a week fell below twenty regular parishioners. Jerome's first job as a priest had been to close this church. That was ten years earlier and whenever he came back to Richmond he visited the old church.

On paper it made sense. Only six blocks away Mary Queen of Heaven had a thriving Catholic community and Archangel Michael was in terrible condition. The roof leaked badly and several of the stained glass windows had holes which were covered by boards. During the winter the church held services in the basement because it cost too much to heat the high ceilinged and drafty worship area.

Jerome was told that the church would be closed in four months and all he would have to do was caretake it until that time. He would say mass once a week, visit sick parishioners, ease his flock through the merger with Marry Queen of Heaven, and get some good experience as a first time parish priest.

It was a disaster. No one told the parishioners that Archangel Michael was closing before he arrived; worse, no one told him of the omission. As well, no one had told the parishioners that their new priest was African-American. When he said his first mass in front of a group of thirty-two people, all but two of whom were elderly and all of whom were White, he felt a sense of dread. It did not help when a third of the attendees did not come forward for communion. Then, at the end of the mass he stood to introduce himself a little better and read a couple announcements.

"Hello. For those of you who might not have figured it out I'm the new priest." He paused for an expected chuckle and got stony silence. He hurried on. "I'm going to be the priest for Archangel Michael until we merge into Mary Queen of Heaven in August . . ."

There was an audible gasp from someone. The parishioners all started talking at once. A man on the third pew turned red in the face before he stood and walked out. A lady on the first row stood and then crumpled back down onto the pew and dissolved into tears. After a couple minutes, two other parishioners walked her out. Jerome was stunned and when things dropped into a lull, he forgot the announcements and just did the closing blessing. He recited the blessing, but no one in the pews replied. Then no one sang the closing hymn. Jerome found himself walking down the aisle to the back of the church alone. There were two doors at the back of the church and Jerome stood next to the one on the right. Two parishioners gave him tepid handshakes as they went out the door. The others all hurried by, walking out the left hand door.

He prayed a lot that week and came back the next Sunday determined to do everything he could to mend fences and get things moving in the right direction. Then he walked into the

church and found himself conducting mass for three parishioners. The following Tuesday he was served with a law suit by a group of parishioners who styled themselves the Archangel Michael Church Council. They asked for an injunction against the closing of the church. When Jerome called the Bishop's office he was told in no uncertain terms that the reason they assigned someone who was a lawyer before he became a priest to tend to the closing of Archangel Michael was that he could handle any legal matters that popped up. Thus, he ended up personally fighting a court battle against the parishioners he was supposed to be helping. It had been almost ridiculously easy to win, but it delayed the closing by three months. During the entire last seven months of Archangel Michael's time as a functioning church he never had more than seven parishioners in the pews.

It was a soul crushing experience which almost broke Jerome. He spoke with other priests about it and even approached Bishop Mannion a couple times. They were all full of encouragement, good will, and platitudes. However, no one provided much in the way of actual assistance. In the end, it was his church secretary that got him through it.

Abigail Marie Mahan was a sixty year old woman and if Hollywood was going to cast a stereotypical Irish grandmother it would have looked to her. She was no nonsense, tough as nails, and she more or less adopted Jerome. She was not happy about Archangel Michael closing and she was at least as angry about the way he was being treated. About three months in, when he had been about to fall apart, she marched him into the back office of the church and lectured him for over an hour on his duties as a priest and how he needed to buck up and do his job for both the Church and this church. She was strength from God and stiffened his backbone for the rest of his time there. Years later he found out she had also turned herself into an absolute terror for the Bishop's office over her anger that Bishop Mannion had thrown a young priest like him to the wolves. When Archangel Michael was finally closed she was its only parishioner to come to the mass he held with Father Rios at Mary Queen of Heaven. A lone Irish-Catholic woman, she stood in the middle of pews filled with African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. After the mass she gave him a fierce hug and told him if the "bastards" ever did anything like this to him again that he should call her and she would set them straight. Then she turned and left while both of them were still able to hold their tears in.

Three years later he was in Charlottesville, reorganizing Blessed Sacrament Church for the diocese, when she called. Her wayward daughter, Margeret, had come back from the Army and gone to some law school in Kentucky. Now she was living in sin with some man deep in the mountains of Virginia. Abby was going to go out there and fix that. Would he preside over the wedding? He agreed and once he set the telephone down promptly forgot the call. After all, while he never met Margeret, he had met Abby's other two daughters, Kate and Ann, who were both every bit as willful as their mother. He had no doubt that Margeret would be just as stubborn as the other Mahan women. She would not get married unless she wanted to and she would never let her mother choose the priest for her wedding.

Six months later Father Jerome Tolton found himself in a place most Virginians did not realize existed. When most people thought of Southwest Virginia they thought of Roanoke. Bartlette County was three hours west of Roanoke and he was assured by the local priest, Father Gabe Mullins, that Virginia continued on for at least two more hours of driving until you left Lee County, Virginia and went into Middlesboro, Kentucky. There was a tiny Catholic church right next to a local hospital which had been built by the Church but was now owned by some

conglomerate. Saint Berlinda was a rural church with a congregation that was theoretically about seventy and actually worked out to thirty parishioners at the weekly mass. The wedding had been a joyous, if somewhat chaotic, event. The church seated about one hundred. In the church proper there were nowhere near enough seats for the Mahans, who descended on Bartlette County in droves, much less the groom's family. However, Abby and her daughter Maggie made sure that every member of the Dollerby clan who wanted a seat got one. They were Protestants of some sort and the ceremony, celebration, and length of a Catholic wedding all seemed to combine to leave them kind of happily bemused.

The five hour reception dinner and party afterward at the local hotel and bar stunned the entire town. When a town policeman showed up at eleven thirty to calm them down some idiot who married into the family actually threw a punch at him. Before the local officer could get up off the floor three of Abby's nephews had slammed the attacker to the floor and were flashing their own badges. They helped the officer up and asked him to let them take care of the moron their cousin married. The local cop looked around, nodded his head, and left. About thirty minutes later four local officers and three deputies showed up to shut the party down. The Mahans reacted to that mostly with good humor and started to head back to their rooms until one of the local officers decided they were moving too slowly and got mouthy. The confrontation which followed was almost word for word from a movie.

A large Mahan looked down at the officer. "You'd better have the National Guard out there to back you if you think you can make us do anything."

The town officer snapped back, "Hell, we don't need no army. We got us a Bo."

On cue, a deputy walked through the door. He turned sideways as he did so and ducked his head under the door frame, then straightened out. None of the Mahan men were small, but they all looked up at Bo, who seemed to be as large as any three of them put together. The room got very quiet as Bo walked up. He had lieutenant bars on his collar and pointed at one of the other town officers.

"Get Mouse out of here before he gets me in another fight." The town officer who was making trouble gave Bo a sullen look, but went without a fuss. Then Bo pointed at the bartender. "You know that no alcohol can be sold after twelve. It's seven after."

The bartender looked like he was used to this. "Aw Bo, it's an open bar. I ain't selling anything."

Bo looked singularly unimpressed. "Don't care. You can serve these folks one more round and then you shut down if you want to keep your license."

Finally Bo turned to the Mahans. "Gentlemen, we got noise ordinances and drunk in public laws. I got little old ladies who live down the street who think that any drinking is a sin and who will be bugging the living crud out of my Sheriff tomorrow. He's already going to be on me for not shutting you down earlier. I hear some of you are officers and I'm sure you know what that's like." Several of the Mahans nodded as he continued. "Get a last round and break it up by one. I'm certain we'll get a couple more complaints by then and we'll swing by. Anybody who's still in the bar or partying in the halls will get to spend the night in jail on a drunk in public. Have a good night."

As Bo turned to leave, one of the younger Mahans started forward only to be grabbed by a couple of his elders. One of them whispered loudly enough that everyone in the bar could hear it through the continuing silence. "What the fuck's wrong with you? Don't you have enough sense to recognize a force of nature when you see it?"

People laughed and started to talk again. As he got to the door the big deputy stopped and turned back. "One last thing. Whoever punched Mark here," Bo pointed at the local officer, "had best be out of the county before eight in the morning. Mark doesn't mind letting it go, but he's going to have shiner and that means he has to file an incident report. His boss will get to the office about nine and read that report. He don't take kindly to people attacking his officers. We don't have a name right now and if he's gone from the county I don't expect much follow up. If he's still here, hitting an officer is a felony with a mandatory six months in jail. Make sure he's gone." With that Bo left and the other lawmen went with him.

Jerome was sitting in a back corner with Father Gabe, Abby and the bride. Abby chuckled and looked like she was suppressing a guffaw. "You know, that man just became a legend in Boston, New York, and Richmond. There are at least three officers from each of those cities here and by the time they get back Bo will be nine foot tall and when he walked in the door he bent a steel bar just to get everybody's attention."

Father Gabe turned to Abby with a bit of conspiratorial gleam in his eye. "You know, Abby, the reason he's a deputy is that he was the runt of the litter and his daddy thought he was too small to do real work on the farm."

Abby stood with a smile. "Oh, that's too good. I'm going to go up and get our last rounds at the bar and make sure everybody knows that." She turned to her daughter. "Maggie, you better go round your husband up. You know what they're doing to him."

Maggie stood up too. "I know. Heck, I figure they've already got him so snookered that he'll be worthless in bed tonight." Then she raised her voice as she turned to walk away past a table where some of the young Mahan women were gathered, commiserating on the lack of worthwhile men at the party. "But, you know, if I wanted to marry a man just because he was great in the sack, I'd probably have gone after Bo."

Jerome smiled at the memory and brought himself back to the present. That was the last time he had seen any of the Mahans, much less Abby. Abby stayed in Bartlette County and they kept in touch through phone calls and email, but for the last year Jerome was assigned to merge two monasteries which each had less than fifteen brothers apiece. It should have been easy since both were from the same order. However, like everything else the Bishop sent his troubleshooter to do, it turned out not to be anywhere near as simple as it first seemed. He spent the majority of the last year cloistered with a bunch of men in monasteries which forbade talking, much less phones and internet. He had just finished a meeting with the two abbots when a message arrived from Bishop Mannion. He was to return immediately to Richmond and get briefed about going to Bartlette County. It was a little after seven when he left the monastery and started driving back to Richmond. He stopped at a church on the way back and tried to call Abby, but got her voicemail. He could not think of anything the Bishop would think important enough to send him to Bartlette County. Whatever it was, he was certain that Abby had something to do with it. Why else would the Bishop be sending him? He

looked at his watch. It was ten and the appointment with His Excellency was at eleven. He needed to get going so that he could make sure he got there on time. He walked back to the beat up old dodge truck the diocese was kind enough to provide him. On the third try the truck's engine coughed to life and he started driving.

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His Excellency Bishop Wayne Mannion waved Jerome into a chair in his office. He was on the phone at the time and Jerome waited patiently while the Bishop finished speaking to some politician about how he should vote in a manner consistent with his faith. He was unable to tell whether the Bishop was going after a Republican for the death penalty or a Democrat for abortion before the conversation ended with the usual meaningless amenities.

Then Bishop Mannion looked at him with an unpleasant scowl. "Father Tolton, ever since the incident in Bartlette County, we have not been able to keep that Irish attack dog of yours at bay. She keeps insisting that you come out there to investigate. She won't leave us alone. She even called Rome." He glared at Jerome. "Do you know how much I hate getting calls from Rome questioning me about whether I have been lax in investigating attacks on the Church? And we're also getting calls from a Monsignor Reilly out of the Archdiocese of Newark who wants to know how one of their priests got killed. She called the Archbishop's office too."

Bishop Mannion's rant ground to a halt, but he continued to glare across his desk at Jerome. Jerome sat there in shock for a few seconds before he began to speak very carefully. "Your, Excellency, I have been either at Sacred Trinity Monastery or Christ the Savior Monastery. I've not had contact with the secular world at large."

The Bishop sat back for a second. "Then you don't know?" When Jerome shook his head, Mannion leaned forward again. "Well, that explains why she kept accusing us of hiding you or ordering you not to talk to her."

Jerome stayed silent and after a couple seconds Bishop Mannion sat up. "All right. I guess I can't blame you for something you didn't even know about. And I never can stay angry at you too long anyway. I don't know how you do it, but every time I send you out to do something which should make everyone hate you, you do it and make friends along the way. Of course, none of the others are quite as fierce as that Mahan woman. Next time you talk to her find out how she got the personal assistant of the Prefect of the Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei to call me at five in the morning." He grinned crookedly. "Let me tell you, it's quite a shock to be woken up and told the Inquisition is holding for you on line three."

"Anyway, you need to know what's going on. A week ago in Bartlette County a bunch of people were ambushed at the back door of the courthouse. During the gunfight, someone shot a big propane tank and it exploded. The explosion destroyed a building and sent about a dozen people to the hospital. The only one to die was a Father Ted Pahl - a priest from the Archdiocese of Newark."

"And now you know about as much as I do. For all I know it was some sort of Hatfield-McCoy thing and the Father Pahl just got in the way. I don't know. You need to find out."

Jerome took it all in and sending him to poke around Bartlette County seemed like a

spectacularly bad idea. "Your Excellency . . . "

The Bishop waved his hand. "You're out of the doghouse. Stop with all the formality."

"Yes sir." The Bishop rolled his eyes as Jerome went on. "It may not be a good idea to send an outsider to look into this. My understanding is that they don't like it when outsiders poke their noses into local business. Also, this is a part of Virginia where people openly fly Confederate flags. I may not be the person who can handle this most effectively."

"Because you're Black?" Jerome cringed inwardly as Bishop Mannion's voice rose. He had heard that tone before. "Part of the Church's job is to combat moral ignorance. If they are too stupid to make use of your considerable skills because you have more melanin than they have, then they are idiots. But, we're going to make sure that they know they're idiots because if they don't accept your help you'll figure it out anyway - won't you?"

Jerome nodded. What else could he do? The Bishop had already made up his mind and now he had fastened a moral imperative on top of the need to investigate. To get there, he had badly misinterpreted what Jerome meant. Local officials would cooperate. It was the guys out in the mountains who unabashedly flew Confederate flags who bothered him. He was fairly certain that he would not be welcome there. He was now equally certain that Bishop Mannion was not going to let him out of this.

Two hours later Jerome found himself back at his truck with instructions to drive immediately to Bartlette County. After meeting with the Bishop, he waited for another ninety minutes while the Bishop's aide de camp scared up a cell phone and portable computer for him. His clothes, New Jerusalem Bible, and rosaries were already packed in the old army duffelbag sitting on the passenger seat of the truck. He coaxed the truck back into life and started the five hour drive. This morning the Brothers at Christ the Savior woke him up at two thirty so he could participate in Lauds and then help with morning chores. He would be dead tired soon and no one in Barlette County even knew he was coming. It would be best if he found a place to bunk down tonight in Roanoke and then finished the part of the drive through winding mountain roads tomorrow. He called directory assistance and asked for the number of one of the Catholic churches in Roanoke.

Chapter 04

Yusif was looking through the through the Tyree Lee file. Tyree went into the eZee Stop in Saint Minas, grabbed a six pack of Bud, and walked out of the store while the clerk was looking the other direction. The theft was less than ten dollars, but Tyree had been in court so often that if he sneezed in the wrong place he caught a felony charge. There was a video of the theft and Tyree confessed to the Saint Minas officer who arrested him. His record was so bad that the sentencing guidelines called for him to get between a year and a month and a year and six months in jail. Yusif put down the file and started typing up a plea agreement on his computer.

It probably would do no good, but he would send the plea agreement to Tyree's lawyer anyway. Most people who were being prosecuted currently were going to get away with it this time. When the old inn burnt down it took out more than just a few offices. It destroyed records of all the investigations done by the Sheriff's Department. Worse, all the evidence

which was kept locked in the basement was gone. Adding to these problems, the Clerk of the Circuit Court had his offices in the old inn too, so all the files which had the original indictments, signed by the grand jury foreman, were nothing more than ash.

"Excuse me." The voice roused Yusif from his gloomy thoughts and he looked away from the computer. There was a Black man standing in the door of his office which meant the guy was definitely from out of town. The only ethnic minorities in Bartlette County were one Egyptian-American, three Indian doctors and their families, and the Melugeons. The only African-American Yusif had seen in Bartlette County in the last year was one of the FBI agents who showed up after the attack. This rail thin man in threadbare black pants and beat up gray coat was not a member of the FBI.

Well, at least he doesn't look like a reporter either, Yusif thought. He waved the man into room. "Yes? Can I help you sir?"

The man walked into the room. "I hope so. The lady downstairs sent me up here . . ." As the man walked into room his coat swung open revealing his collar.

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Jerome saw the moment of recognition. The man's eyes widened slightly and he immediately started to stand. Next, this man who had been perfectly cordial to him would overcompensate for imagined impropriety by becoming extremely polite and formal. He needed to nip that in the bud.

He held his hands up in the universal sign of surrender. "I come in peace, Earthling. Take me to your leader."

The man behind the desk froze. He stood there for ten seconds, then ten more. Finally, he spoke without smiling. "You know, Father, it never ends well when someone says that to Kirk."

Jerome put on his best smile. "Then I guess it's good we're not on the Enterprise."

Striding forward, Jerome stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Jerome Tolton. I'm looking for . . ."

The big man stopped with his hand halfway across the desk. "You're Father Awesome?"

Taking another stride, Jerome reached out and grabbed the hand which had stopped moving forward and shook it when the man squeezed back automatically. He almost regretted it a second later when the big man got a grin on his face and the squeeze became enthusiastic. "Heck, Father, I've been hearing stories about you ever since I moved to Bartlette County. Mrs. Mahan brags on you all the time. I expected you'd be ten foot tall and have lightning bolts flashing from your eyes."

As Jerome took back his slightly crushed hand it was his turn to be a little confused. "You mean Maggie?"

"No, sir." The man's grin got a few centimeters wider. "There's only one Mrs. Mahan in

Bartlette County and that's Abigail Mahan."

"And she calls me Father Awesome?"

"No Sir. She brags on you so much that Maggie and Brad do though."

For a couple seconds, Jerome reflected on that. He did a lot of things over the last ten years as he became the Bishop's top troubleshooter, but not many of them felt much like they should be bragged about. "I can't say I've done much that deserved bragging. I just do what the Bishop tells me to as best God gives me the ability to. Living up to that nickname might take a little more than the abilities the Lord has given me."

"I wouldn't bet on that Father." The big man continued to grin. "And I definitely wouldn't let Mrs. Mahan know if I doubted it. I'd get a tongue lashing that would take off several layers of skin."

"Anyway," the man pointed to one of the chairs in front of his desk, "Have a seat. I'm Yusif Habib, the deputy Commonwealth Attorney. What can I do for you?"

Looking down at the two chairs in front of the desk, Jerome chose the wooden one over the one made of metal and plastic. Although both were of indeterminate age, they clearly had their best decades behind them. So did the metal desk with the Seventies era ugly green paint. The man who sat down in the equally dated orange chair behind the desk had a dark skin tone and he was offensive lineman large.

"Well, Yusif, I was sent here to help out. I'm not exactly Father Dowling, so I don't think I'd be much help sleuthing around the dark corners of Bartlette County, but I am a lawyer. I thought maybe I could be of some help here."

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Brad walked out of the examination room, putting his jacket back on. He might not even have a scar where they sewed his earlobe back together, although Doctor Ambedkar waffled about it the way insurance companies have trained doctors to do. At least the good doctor took off that ridiculous bandage. He gave all sorts of dire warnings about scratching the ear or getting it wet, but he allowed that it would probably be better if the ear got air as it healed.

As Brad was paying at the front desk, Maggie almost hurdled through the front door. "Get moving. We have to get to your office right now. Why aren't you answering your phone? I tried to call you four times and you never picked up."

It all came out in one breath and Brad was a little stunned by the onslaught. He pointed to a sign in the lobby which forbade the use of cell phones because they might interfere with medical equipment. It would have been more effective as an excuse if two kids in the lobby had not been texting away on their phones in the seats next to the picture. Yet, Maggie did not call him on it. Instead, she grabbed him by the arm and started hustling him out the door. "We've got to go now. My car is right outside. We'll come back and get yours later."

Her car was parked right outside the doctor's office on the yellow curb. She shoved him

toward the passenger side and hit her key fob unlocking the vehicle. Once they were both in she turned the key so fast that the starter made a grinding noise and she practically stomped the gas pedal as they pulled out.

While he fumbled to get his seat belt on, Brad looked over at his wife. "What's going on Maggs?"

She kept her eyes in front as the car barely paused at the stop sign at the entrance of the parking lot. "Paula called me. She tried to call you first, but couldn't get an answer. I was in Yared doing the political wife thing at a Red Hats lunch. It took me an hour to get here and get you - still with your phone off."

Brad could tell he was going to hear about this later. Maggie considered it just this side of a sin not to be reachable by cell twenty-four hours a day. Again though, she was not fussing at him about it. Something really had her flummoxed. "Maggs, slow down. What is it?"

"Father Tolton's here. He is at your office, waiting to talk with you and you are making him wait."

Brad winced as his wife made a left turn onto Main Street, at speed, under what could have arguably been the last glow of the yellow before the light turned red, and directly in front of a town officer. "Dammit, Maggs, slow down! It won't do anyone any good if you kill us five hundred feet from the courthouse. And Tolton seemed like a decent guy. He'll understand."

She pulled around behind the courthouse and directly into the space reserved for the General District Court judge. "Bradley 'Nickel' Dollerby, it's Father Tolton and you will call him Father. I know the Father will understand. My mother, on the other hand . . ." She paused and gave Brad a meaningful look. Both of them got out of the car and strode quickly into the courthouse.

When they got to Brad's office, Paula was on the phone and she pointed upward. They turned around and headed straight to the attic office. When they got there, Yusif had two people sitting in front of his desk. There was a thin black man in priestly garb and an older lady with a light blue blouse and long dark blue skirt. Brad had just enough time to think "damn, she's wearing the pearls" before she opened up on him.

"Well, it's about time you showed up, Mister Commonwealth Attorney. While you've been out gallivanting, Father Jerome has been sitting here for an hour and a half waiting for you to be kind enough to show up at your own office. You do still work here don't you?"

Brad stood there. All he could do was weather the storm. There was no arguing with this woman and even if he did argue, God help him if he scored any hits because then his wife would turn on him too. Of course, if he remained silent his wife would start arguing with Abigail on her own in about ten seconds. This would lead to chastisement later about how he never stood up for himself and how she always had to defend him from her mother. That was infinitely better than having the two women yelling at him in tandem. Then, just as Abigail was hitting stride, a voice cut across her harangue.

"Now, Abby, this is my fault, not his."

Then Brad saw something he had thought impossible. Abigail Mahan stopped in mid fuss. It was only a moment, but when the slightly built priest interrupted her she stopped. Then she turned to the priest.

"Nonsense. You are a guest and shouldn't be treated this way. And you a Father even." She scowled slightly and started to turn back to continue tearing strips off Brad's hide.

The priest stuck his hand, palm out, between that scowl and its intended victim.

"Abby, I'm the one who's being rude here, not Mr. Dollerby. I came to town without calling anyone, showed up without an appointment, and it never even occurred to me that a man who was in a building when a massive explosion took place right outside would probably be seeing a doctor." The priest stood and took Abigail's arm, helping her to her feet. "And you, of all people, know that the fact that I'm a priest does not make me perfect. The Bishop sent me to talk to these gentlemen about what happened last week, so I'm afraid I'll have wait until tonight to finish filling you in on all the details of what I've been up to." He walked her over to the door and looked at Maggie. "Maggie, would you be kind enough to walk Abby out so that I can talk to your husband?" Maggie nodded and both women left after the priest promised he would show up at half past six for supper.

Brad stood there astonished. He had never seen anyone stop Abigail once she got rolling, much less give her the bum's rush out the door. As the priest shut the door behind the ladies and turned back around, Brad heard his assistant's voice behind him. "Wow. Now I know why they call you Father Awesome."

As Brad watched a little grin crossed Father Tolton's lips. "Don't expect it to last. I give it a day or two and she'll be pushing me around just as much as she does everyone else."

With that, the priest returned to his seat. Brad sat in the the old metal chair next to him. "Father, what can we do for you?"

The priest's expression became much more serious. "I've been sent by Bishop Mannion. What can you tell me about the death of Father Ted Pahl?"

Chapter 05

Jerome sat there with the two prosecutors, holding the silence in the hope that they would fill it with the information he needed. Finally, the senior man broke it.

"Father, the investigation is ongoing. It is far from complete and we are not in a position to make any of it public."

This time the silence came from the other men and Jerome broke it. "I'm not here to report things to the paper. I'm here to help in any way I can. The only person I am supposed to report to is Bishop Mannion."

The silence carried on so Jerome filled it again. "I expect to be here until everything is shaken out. I was speaking to Yusif before Abby came in about possibly helping with legal

matters. I went to Boston College Law and I worked for six years at the Richmond office of Spears, Allenby, Austerlitz, Evans, and Metcaffe. As you might imagine from the rather ostentatious name, I didn't see the inside of a courtroom for those years. There's far more money and perceived prestige," he rolled his eyes expressively, "in arguing over clauses in five hundred page contracts between IBM and Motorola than there is in going into a courtroom where you might actually affect people's lives."

He knew he was laying that on a little bit thick, but he always worried that pulling out his legal bona fides would create a gulf. It never hurt to salve the egos of the everyday lawyers he dealt with more often in untangling the local affairs of churches. After all, he was no longer working at a snobby multi-national law firm.

. . . .

Yusif saw the gulf between his boss and Father Tolton widening. The cleric seemed to lack a basic understanding of how lawyers outside of big cities operated. A biglaw firm like Spears, Allenby, Austerlitz, Evans, and Metcaffe was something entirely alien to Brad. Yusif understood somewhat because he worked at Boreman & Franklin in Charleston for several years before he left West Virginia to take his job here. However, Brad was a dyed in the wool local guy for whom law school had been a step in his planned political career. In fact, going to the University of Kentucky had set him apart from the other local attorneys. None of the twelve lawyers in the county had ever thought that practicing law had anything to do with locking themselves in an office on the thirty-second floor of a downtown tower for ninety hours a week.

He decided to jump in. "Brad, I was talking with Father Tolton before Mrs. Mahan showed up. I thought maybe he could come onboard as an unpaid deputy for this matter. That way he would have a fiduciary responsibility to this office and . . ."

Brad interrupted him. "Can't do it. Statute says that larger jurisdictions can have unpaid deputies, but we can't have one unless the comp board approves it."

"How's that?" Yusif focused in on Brad. "The Virginia constitution only allows the General Assembly to set the laws you have to enforce and how much money you have."

"Yeah. It's unconstitutional as H . . ." Brad stopped with a glance toward Father Tolton, "It's unconstitutional as heck, but we don't need to give defense attorneys in any prosecution coming out of this anything to work with."

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Brad was scrambling. What in the world was Yusif thinking? Thank goodness this topic came up at the last commonwealth attorney seminar in Williamsburg. Some commonwealth in the mountains on the other side of West Virginia was running an office entirely by himself and had a kid from the University of Chicago Law School who wanted to work for him without salary for two years because some charity would pay for the kid's room and board and pay off his loans. That commonwealth attorney had been willing to deputize the kid to work without pay, but the charity's lawyers had nixed it because the statutes didn't allow it in counties with smaller populations.

The idea of having a Catholic priest as a deputy Commonwealth Attorney was a nightmare. The Father would have a higher loyalty to another organization and if the Bishop told him to do something Brad was certain that would trump any duty owed to this office. On top of that, he already had to deal with the fact that he married a Catholic woman. Having a priest in his office was a problem he did not need in next year's election.

"I can't hire you on Father, but I can brief you up on what we know so far. However, you do have to give me your word that you will not disclose this publicly."

He waited. Father Tolton finally spoke. "As I said before, I will not reveal anything that you tell me except to Bishop Mannion."

After considering that for a moment, Brad continued. "Okay. The investigation isn't complete yet. The only persons who have been interviewed are Captain Ross and Grant Lasley, one of the defense attorneys. The FBI and State Police have sent a lot of stuff to labs to be analyzed and none of that has come back. Things are going to change."

When the Father nodded, Brad dove into the description of what he knew. "The Pahl brothers were on trial for rape and abduction. The trial broke for the day and deputies Carr and Boyd were escorting the brothers to the holding cell over in the Sheriff's office in the building next to the courthouse. They let the brothers' attorneys and their uncle, Father Ted Pahl, go with them. Stopping in the alley between the buildings, they let the brothers smoke while they spoke with their attorneys. Captain Ross came out and was breaking all that up when someone, probably two people, opened fire on them from the parking area behind the buildings."

"The civilians were on the side of the alley next to the Sheriff's office and the deputies were next to the courthouse. The initial shots went into the civilians. We don't know how many bullets were fired, but there were rounds both from a pistol and AR-15. That first volley hit Kyle Pahl in the neck, Justin Pahl in the chest twice, Grant Lasley in the elbow, and Father Pahl in the leg. The Pahl brothers fell where they were and Lasley, who is a combat vet, grabbed the Father by the back of his shirt and dragged him behind the deputies. The other defense attorney, Keith Tolliver, turned and ran toward the front of the alley. He got three bullets in the lower back and went down. The deputies took cover behind a propane tank that was next to the courthouse. Then one of the attacker's bullets holed the tank and a white gas filled the back of the alley. Captain Ross grabbed his keys and ran for the door to the courthouse. He got to up on the little patio to the door and four bullets hit him. His vest caught three and one hit him in the arm and he was thrown off the porch into a bunch of plastic trash containers. Then something, we don't know what yet, ignited the gas."

"The explosion caught the two deputies behind the tank and threw them back ten feet. They suffered concussive traumas and third degree burns. Lasley and Father Pahl were lying on the ground and the explosion mostly missed them. Lasley got burns on his right hand, the back of his neck, and had to have his left arm removed above the elbow, but he came through it without any other serious injuries. Father Pahl may have already been dead when the explosion occurred. His leg wound hit an artery and he bled out. The explosion reverberated from the solid granite courthouse and hit the Sheriff's office hard. It was an old inn which was converted for use by the county government about thirty years ago and about a third of it was

immediately flattened. Some of it fell on the the Pahl brothers and they got multiple internal injuries on top of the bullet wounds."

"Neither Tolliver or Captain Ross were hurt by the explosion. Tolliver probably won't be able to walk ever again, but he's awake. He just won't talk to anyone in law enforcement about what happened. On the other hand, Bo . . ." He paused when he saw a questioning look in the Father's eyes. "Yes, the same Bo who came to our wedding reception. Bo wouldn't have even gone to the hospital in Tennessee if Sheriff Minton hadn't ordered him to. He's already back on duty with a bandage on his right forearm. The bullet didn't even hit any muscles or bone. It hit the arm at an angle, furrowed under his skin and lodged there. He claims the bruises on his back are worse than the bullet wound. Apparently, the porch and the trash cans they found him under must have blocked the explosion so he didn't get any concussive injuries or burns. Sheriff's got him riding a desk for now until the arm's completely healed."

"Right now the only one dead is Father Pahl. However, The Pahl brothers are never expected to regain consciousness and the doctors are just waiting for the old man to sign off on removing them from respirators. Deputy Boyd is in the same condition, but the hospital can't find anyone related closely enough to make the call. They're going to have some sort of meeting to decide what to do tomorrow. Deputy Carr was taken off the respirator two days ago and wasn't expected to make it through the night. His family is sitting a deathwatch with him down at Beauregard Medical down in Johnson City."

"Father, I don't know how familiar you are with Virginia criminal law. Both killing multiple people and killing law enforcement officers call for the same thing. This is a capital case."

Chapter 06

Promptly at six thirty, Jerome arrived at 1215 Old Lebanon Road and found a house overflowing with people. As well as the expected Brad, Maggie, and Abigail, the house contained a few dozen others. He found himself being introduced to numerous Dollerbys and a surprising number of Mahans. When he asked about that, Abby explained how several Mahan families realized that they could sell their two bedroom hovels in whichever city they were in and use the money to buy huge houses here. Four families of Mahans uprooted and moved to the mountains. Abby went on to brag about how two of the Mahan men were now deputies and one of the women was a police woman in the Saint Minas Department.

It was also his first real introduction to the Dollerby family. A number of Dollerbys were at the wedding, but that event had clearly been dominated by the Mahans. He met Brad's parents, Bradley Senior and Tracey. Senior had several businesses, including selling heavy equipment to the mines and the only new car dealership in Bartlette County. Tracey was a vice-principal at Bartlette Unified High School. He also met the "Aunts" - Alison, Jeanie, and Elspeth - each of whom was in her late fifties or early sixties; the group of them seemed to fill the same role in the Dollerby clan as Abby did in the Mahans. After they cornered and interrogated him for thirty minutes he was rescued by Senior who explained that he had to introduce the guest of honor around to others who were waiting to meet him.

After a couple hours of talking with various persons or groups from either of the families, Jerome finally filled a plate from the various bowls and crocks sitting on the table and counters in the kitchen and managed to escape to the back porch where he sat on a patio

chair and ate in the dark. He could see the two families inside mingling cheerfully. It was a celebration of life and his arrival had been the spark that ignited it. It was nights like these when he felt the Lord's touch - or maybe tonight it was more the Holy Spirit. He had never once seen a miracle on the scale of a sea parting or water turning to wine. Yet, he constantly saw small miracles such as this. These people needed something to bring them back from blackness and anger and the Lord, through the good offices of the Bishop and the prodding of a fierce Irish matron, had sent him so that they could get together and start to heal themselves. He finished his plate and sat back in the chair listening to the the soothing murmurs of conversations that he could not quite hear.

A man walked up back lit by the light of the glass doors to the house.

He nodded his head. "Evening, Father."

Jerome nodded back and the man continued. "It's a good thing you've done here, Father, but it is going to get worse before it gets better. That man," a finger pointed toward Brad, "will charge at least two people with capital murder. If you stay here and oppose him, as you will be required to by your Church, you turn these people from great friends into enemies. Oh, Abigail Mahan will probably stand by you. Her loyalty to you and your Church is probably stronger than her loyalty to her family. She'll lose the status she cherishes so much in the family as a result. Rifts will tear the families apart and Brad probably will not be re-elected next November."

"On the other hand, these families are now strongly tied together. Without your hindrance that harmony will continue. Brad will win his trial and re-election. The publicity will probably make him a strong candidate for Attorney General. At the very least he will become a delegate or senator in the General Assembly. He'll also back Bo Ross for Sheriff which will mean the county can have an honest sheriff for years to come."

"You've fulfilled your responsibility. Go back to Richmond and tell Bishop Mannion what happened to Father Pahl. Leave these people to a better future."

Jerome struggled to see the man's face. He could never quite see the man's face. "Get thee behind me . . ."

"Satan?" The way the man's face stretched, Jerome could sense he was smiling. "I am neither Paul nor Lucifer. I do not come to tempt you Father. You have already done your duty. Thus, I cannot tempt you away from it. I just lay out the possible futures so that you can choose the proper course."

Then someone started shaking Jerome's arm and he woke up. "Hey, Mister Father?" A boy who looked all of eight stood there. "You okay? Why you sleeping out here in the cold?"

He smiled at the boy. "Sometimes we old folks just get so tired we doze off wherever we are."

The boy looked skeptical. "Huh. The Brads are looking for you. I think Mrs. Abigail wants to end the party and they want you to pray or something."

Standing, Jerome left the patio chair in the darkened corner of the patio and walked toward

the glass doors. As soon as he opened the door the boy ran past him into another room where the young members of both clans had staked out as their territory earlier in the night. Senior saw him as soon as he walked in the door and called to Abby.

"Here he is Abby. No wonder we couldn't find him; he was hiding outside in the cold."

Abby hustled up, took one look at him and turned back to Senior. "Get everybody's attention. I think it's time we wrapped this up and let the Father get some sleep."

Senior let out some sort of yelp or yodel and the whole house quieted long enough for him to announce in a loud voice that everyone should come to the family room. After a minute or so, once everyone who could had crowded in and people stood as close as they could in the rooms next over, Senior called for silence again and then pointed to Abby. She looked around at all the people around that towered over her and, using Senior's arm as a brace, she climbed up on the wooden coffee table. Her voice carried through the room with a clarity that stage actors could only dream of.

"Listen up ya bunch of heathens, Protestants, and people who really, really need to go to confession." With that last came a withering stare at a man who had been introduced to Jerome as Sergeant Luke Mahan of the Bartlette Sheriff's Department.

He beamed a smile back at her. "Abby, you know full well that I went to confession last month."

"Yeah," Abby shot back, "And from what I've been hearing you're past due to go back."

Everyone in the room, including Luke Mahan, broke out laughing. After a few seconds, Abby waved her hands to focus everyone again.

"I'm afraid that we've been having so much fun that we forgot Father Tolton's had a long day. So, in about five minutes I'm going to kick all of you out. However, in a final imposition on the good Father, I'm going to ask him to say a prayer for us, because surely some of us are in bad need of it." That came with another glance toward Luke Mahan and more chuckles around the room. As that died down she pointed to Jerome.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Seeing that less than half the people around crossed themselves he continued in a more ecumenical vein. "Let us bow our head and pray together."

"Heavenly Father, we are told in Psalm 127 that it is fruitless to build a house without you and impossible to defend a civilization without you. Please be with us as we build our house with these good people and through that house a better land with you in our hearts. Let us not turn from the difficult tasks nor forget our duty to you. We ask this in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

There was a chorus of "amens" and the crowd started breaking up. The only person who did not move was Brad Dollerby. As the crowd broke up Jerome saw the look that Brad had fastened on him from across the room. It was a hard, determined look that was not friendly. Finally, he saw a frown that bordered on belligerence cross the man's face before he shook

his head and walked out of the room.

Chapter 07

The Boss was really upset. Yusif had only seen him in this foul a mood once before back when Yared police officer had not done anything about one man stabbing another in a fight over a girl in the parking lot of the local eZee Stop. He had not even sent the stabbed man to the hospital or taken the knife from the aggressor. He just sent everybody home and the victim's father had actually driven the guy to the hospital. The officer would not even come to the courthouse to talk to Brad and when Brad finally got him on the phone his explanation had been "It's just two thugs. They ain't worth the trouble." The case was so screwed up that Brad had to settle it as an assault and battery with no jail time. Yared had stayed up in his attic retreat as much as possible for the week or so that it took Brad to calm down that time.

This time the anger looked worse. After the priest left yesterday there had been a long "discussion" in which Brad made it very clear to Yusif that he was never to talk to anyone about joining the office unless Brad had told him he could. When Brad left the office he had been angry; when he came back this morning he was furious. The get together at his house the night before had clearly gone sideways.

Yusif did not go to the party in honor of Father Awesome. Few things actually got Brad angry, but it was usually best to avoid him for a while if you were the cause of that anger. Just in case the subject came up, Yusif had met with one of the Saint Minas police officers last night at seven thirty about a case in General District Court this morning. That gave him some cover if Brad cornered him and asked why he skipped the party. So far, he had only seen Brad when they arrived at the courthouse at the same time and walked in together and for a minute or so when he picked up some of the blank plea agreements they filled out by hand because Judge Fleming hated verbal plea agreements. Brad had said nothing other than a muttered greeting in the parking lot and he actually yelled at someone on the phone while Yusif was down in the main office. All things considered, Yusif planned to stay as far away from his boss as he could for the next week or two.

General District Court was a disaster this morning. Judge Fleming decided rather quickly that no case could go forward unless he had the original summons or warrant which had been signed by the defendant - all of which had been destroyed in the fire. The fact that the Virginia Supreme Court's database had the charge and the officers had copies of the warrants or summons signed by the defendant did not budge the judge from that position. When Yusif pointed out that a statute allowed the judge to sign off on warrants and summons himself upon testimony of the officer, Judge Fleming had looked him in the eye and explained in simple words that he was not going to hear evidence and sign off on warrants for the two hundred people on the docket today. He was going to dismiss those charges, without prejudice, and if the Commonwealth thought they were serious enough he could send the officers back over to the magistrate to swear out new warrants.

Starting at nine, there were about thirty people scheduled for trial each hour. Every hour, when the people came in and sat down, the judge came in and announced he was dismissing their cases and sent them on their way. After the eleven o'clock crowd wandered away, Yusif left the courtroom and found a man whom he did not know waiting in hallway.

"Yusif Habib?"

"Can I help you, sir?"

"We'll see." The man reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a business card. Then he seemed to think better of it and put the card back. "Sorry. It's a natural instinct. I don't think I should give you my name yet. I represent someone who asked me to talk with you. Is there any place private we can go to talk?"

"We can go to my office."

The man waved his hand, rejecting that option. "No, it needs to be someplace where nobody else will see or hear us."

Yusif looked the man over. "I know you're not from here, but you've got to realize that the moment a lawyer from somewhere else shows up people around here notice."

The man smiled. "Oh, I'm sure that's true, but I haven't told anybody who I am or where I'm from and I'm sure you've had enough outsiders poking around for the last couple weeks that people will forget me pretty quickly. Do you have a witness room where we can talk privately?"

Yusif looked around pointedly and then back at this guy. "You must have noticed when you came in that this is a courthouse built in the eighteen hundreds. We have one courtroom. Up those stairs," He pointed to the right, "are Mr. Dollerby's office, in the old balcony, and another set of stairs which lead to my office in the bell tower. Down here all we've got are the two restrooms and the law library."

Before Yusif finished speaking the man started walking toward the door with the plastic sign on it reading "LIBRARY." Yusif hesitated for a second then stuck his head back in the door of the courtroom and told the bailiff that he would be in the library if the judge needed him. Then he followed the stranger into the room.

The law library was a small rectangular room with bookshelves on all four walls and one circular blue and yellow stained glass window above the shelves on the outside wall. The books on those shelves were ancient. In one corner there was a copy of Virginia's statutes so old that they were all in a single large book. The other books ranged from an old set of Corpus Juris with the name of the lawyer who had bequeathed them to the library on their bindings through a set of law reviews from Washington and Lee Law School that were all from the nineteen eighties. In fact, the only books that were not at least twenty years old were a single set of modern Virginia statutes kept next to the door and Yusif knew from experience that the books containing the criminal and traffic codes would be missing. They were always carried away somewhere by lawyers, although the judge's secretary putting two inch strips of red and white tape on them had stopped lawyers from taking the books back to their offices anymore so a search of the courthouse usually turned them up. The entire room was almost filled by a worn oak table that was so large Yusif thought it must have been built inside the library. The nearest concession to modernity was a single computer at one end of the table which was about five years old and allowed research over the internet for those patient enough to coax the information out of it.

As usual, the library was empty. The man walked to the other side of the table and sat waving Yusif toward one of the chairs opposite him, acting for all the world as though this was his office and Yusif were the stranger. Yusif shook his head and instead leaned back against the book shelf.

The man nodded once and began speaking. "I'm here because someone contacted my office yesterday and asked me to come speak to you without involving local law enforcement or Mr. Dollerby. Can I get your promise that you won't talk to either about our conversation?"

Yusif looked at the stranger. He was a man in his late twenties or early thirties and wore the same sort of plain business suit as any courtroom lawyer, but his haircut was a little too fancy and his accent was not one that Yusif had ever heard in the mountains. Further, he had just asked Yusif if he would betray his boss.

"I don't know who you are and I don't know why you're here, but I'm not promising anything like that. What do you want to talk to me about?"

The man stood again and walked back around the table. As he did he spoke again. "I'm sorry Mister Habib. I have a specific set of instructions and I'm not allowed to discuss the matter without your agreement to those conditions." He stopped at the door. "You're sure you won't reconsider?"

As the man came around the table, Yusif stopped leaning on the shelves and took a couple steps back from the door. "No. If I am told something important I will tell Mister Dollerby. He makes the decision about whether to tell anyone else."

The man seemed to consider that for a moment. "I thank you for taking the time to speak to me this morning Mister Habib and I thank you for your honesty. I'll tell the client what you've said and see how the client wants to proceed." Then he turned and started to walk through the door.

As the man walked out, Yusif tried to get some sort of information. "Can you at least tell me what this concerns?"

The man stopped in the opened door and half turned back. "Are you going to talk to Mister Dollerby about this conversation?"

The answer from Yusif came back without any thought. "I already told you that."

"Then," the man said as he turned and walked out the door, "I'm afraid I can't."

Yusif stood there for a couple beats and then headed out the door himself. The man was already out the front door of the courthouse and Yusif followed behind him, hoping to at least get the guy's license plate. However, the man did not get into any of the cars on the street. Instead, he started walking down the street in the direction of the the Food Time grocery. There were very few parking spots in town so a lot of people parked in the Food Time's parking lot. About a minute after after the man turned into the parking lot so that Yusif could not see him a red Lexus sedan which Yusif had never seen before came out. It was too far,

and moving too fast for Yusif to get the entire plate, but he was pretty sure that the last three letters were "ESQ."

Going back into the building, he headed up the stairs. This was entirely too weird and even if it meant facing an angry boss, he had to report this to Brad.

Chapter 08

Things were bad and the priest meddling about was making them worse. Being ambushed by Father Awesome came as a complete shock yesterday. The priest, without any warning, just showed up and tried to shoehorn himself into Brad's office. The conversation got extremely awkward when Brad shut that down and told Father Tolton that when they caught whoever killed the men in the alley he was going to get the death penalty for them. Then, after Father Tolton left, Brad vented his spleen at Yusif for about forty five minutes because he had supported the priest's proposal without talking to him first.

Consequently, Yusif had ducked the get together his mother-in-law and Maggie set up for Father Tolton. Brad was already annoyed by the mother-in-law who would not move out of his house now deciding to use it as a place for entertaining crowds of people. Yusif's pointed absence added to his foul mood. Brad did his best to stay in the background all night and watched as his father and mother-in-law ushered the guest of honor around Brad's house introducing him to everyone in both families.

The party ended with a prayer which the Father kept vague enough that most just left the party with good feelings. However, there was a part at the end which sounded entirely too much like the priest had decided that he had not yet done enough to fulfill his duty to his Church and his God. Brad heard in that prayer a promise that Father Tolton would be interfering in matters which he should leave alone. Nothing good could come from that.

However, the party had been the least of the night. After the guests left, Maggie found him sitting in the living room and lit into him about not participating in the party and not kissing up to the priest. Maggie sniped at him all the time and she had a quick temper that would flare up constantly. Sometimes he just rode the wave of the scoldings she sent his way, secure in the knowledge that ten minutes later she would move on; often he sniped back at her in a playful way. Last night he exploded. Her anger was based on a social slight that occurred one night and a belief he could do better. His anger was based in the deaths of people he knew most of his life, his inability to do anything about it, and the unnecessary interference he knew was going to come from this priest.

His deep raging fury overwhelmed his wife's choler. He did not know how long he screamed at her, but when enough reason took hold for him to think again he found himself yelling ". . . All this shit started when a fucking priest from your fucking church came down here to interfere and now there's another fucking priest from your fucking church here to interfere more! Well, fuck them all and fuck you too!" As he paused to breathe in, his wife's appearance got through to him. She had retreated to the exit from the living room into the kitchen and she looked scared. That was what broke through. Maggie was scared of him. He stopped, walked to the nearest door and left the house. He left without even getting his coat. He could not stay. The woman he loved was afraid of him and the black rage which caused that fear was still in him; if he stayed it would come out again.

He got in his SUV and drove off. As he backed out of the driveway, Maggie came outside and he heard her calling his name, but he kept going. Nothing good could possibly come from going back; it would just add to the disaster.

After driving around for a couple hours, he headed for the courthouse. He used his key to get in and went up to his office. There was no way he was going home. He knew Maggie; she would be sitting up waiting for him and she would want to talk. She would not want to yell and argue now; she would want to have a deep, meaningful conversation and get this worked out. He could not do anything like that. He needed time alone to get himself back under control and deal with what was going on. Someone messing with him and trying to make him talk out his emotions, even if in the most well intentioned way, would only make it worse and probably end up with him blowing up again. Maggie would never understand that and she would insist on trying to help.

To avoid that he slept in the reclining office chair behind his desk. He got maybe ninety minutes of sleep before he took the spare suit he kept in his office and went down to the bathroom, washed up, and put the suit on. A little after five o'clock, he sat back down at his desk and tried to do some work to get his mind off everything else. His concentration faded quickly and he found himself staring mindlessly at the screen between periods of dozing.

Finally, at about eight, Brad left the office and went down to the local eZee Stop to buy a couple sausage and egg biscuits and some coffee. When he drove back to the courthouse he arrived in the parking lot just as Yusif pulled in. They walked in side by side but neither said anything except to exchange meaningless greetings.

When Paula got to the office at eight thirty she told Brad that there several messages from his wife asking him to call home. She looked at him curiously as she handed him the messages, but he took them from her without comment and she retreated to her desk.

Shortly after nine, a call came in from Charles Poplin, the chief of police in the Town of Yared. Including himself, Chief Poplin had six officers on his payroll and most of them made Barney Fife look competent. The two other towns in Bartlette County, Mount View and Saint Minas, had small offices that tried hard. There was a gap between their work and the work done by the Sheriff's Department or State Police, but that was mainly because the Sheriff and the Virginia State Police had more money and resources. In fact, Brad had a lot of sympathy for the chiefs in Saint Minas and Mount View because he knew the towns could only afford to pay their officers so much and almost every time one of the towns found a really good officer, trained him up, and sent him to the academy that officer would get hired away by a sheriff's department that could pay him more. However, Brad had no sympathy in his heart for Yared. The town was basically owned and run by the Poplins. Mayor Mark Poplin and his cronies controlled everything that happened in the town and had for thirty years. Charles Poplin had been made chief of police a couple decades back so the Mayor could use the police department to keep his fiefdom under his control. As best Brad could tell, whether you broke the law in Yared had little to do with whether you were charged with a crime. If the Poplins disliked you, you would eventually get a criminal charge.

Chief Poplin was mad because a charge against a member of the Hope family had been dismissed by the judge. The Hopes had backed the other side in the last town election and

failed to depose the Poplins. Ever since, if a Hope even jaywalked he got arrested and usually charged with obstruction of justice. There was more than one Hope who showed up at the jail with a lot of bruises because "he resisted arrest." The regional jail now routinely took pictures of anyone who was arrested in Yared so that no one could claim the injuries happened in the jail. Not that Brad thought the Hopes were anything less than a rough crowd themselves. They opposed the Poplins in the last election not out of any great sense of morality, but because they thought they could snatch the power for themselves. As well, no officer went to the Ritz Road area - more generally known as "Hope Hollow" - by himself. Every house back there was full of Hopes and a single officer who went in might not make it back out. Still, the sheer number of overcharged and wrongly charged Hopes who came before the judges in the last couple years had made it almost impossible to convince a judge that any Hope charged with a crime by any Yared officer should be convicted.

Mikey Hope stood accused of keying the car of a girlfriend of one of the Yared police officers. Mikey was definitely a bad guy. However, the entirety of the evidence at the preliminary hearing consisted of the girlfriend seeing him leave the Yared Food Time store as she went in and her car being keyed. The magistrate somehow allowed the officer to swear out a misdemeanor destruction of property charge based on those facts. Judge Fleming, on the other hand, had thrown it out of his court as quickly as he could and told the officer, in no uncertain terms, not to bring any more cases like this.

Today, Chief Poplin wanted a perjury charge placed on Mikey Hope because Mikey had stood in general district court and dared to say that he did not do it. The man's tunnel vision was incredible. He only cared about one thing - putting Mikey Hope in jail one way or another. Brad explained to him three times - rather sharply the third time - that a man could not be charged with perjury just because you thought he lied under oath. You had to have proof. The conversation ended badly with Brad telling the Chief to get a sense of perspective and the Chief telling him to do his job.

The rest of the morning dragged on slowly. As lunch approached, he knew he had to get out of the courthouse before noon. Maggie brought him lunch every day at noon and if he was not stuck in court they ate together. That was not going to happen today. At eleven thirty, he got up and told Paula he was leaving for lunch.

As he was walking down the stairs, he ran into Yusif. He had some story about a guy wanting to talk with him and not Brad. Pausing for a couple seconds, he told Yusif that if his instincts told him something was wrong he should tell Jeff Sanger, the chief investigator for the Sheriff's Department and let him track it down. Then he turned, walked down the stairs and left the courthouse.

Chapter 09

Yusif watched his boss leaving the courthouse at a clip. The man had barely stood still long enough to hear half of Yusif's story before telling him to tell Captain Sanger about it and continuing on his way. There was no telling where he was heading, but at least he did not seem to be acting out of anger. Yusif figured that was a good sign.

He continued up to his office. Once there, he tried to call Captain Sanger's cell number and got voice-mail. That could mean the Chief Investigator was already at lunch or it could mean

the deputy was in the eighty percent of the county without cell phone reception. There were only four places in Bartlette County where cell phones would usually work: the three towns and Yared State Penitentiary. In any event, Yusif put a note on his computer to call Sanger that afternoon.

By then it was noon and he started his regular lunch ritual. He reached behind the phone on his desk and walked over to shut the door to the office. As he reached the door he saw Maggie walking up the stairs toward his office. She saw him too.

"Just about to lock yourself into your Fortress of Solitude, Yusif?"

Backing up a couple steps Yusif gestured for Maggie to come in, but she stopped at the door. When she paused for a second he spoke. "You know how it is Maggie. If I don't lock myself away I'll never be able to get enough time to eat my sandwich and call my evil minions."

She smiled a little at his reference to an ongoing joke which had sprung from how suspicious people had been when an Arab-American moved to Bartlette, but she did not join in this time. Instead, she asked if he had seen Brad.

"Last I saw, he was leaving the courthouse, moving fast. He must have had a meeting or something. Didn't he call you?"

"He left without his cell phone." Maggie dug around in her purse and then handed a phone to Yusif. "Make sure he gets this, would you?"

Yusif took the phone. "Sure, Maggie. I'll be in court after lunch, but I'll give it to Paula. She'll make sure he gets it."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd give it to him yourself." She stood there looking at him until he spoke.

"The thing is, he's mad at me for not coming to your party last night. I think it's best if I leave him alone for a while."

Maggie turned to walk away, speaking back to him over her shoulder. "Yusif, you've been his best friend since law school. He may be angry, but it's not about you missing a party for Father Tolton. I can pretty much guarantee that. Just do me a favor and make sure you hand him the phone yourself."

Then she was gone and Yusif was left standing there holding the phone. He stuck it in a pocket and closed the office door, locking it. Then he went back to his desk and pulled out the two ham and cheese sandwiches he packed this morning. He had about forty minutes left before he had to be back in court to watch Judge Fleming do his next batch of dismissals.

"Hey Joseph, I got your message. What's up?"

The man on the other end of the phone did not bother with an introduction. Jeff Sanger was

the only person who called him Joseph. The chief of investigations could not pronounce Yusif's actual name correctly. He had tried for months and butchered it every time. The mixture of mountain accent with Arabic pronunciation would not work for Jeff. When he found out that Yusif was the Arabic version of Joseph he immediately switched to the English pronunciation and never looked back. Yusif found this annoying; after all, if his parents wanted to name him Joseph they would have done so when he was born. However, Jeff was a decent sort and there was nothing to be gained by forcing him to continue butchering Yusif's name so he did his best to ignore it.

"Hey, Jeff. I had something weird happen today and the boss wanted me to call you about it."

"Wait a sec. Let me get a pen and some paper." Yusif could hear scrabbling through items in the car which had become the Captain's de facto office since the Sheriff's Office burned to the ground. "Okay, got 'em. Is this something to do with ambush?"

"Truth be told, I don't know, Jeff. I think it probably does, but the conversation never got that far. Some guy claiming to be a lawyer showed up this morning and insisted on talking to me in private. Wouldn't even go up to my office, so we ended up in the law library."

Yusif paused to give Jeff a chance to write that down and the investigator filled the silence with questions.

"What was his name? What law firm was he with? And where's the law library?"

"He wouldn't identify himself at all. He wasn't from around here though. His hair was a little too fancy and he looked like he was dressing down to blend in with the little people. The law library's that room on the first floor of the courthouse with the big oak table."

Yusif waited a couple of seconds then went on.

"Anyway, this guy asked me to promise not to tell Brad or anyone in the Sheriff's Department about our conversation. When I refused, he left. He drove off in a red lexus; I couldn't get the whole plate, but it was one of those with a seal in the middle and three numbers on both sides. I'm pretty sure the last three were 'ESQ.'"

Jeff asked a few more questions about what the man and his car looked like then he finished the conversation. "Right. I think that's about everything I need. I should be able to locate this man and send someone to talk to him. If all else fails, I guess we subpoena his client list and that should give us whoever it is we need to talk to."

Yusif hung up the phone sure that this puzzle would be figured out in the fullness of time. Captain Sanger was not the smartest man Yusif had ever met, but he was perhaps the most thorough. He would not have brilliant Sherlock Holmes style insights. Instead, he would steadfastly hunt down every lead and doggedly pursue any suspect. He might not solve every case, but every bit of evidence which could be found would be.

With that finished, Yusif turned to the docket for Thursday's Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. He had the rest of the day to figure out how he was going to keep Judge Mullins from following Judge Fleming's example and throwing all the cases involving minors and domestic

abuse out because the original paperwork was destroyed.

Chapter 10

The third floor of Veteran's Administration Hospital was quiet. It was after ten, but a man of the cloth usually went unchallenged if he stayed out of the way. In fact, the nurse at the central table had been quite helpful when Jerome asked for Mark Carr's room. Everyone knew that it was only a matter of time for Mark so it was no surprise that a member of the clergy would show up to comfort the family and say final prayers for the dying.

Yet, that was not Jerome's purpose in being here. In fact, even Jerome did not know exactly why he was here. He had spent his entire Friday running down the victims of the ambush. His first visits were with the two lawyers, both of whom were patients at the Beauregard Medical Center. Grant Lasley had been sitting up in his bed and using his cell phone to talk to clients and his secretary. The man acted as though getting ambushed and shot was an inconvenience designed to keep him from representing his clients. While Jerome was there a young nurse arrived with about six different pills for Lasley to take and he almost ripped her head off when he realized one of them was a lortab. The nurse kept trying to explain that pain management was necessary and he kept talking over her. Finally, Jerome intervened.

"Mister Lasley, all she's doing is following the doctor's instructions and trying to give you something for your pain."

Lasley paused and made an obvious effort to get himself under control. "Respectfully, Father, that is not what is happening here. The opioids are extremely addictive and both she and her doctor know it. They are trying to turn me into another one of the pill zombies like they have half the people out here. It starts with a few tabs, then oxys, then fentanyl or oxymorphone. They can justify every step of the way as they increase the depth of your addiction and guarantee that doctors, pharmacies, and pill companies keep making money off you."

Jerome tried to speak in a soothing tone. This man was obviously being more than a little paranoid. "I'm sure the doctor is just trying to do his job. He's not trying to turn you into an addict."

The lawyer almost sneered at him. "It's so obvious you're not from here, Padre. The doctors, all just trying to do their jobs, have flooded us with these damned pills and addicted a huge number of people. If you don't believe me, start counting pharmacies. You think Mount View needs seven pharmacies for thirty-five hundred people or that Yared needs four in a town of about one thousand? The medical-pill industry is booming Father. And, if you need further proof of bad intent, note the fact that this nurse, her doctor, and this hospital are trying to give me an addictive medicine like lortab when they could just as easily give me a non-addictive pain pill like torodal."

Then came a fifteen minute lecture on how "big pharma" was neglecting the development of non-opioid, non-addictive pain suppressors because they did not lead to addiction like the narcotics and therefore fewer pills were sold and less profits made. Jerome eventually gave up trying to talk sense to the man and started asking him about the ambush.

Lasley waved his remaining hand dismissively. "Not much I can tell you there. I assume

you're here investigating the death of Father Pahl?" After Jerome nodded he continued. "Well, we were all standing in the alley. The deputies were letting the Pahl brothers smoke. We were all chatting about something inane because we couldn't talk about the case in front of the deputies. I heard the shots and saw the Pahl brothers get hit. I turned and dove behind the nearest cover. I'd like to say I was noble and pulled Father Pahl down with me, but the truth is that he got in my way and I shoved him down so that I could get down. I don't remember getting hit myself and I don't remember the explosion. There's a huge blank spot in my memory between hitting the gravel behind the deputies and waking up here with my arm sawed off."

After a few more questions which yielded no useful information and a couple very impatient looks from the Lasley, Jerome left and went a couple floors up to speak to the other lawyer. Keith Tolliver was in far worse shape than Lasley. He was only semi-lucid and after about ten minutes of mumbled and unfocused conversation prompted by Tolliver's wife Tara, the attorney lapsed into unconsciousness. Tara kept apologizing to Jerome because her husband could not help him and explaining that he had been much clearer before he had surgery two days ago. She was obviously worried and Jerome spent well over an hour comforting her and assuring her that he was not upset because her husband was not in any condition to talk with him.

After a break for supper in the hospital cafeteria, Jerome had tried to visit the Pahl brothers at the same hospital, but they had a police officer stationed outside their door and standing orders from their father that no visitors could see them. Neither of them were conscious anyway, but he felt obligated to visit all the victims and the Pahl's were Catholics. He might not be able to talk to them, but at the very least he could perform an anointing. After about forty five minutes of reasoning and outright wheedling someone finally called the men's father. That proved fruitless when the elder Pahl both refused to speak to Jerome and refused to allow him to visit the brothers. Apparently, the man had several experts flying in to see if they could do anything to help his sons and he viewed allowing an anointing as giving up. The poor nurse who made the call out of kindness got yelled at loud enough that Jerome could hear it himself and after she hung up she told him that the man said he "would not allow a priest to bless his children to death." She looked confused so he explained the anointing to her, after which she just looked dubious.

The next visit had been simple in comparison. Deputy Ed Boyd was in a room by himself, covered in bandages and hooked to machines which were performing his bodily functions. There was no one with him. The nurse told Jerome that deputies would come by and visit every day, but no family. It turned out he had no close relatives at all and a board of doctors had decided that they would wait until Monday and if there was no improvement they would detach him from the machines preserving his life. Judging from the way the deputy looked and the nurse's resigned attitude, Jerome understood that this basically meant the deputy would die on Monday. He did not know the man's faith but sat praying for him for some few minutes before he stood and approached the bed. He made the sign of the cross, dabbed his finger in his bottle of oil, and lightly made the sign of the cross on the sheet over the man's heart as he recited the blessing. "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." That done, he prayed a little longer for the man and then left for his final visit.

And found out that the last hospitalized victim was not at Beauregard Medical. When Deputy Carr's family decided to remove him from life support everyone expected him pass quickly; his father even signed a no resuscitation order. However, the deputy hung on and it looked like there was a chance he would transit into a persistent vegetative state. As soon as the family was told this they insisted on moving him to the V.A. hospital. The doctors recommended against it, but the family was adamant. He had been moved earlier that day. The nice, young doctor whom the nurse summoned to explain this also launched unbidden into an explanation of Deputy Carr's condition. Jerome listened politely, but he was fairly certain the majority of the explanation would have taken a couple years of medical training to understand. The gist of it seemed to be that the deputy's internal wounds were severe, but stabilized. Even so, the doctors were surprised he was still alive. There was a high probability that Mark Carr would be dead within a week. After thanking the doctor and assuring him that he understood and would not inappropriately raise the hopes of the deputy's family, Jerome took his leave and drove to the V.A. hospital.

A little over an hour later he was standing in the hallway of the George Jordan V.A. Medical Center outside Deputy Carr's room. Walking into the room he found Mark Carr laying in the bed. This deputy had less equipment hooked up to him than his fellow had in the other hospital and Jerome could hear his shallow, somewhat erratic breathing. It took him a couple seconds to realize that there was another man in a chair in the corner of the room.

The man had obviously been dozing. He started awake and shambled to his feet. "Can I help you Preacher?"

Jerome caught himself before the automatic correction which sprang to his tongue could come out. This was not the time to squabble over religious trivialities. "I'm trying to visit all the people who were hurt in the explosion. I went round to Beauregard earlier today and visited everyone I could, but Deputy Carr was moved here before I could see him."

"Well, there ain't much to see." The man looked at Jerome more closely. "You're one of those Roman priests, right? A Vicar? And a n . . . a black boy at that. You must be having all sorts of fun in these mountains."

For a second, Jerome stood stunned. Then he felt the wave of anger building and bowed his head to pray a quick Hail Mary and calm himself. The man seemed to take that as a signal to go on. "What can I do for you Vicar? We surely ain't part of your flock. I don't go nowhere and I'm pretty sure that Mark and Dad still go to listen to Brother Charles at Yared Mountain Christian on Sundays."

Shaking off the what had almost been said - and what had - Jerome fastened on the question. "I was sent to look into the death of Father Pahl and I felt I ought to visit as many of the victims as I could. I got here late because Deputy Carr was transferred here."

"Yeah, you said that. Just like Mark here to inconvenience somebody else right up to even the way he dies. You ain't the only one. I'm here 'cuz Dad wouldn't leave unless someone was here to watch his favorite son and a couple of his deputy buddies showed up at my trailer and told me they were taking our Dad home at eight and I better be here to take his place or be able to explain why I wasn't. Give an asshole a badge and a gun and he thinks he rules the world. Anyway, I got to be here too, but it wasn't God who sent me."

The conversation stumbled on for another ten minutes. Jerome found out this man was the deputy's younger half brother Andy and that Brother Charles was coming by tomorrow to try a laying on of hands so no praying by a Roman priest was needed. Certain that he was not wanted here, Jerome started to leave when Andy stepped between him and the door.

"I need to hit the john and go take a smoke, can you watch him for a while?" Before Jerome could say anything, Andy started for the door, only to stop again when a gasping noise came from the direction of the bed. Both men looked back and saw Mark Carr moving his right arm as his eyes fluttered open. The brother practically knocked Jerome over as he shoved him aside to get to the bed. "I'm here, Mark. It's me, Andy."

However, the deputy looked right past his brother at Jerome and started mumbling something. Jerome walked up to the bed and the voice was barely audible. ". . . brownie . . . brownie . . . why . . . we did it . . . why . . . why?" The voice slid into an unintelligible mumble as the man's eyes lost focus. Then the eyes caught on his brother and strength came back. ". . . get Dad out . . . he'll kill him . . . did what told us . . . killed Ross . . . brownie . . . flare . . . Dad out . . ." With that, the man in the bed took a couple deeper breathes and his eyes blinked twice before remaining closed. Once again the only noise in the room was the breathing of the three men.

Jerome started to turn toward the door when the younger Carr's hand grabbed his arm. "Nothing happened here, Vicar."

Jerome tried to yank his arm free, but the man had a firm grip. "What do you mean, 'nothing happened?' We both heard him. We need to get a doctor in here to look at him and tell the police. And warn your father."

"Out here people take care of their own Don't you worry about our dad. Worry about yourself. You ain't the only brownie around here. He's talking about the Sheriff's pet melungeun. You tell the law and we're all dead."

The man loosened his grip on Jerome's arm. "You tell whatever story you want. I didn't see a thing. Ain't getting killed 'cuz Mark did something stupid."

Jerome left without saying a word, only stopping long enough to tell the nurse on duty that he saw Deputy Carr wake for a few seconds and say something to his brother. The nurse did not seem to care too much, but wrote something on a notepad and promised she would tell the doctor when he came back around.

With that, Jerome left the hospital behind. It was after midnight as he started to drive back to Bartlette, wondering whom he could speak to about this - wondering whom he could speak to safely about this.

Chapter 11

When Brad got to work on Monday there was the normal pile of phone messages on his desk which Paula had gleaned from the weekend's voicemail. On top was the usual message from Marty Elkins. Norton High School's football team came to town last Friday and destroyed the

Bartlette Unified Tritons. Marty would have complaints about the refs and be absolutely certain they were on the take. He had been the first quarterback at Bartlette Unified when the county's three high schools were merged into one and ten years later he still lived or died each week in accord with the Triton's latest game. For himself, Brad doubted the thirty-five to thirteen loss had much to do with anything other than the fact that eleven starters graduated last year and a third of this year's starters were sophomores.

He smiled. Paula purposefully put that one on top so his day would start with a bit of humor. She knew the problems he was having at home and was trying to help in what little ways she could.

Of course, after that first message, there were about twenty others which were not so much fun. Most of them were about the judges throwing every single case that came before them out of court. Each of the three judges decided that since the original paperwork was destroyed in the fire that the cases based upon that paperwork had to be dismissed. All Brad and Yusif could do was weather that storm and indict anyone with a serious charge. The next grand jury was scheduled for a week from Thursday and he had already told Judge Isom and the clerk of court that it would take at least two days because they had to re-indict everyone whose original indictment was destroyed in the fire and all the serious cases which had been dumped by the judges in the lower courts. In a normal month they indicted somewhere around thirty-five people. This month they would be indicting at least four hundred. Poor Paula would go nuts this week trying to get everything set up.

There were two messages from law enforcement officers. The first, received Saturday, was from Special Agent Mazzota of the FBI. Mazzota was the lead FBI agent for the federal team that showed up after the explosion. He had not been especially cooperative with the Sheriff's Department or even Brad's office and in the call at three in the afternoon on Saturday his message only stated that he wanted to speak to "the head prosecutor." Apparently, it was too much trouble to remember Brad's name or even look it up on the internet. The second message was from a Detective Barry Shifflet, a Roanoke officer. It was from earlier this morning and said it concerned an abduction.

In a fit of pique, Brad decided to call the detective in Roanoke first. If the FBI agent could not be bothered to remember Brad's name then Brad would not bother to give him top priority. However, Brad's pettiness was stymied when the number rang through to voice mail. He dutifully left his contact information and then hung up so that he could call Special Agent Mazzota.

Mazzota had left a cell number and it got answered before the second ring. "Mazzota here."

"Hi. This is Brad Dollerby, the Bartlette Commonwealth Attorney. You called my office over the weekend. I'm returning your call."

"Thank you for calling back, Mr. Dollerby. I was just trying to confirm the identity of a Father Jerome Tolton. He gave your name as someone who could verify his identity." The voice was coolly professional.

"Um, sure. Black guy. Skinny. Maybe mid-thirties. Priest. Presided over my wedding and he's some sort of trouble shooter for his Church. Also claims to be a lawyer, although I can't

confirm that." Brad tried to match Mazzota's professional tone, but surprise, curiosity, and some anger tinged his words. "What has the Father gotten into now?"

"Thank you. We called Bishop Mannion after we could not contact you and he confirmed the identity of Father Tolton." The FBI agent pointedly did not answer the question. "I'll be sure to advise you if anything comes up involving your office. Thank you for your assistance."

With that, the line went dead. Brad had dealt with federal agents before and you just had to accept a certain degree of sanctimony and self righteousness from them, but this jerk was just plain rude. More troubling was the refusal to tell him what Father Tolton had meddled in now. He also found himself mulling over the "advise you if anything comes up involving your office" line. There were all sorts of implications which could be read into that statement. Well, there was only one way to find out.

He pulled up a search engine on his computer and looked up Saint Berlinda's phone number. He called and the phone rang seven times before a man picked up. It was Lyle. Lyle was a retiree who volunteered at the church. Brad was uncertain what he did exactly, but he was always at Saint Berlinda.

"Hey, Lyle, it's Brad Dollerby. I'm looking for Father Tolton."

"Oh, he's on his way Mr. Dollerby. The troopers picked him up about thirty minutes back. They must have stopped for breakfast - otherwise they'd be at your office already."

Brad rolled with what felt like a body blow and kept his voice light. "Yeah, they must have. Do you know which troopers picked him up? I think maybe I ought to give them a call and hurry 'em up a little. You know how people can sit around at the Hardees all morning."

Lyle chuckled. He was one of the old men who sat around every morning at the Hardees talking politics and remembering how great things used to be. "Nope. Both of them were in suits and one didn't even come into the church. They weren't even in a gray car; it was just a white SUV. Only reason I know who they were is that I heard Father Jerome tell Father Gabe that he was 'leaving with the troopers.'"

"Okay. Well, I better get off the phone. I need to clean my office up a little bit before Father Jerome gets here." After a couple more words of goodbye Brad hung up the phone.

What was the priest doing now? It had to have something to do with the ambush and the FBI and state police were involved. He was not. He wondered if the Sheriff was cut out too. He called over to the Sheriff's Department, but the Sheriff was off at a prayer breakfast. So, he asked to speak to Jeff Sanger. The chief of investigations picked up on the second ring. They exchanged quick greetings and Jeff beat Brad to the punch.

"So, I guess you're either calling about Squire dying or Dave getting arrested."

Brad was startled by Jeff's abruptness and the unexpected topics stupefied him for several beats. Then it all came pouring out at once. "Wait, I thought Tolliver was supposed to be okay. What happened? And what do you mean Dave got arrested? Dave who? You arrested someone on this?"

"Something went wrong with Squire's surgery. He died this morning from complications - about six. And, no, we haven't arrested anybody on this yet. Dave Jordan got himself arrested yesterday in Roanoke."

"Dave Jordan? You mean your Dave Jordan?" The only Dave Jordan that Brad knew was Sergeant Dave Jordan, one of the investigators directly under Jeff's supervision.

"Yeah. Apparently, Dave found out who that guy was who spoke to Yusif last week - the one who wouldn't tell Yusif who he was. It was some lawyer out of Roanoke. Anyway, Dave drove to Roanoke yesterday without telling anyone here or contacting anyone there and found the guy. He arrested this lawyer, cuffed him, and started questioning him. Seems he got pretty rough and when local PD arrived on the scene they arrested him and charged Dave with abduction, malicious wounding, and two charges of using a firearm in a felony. I spoke to the detective assigned to the case and they are pissed. I don't know if the Sheriff and ya'll are going to be able to help him this time."

Brad was not particularly disposed to help Dave Jordan. The guy was a jerk and not quite half as clever as he thought he was. In an equitable world Jordan would have never risen above street patrol and probably not lasted too long as a deputy. In the real world, he was the Sheriff's step son and he had been promoted to someplace where no one thought he would do any harm. Brad knew that Jeff only gave Jordan the most basic assignments and even then kept a fairly close eye on his work. Even so, at its peak Jordan's work only occasionally rose to the level of adequate. Brad would not be bothered a bit if Jordan was no longer working for the Sheriff's Department. Unfortunately, the Sheriff would not see it that way; he would want some help.

"Jeff, is the Roanoke detective a guy named Shifflet? I got a call from somebody by that name before I got to the office today."

"Yeah, that's him." Jeff paused for a moment. "I've got his info here . . . Lieutenant Barry Shifflet, Roanoke Police Department. You want his phone number?"

"No, I've already got that. I left him a voicemail a couple minutes ago. Is there any other news about the case? You heard anything from Father Tolton?"

"The priest? I got an email about him. Let me check." After about ten seconds Jeff continued. "Here it is. Apparently, last Thursday Father Tolton tried to talk to Bo about the incident, but Bo wouldn't talk about it without the Sheriff's permission. Bo sent an email to the Sheriff about it, who forwarded it to me and I sent an email back to the Sheriff saying I don't want information about the case being handed out to anyone while we're investigating. Heck, Brad, I know y'all are close to this priest, but we can't let somebody come in and mess around in this when we haven't even figured out who did it yet."

Brad knew he had to immediately squash that notion. "I don't want you to do anything for this man that you would not do for anybody else. My wife's the Catholic. I'm still a member of United Methodist here in Mount View. If he starts throwing my name around trying to get things, you let me know. The only reason I asked about Tolton was that the FBI called and asked about him. I thought maybe he'd gotten into something."

"The FBI hasn't said anything to me about him, but then the FBI pretty much hasn't said 'boo' to me since all this started. They don't seem to have any real interest in cooperating. And, I wouldn't worry about Tolton using your name to open doors. Best I can tell, he didn't try that and we all know that Bo wouldn't help someone who dropped your name anyway."

It was an ongoing joke. Bo "blamed" Brad for his marriage. After Bo waded into the Mahans at Brad and Maggie's wedding reception the Mahan women had targeted him. Brad was not sure why exactly; all he knew was that every time he brought the subject up with Maggie or Abby they chortled or grinned like cats that had eaten several canaries. After the reception and before they left town two women from Boston actually tracked Bo down and got him to exchange email addresses with them. Two others found him online within a week and Bo had a lively exchange with three women from Boston and one from New York over the next several months. Obviously, he thought nothing would come of it. After all, these were big city women who could not possibly want to live in the mountains of Virginia and they were hundreds of miles away. He was just having fun flirting with them. Then, Mary Elizabeth Mahan left Boston, moved to Bartlette, and put an end to all of that. Within four months Mary had shouldered aside both her local and internet competition and had a thoroughly bewildered Bo Ross in front of a priest saying wedding vows. However, this time the wedding and reception were in the next county over because Norton had both a larger Catholic church so that everyone could get in this time and a bigger hotel where the Mahans could have their monster reception in peace and not get Bo in trouble with his Sheriff. From that day on, Bo would gripe whenever he saw Brad that his carefree bachelor days ended because Brad brought Mahans to Bartlette County.

Brad gave the obligatory chuckle. "Watch yourself, Jeff. Today's not the day to get on my bad side. The Tritons lost on Friday so I've gotten a call from your favorite person, Mister Marty Elkins, with the usual complaints. I could decide that my office isn't equipped to investigate such an important allegation and refer him over to you. Maybe I'll be extra helpful and give him your direct number."

"Ug! I take it all back!" Both men chuckled this time. Marty's phone messages to the Sheriff's Department about the corruption in high school football tended to get lost somewhere between the receptionist's desk and Jeff's office. In fact, the non-responsiveness of the Sheriff's Department was the reason that Marty now called the Commonwealth Attorney instead.

With that, the conversation wound down. After hanging up the phone, Brad spent a couple seconds thinking how good it was that people were getting back to the point they could kid around again. Then he found his thoughts turning sour as he mulled over any possible meaning or connections between all the things going on. He still did not know what Tolton was up to, but the situation with Dave Jordan was even more troubling. Jordan was just dumb enough that it was believable that he would go cowboy and try a stupid stunt like going to Roanoke to make an illegal arrest. Yet, somehow it did not feel right. Things were going on that Brad did not have enough information to understand and he did not like that at all.

Chapter 12

If there was a Hell, the last month was surely its attempt to manifest itself in Bartlette County.

And, much like one might expect from Hell, just as you started to have some hope that things were getting better that hope was snatched away and more pain was piled on. This week had been filled with shock and pain. It was eight on Friday evening when Yusif found himself mulling over these dark thoughts. He was still at the courthouse. He stared at the bricks in the wall of his office trying to process everything that had happened.

It started the Friday before because Father Tolton went to question the ambush victims who were in the hospital and he claimed that Mark Carr woke up and told him that Sergeant Ian Minor was involved in the ambush. Instead of coming to the Sheriff or Brad about this, Father Tolton had somehow gotten in contact with FBI agent investigating the attack. On Sunday, Dave Jordan, an Investigator for the Sheriff's Department and the Sheriff's stepson, drove to Roanoke and beat the living tar out of the attorney who had come to Bartlette and had that enigmatic conversation with Yusif. The photos showed a man who had his face beaten so badly his eyes were swollen shut and several teeth were gone. Monday Morning Squire died unexpectedly when something went wrong after his surgery. Later that day, Ed Boyd died less than an hour after the hospital unhooked him from life support. Meanwhile, both Brad and the Sheriff had gotten wind that something was going on between the Father Tolton, the FBI, and the State Police; however, neither of them could get answers from anyone about what was going on.

Tuesday morning they found out. Sometime between four and five in the morning a large number of State Police, FBI agents, and Federal Marshals arrived in Bartlette County with both search and arrest warrants. They arrested the other two investigators from the Sheriff's Department, Jeff Sanger and Ian Minor, as well as the Chief of Police for Yared and his two senior officers. They searched all of their houses, the houses of everyone caught in the ambush, the offices of the Yared Police Department (three rooms in the town hall), and the new Sheriff's Office which had been set up in the abandoned stores across from the courthouse. The initial warrants were federal, but State Police agents went to the magistrate's office that morning and got murder and drug distribution charges in Virginia as well. Everyone was in shock; even Brad had seemed at a loss as to what he should do. However, Brad never remained quiescent for long. By noon, he was calling people and demanding answers. When federal and state agents proved intransigent, Brad started calling political allies both in the Virginian and federal government. Yusif had known that Brad was politically well connected, but even he was surprised at the breadth of those connections. Before the day was out, Brad got a United States Senator to call the FBI and several Virginia Delegates and Senators to call both the Attorney General and State Police headquarters. Faced with this pressure, the agencies had agreed to brief Brad on what was happening, but they absolutely refused to bring the Sheriff into the loop; they even made Brad sign non-disclosure documents which forbade him from talking to anyone in general and specifically forbade him from talking to the Sheriff or anyone in law enforcement. Yusif knew this because when he pressed Brad to tell him what was going on Brad showed him the documents. Brad spent most of his Wednesday and Thursday out of the county, getting briefings. This left Yusif to handle court, help Paula prep for the hundreds of cases being presented to the next grand jury, answer the calls from upset citizens who did not understand what was going on, and fend off the press. The ambush and explosion had gotten national attention for a day or two, but Brad handled most of that. The story of lawmen killing lawmen and a county basically being invaded by federal agents made the press rabid. It seemed like every five minutes a different news agency was calling and one twenty-four hour channel even sent a team to ambush Yusif as he left his house Thursday morning.

On Thursday, Mark Carr died. Despite increased observation after Father Tolton talked to the FBI, the deputy never woke again. The only person who could confirm the Father's statement about what happened in the Veteran's Hospital was Andy Carr and he had dropped off the face of the Earth.

On Friday, the plan was to bring the accused lawmen to court for their pretrial hearing. Unlike other states Virginia does not do an early arraignment. However, defendants still have to be brought before a judge within a certain amount of time after they are charged so the judge can make sure they know what they were charged with, assign them attorneys if they cannot afford one, and perhaps adjust their bond. The State Police were going to bring the three investigators from the Sheriff's Department and the three officers from Yared one at a time to the courthouse from the various regional jails where they were stashed. None of them were being housed at local jails and no more than two were being kept at the same jail, segregated from each other even there. The State Police intended to bring the accused to court one at a time, staggered at hour intervals throughout the entire day. They would not even release a list of which defendant was coming to court at what time.

Things started falling apart immediately. At nine-fifteen three troopers showed up with Deputy Chief Haley from Yared and went to escort him in the side door through which prisoners always went. They found the door locked and a sign on it noting that entry through this doorway was limited to court security officers approved by the Sheriff. The troopers tried knocking on the door, but they got no answer. Then they took the prisoner around to the front door of the courthouse and found eight deputies waiting for them. The deputies informed them that because the Sheriff's Department was solely responsible for security at the courthouse only deputies were allowed in the courthouse under arms. The troopers refused to give up their firearms and after a short standoff returned to their cars. Of course, the entire thing was filmed by two different news channels and a bunch of people with cell phones. It was all over the internet within minutes.

The state police tried to get someone to order the Sheriff to allow them into the courthouse with their pistols. By one in the afternoon Brad had refused to involve the Commonwealth Attorney's office in an argument between the state police and the Sheriff and Sheriff Minton had told the Virginia Attorney General that as a constitutional officer the Sheriff did not take orders from the him or anyone else in Richmond. A lawyer from the Attorney General's office in Abingdon was on his way and expected to be at the courthouse by two.

In the meantime, their carefully planned schedule fell apart. The back parking lot was filled with state police cars and the four with the defendants in them were purposefully parked so that they were in different parts of the lot. Thinking back on it, Yusif marveled that no one had thought to call the oncoming troopers and tell them to go back - or at least to divert to someplace secure. The back parking lot may have been reserved, but it was in no way secure. Two of its sides had woods right up to the pavement. On top of all that, newsmen and plain old regular citizens kept putting videos of the troopers back there on the news and internet. It was almost predictable that something would go wrong.

At around one-thirty it did. Andy Carr came out of the woods and unloaded a revolver into the front window of the nearest car with a prisoner in it. Most of the bullets were stopped by the window glass and the two that got through lodged in the empty driver's side seat. The

prisoner in the back, Lieutenant Mickelson from the Yared police department, did not even have time to duck for cover before all the shots had been fired and Andy ran back into the woods with six troopers in pursuit. Ten minutes later they had him under arrest and took him off to jail to face attempted murder charges. Then, they also started driving the prisoners back to the jails.

By three some lady who was an assistant attorney general showed up and Judge Isom got her, the state police first sergeant, the Sheriff, and the county attorney in his chambers and the yelling was loud enough and the old walls thin enough that it could be heard out in the courtroom. The words were not quite discernible, but it was very clear that the judge was reading them all the riot act. When they came out of the judge's office all of the people who went in were steaming. The assistant attorney general and first sergeant went to one table in front of the bench; Sheriff Minton and the county attorney went to the other. Judge Isom went straight to his bench, sat down, and immediately announced his decision.

"This Court finds that the special circumstances in these cases merit the following special conditions and behaviors. At any time one of the following six defendants - Mike Haley, Oscar Mickelson, Charles Poplin, David Jordan, Ian Minor, or Jefferson Sanger - are in the courthouse the Bartlette County Sheriff's Department shall maintain its duty as the primary security force for the courthouse. However, the Virginia State Police shall maintain its self-imposed duty as the primary security force dealing with the prisoners. To achieve both of these missions, the Court hereby orders that on any date when any of these defendants are in the courtroom there shall be one bailiff from the Sheriff's Department and one bailiff from the State Police in the courtroom from eight a.m. until all of that day's cases are completed and the courthouse closed. As well, the front door of the courthouse shall be guarded by two deputies and two state policemen during that same period of time and whenever one of the defendants is brought into this courthouse or before this bench he shall be escorted by one deputy and one state trooper. At all times each deputy and state policeman who enters the courthouse or provides security at its front entrance shall be in uniform - not tactical gear or civilian clothes - and carry only a pistol and no other weapons. No other individuals, whether they are law enforcement or not, shall be allowed to enter this courthouse under arms. This Court also orders that the defendants be brought before the General District Court in the next two hours for their pretrial hearings."

With that Judge Isom stalked from the bench back to his chambers. He had never even allowed all the people in the courtroom who were ordered to their feet when the judge came in to sit down. Yusif was watching from the back of the courtroom and he was pretty sure that if the door to the judge's office had been without a spring the judge would have slammed it behind him.

The State Police got the cars headed to the jails turned around and found an adequate number of troopers to set things up as the judge ordered. To make it work, the first sergeant actually served as the bailiff. By five, the defendants started being brought before Judge Fleming, who stayed late so that things could be done as Judge Isom had ordered. The troopers would drive one defendant into town, have his pretrial hearing, and then drive him out of town as the next defendant was being driven in. Yusif and Brad sat through every hearing and watched as a defense attorney stepped forward for each defendant and Yusif repeated by rote that the Commonwealth opposed any bond.

By six forty-five it was all done. Brad stepped out to talk to the media, giving some sort of general statement about how the citizens of Barnette County believed in law and order. As soon as the press dispersed Brad went straight to his car and left. Yusif stayed in the office, but he did not stay to do any work. He just sat there playing bloon tower defense on his computer and thinking dark thoughts until he was sure that everyone was gone. When he finally got up to leave he swore that he was going to leave this damned county and not return a second before he had to on Monday.

Chapter 13

Saturday morning Jerome woke early. To be more accurate, from the moment he got into bed at about one thirty he tossed and turned in the bed, troubled; he dozed off a couple times, but each time he started awake, torn between the need for sleep and the certainty of a visit if he slept before making a difficult decision. Finally, he got out of bed at about five and spent an hour or so praying the rosary. This calmed him down considerably and he put some thought into what actions he should take today.

He needed to tell someone what Deputy Carr said the night before. However, from the things the Deputy's brother said, it could be disastrous to talk to any local police. He recalled that some of the news reports he read about the ambush stated the FBI was providing "technical support" in the investigation, but he did not know what that meant exactly. Would the FBI be the right people to go to and how could he get in contact with them anyway? Even if he could get in contact with someone there, how should he approach this situation? He thought about it for a while longer and decided that his best option was to call the Bishop's office and see if they could help him contact the FBI.

Jerome had the Bishop's "direct line", which actually went to whichever young priest had been pressed into service as the Bishop's aid this year. He called and a bleary voice answered. After identifying himself, Jerome explained that he needed help contacting the FBI. That woke the man up on the other side of the phone and after a little scrambling Father Ostrowski got Bishop Mannion on the line.

After Jerome explained the situation, the Bishop promised that he would have someone (that meant Father Ostrowski) contact the FBI and make sure an agent was talking to him by noon. Then Bishop Mannion gave Jerome his marching orders.

"When the secular authorities contact you, you will make it clear to them that the Church, and you as its representative will not cooperate in the murder of another. You know where the Council of Bishops, and the Church as a whole, stands on this issue."

Holding his phone, Jerome began to consider the possible outcomes of that order. "How far do you wish me to push the secular authorities on this, Your Excellency?"

"You must look to the Lord as he leads you in this matter. The taking of a life is a highly immoral part of the culture of death. We resist that with as much strength as the Lord gives us."

"Yes, Your Excellency, I understand." And Jerome did. That was a highly worded and spiritually grounded way of telling him to endure jail if he must, but not to cooperate with the

FBI until such time as he had assurances that the death penalty was off the table.

For the next couple hours, Jerome prayed some and considered what he would say or do once the FBI called. While at BC Law, he only took two courses on criminal law. However, he distinctly remembered one of his professors adamantly telling the students that officers could lie at will to get the information they needed, but that if a federal agent could construe something you said to him as lie you got convicted of a felony and went to federal prison. He got the computer out that the Bishop's office had given him and researched these points, confirming both rather quickly. However, her also tripped across another fact: a prosecutor was ethically forbidden to lie. Armed with that bit of information, he called Richmond back and spoke to Father Ostrowski again.

By this time, Martin Ostrowski was already a very frustrated man. Apparently, the FBI was not being cooperative. He had finally been able to get into contact with someone in the Richmond office, but they would not tell him the name of any FBI agent involved in the Bartlette County investigation, much less how to contact one. Now, Jerome was adding another level of complexity. He told Ostrowski to make sure that any FBI agent who wanted to question him came to the meeting with a prosecutor.

Faced with the extra task, Father Ostrowski, to his credit, did not whine or make excuses. He took the message and told Jerome that he would pass it on if he could ever find a means to contact someone to pass it on to. Then Jerome let the young priest get back to his mission, smiling slightly at the exasperation he heard in the man's voice.

At a quarter past eleven, Jerome got a call from a man identifying himself as Special Agent Carlos Mazzota. The initial conversation was very short. The agent asked what Jerome needed to speak to him about and Jerome told him that while he was visiting Deputy Carr, the deputy woke up and made a statement which seemed to indicate who the attackers were. Special Agent Mazzota immediately asked whom Deputy Carr identified. When Jerome refused to give him that information the special agent did not get angry or loud; in fact, his voice flattened and fell into a practiced, cold rhythm.

"Father Tolton, under federal law concealing evidence of a felony is a crime and you could spend five years in prison for it."

Jerome's nerves spiked at the threat, but he clamped down on them. "I'm not hiding evidence Special Agent Mazzota. I am merely refusing to reveal that which was obscured by circumstances."

"Sir, you are concealing your knowledge of a felony from a federal officer. That's obstruction of justice. It may also be misprision."

This time Jerome's nerves did not jangle quite as much. "You can threaten me all you want. However, until such time as I talk to a federal prosecutor and sign a letter of use I will not turn this information over. I will not lie to you, nor will I hide something you could have otherwise found. I simply won't cooperate."

There was a pause from the other side. "Okay. I'll see if I can scare up one of the A U S A's. Understand something though, I don't like the idea of putting a priest in prison, but I will if I

need to. You need to cooperate. It's time to render unto Caesar."

If he had heard that once, Jerome had heard that a thousand times. Every public official who wanted him to do something quoted that line and hearing it again actually put him back on more comfortable ground. "I am offering to pay unto Caesar, but the rest of that sentence requires me to pay unto God what is God's. All I am asking is that someone who can guarantee certain conditions be present so that I can do both."

With that the FBI agent grunted, told Jerome that he would call back as soon as he could, and hung up without any exchange of pleasantries. Jerome sat there for a moment before starting his computer back up. He needed to do some more research. Could he be thrown in prison for simply not telling an FBI agent something? And what in the world was 'misprision'?"

About ninety minutes later Special Agent Mazzota called back. He told Jerome that he had located a federal prosecutor and they would meet Jerome at the federal courthouse in Abingdon, Virginia at three. It took Jerome ten minutes to find directions to the courthouse on his computer and then he cranked up his truck and was on the road. As he drove, he called the Bishop's office and spoke to Father Ostrowski yet again. He filled the aid in on what what he was doing; he also told Ostrowski that he thought there was a good chance he would be in jail before the day was over. Ostrowski reciprocated by telling him that Special Agent Mazzota called about an hour earlier and spoke to the Bishop. Father Ostrowski was not privy to the conversation, but the Bishop was perturbed enough that he had Father Ostrowski calling around in an attempt to find a criminal defense attorney who would answer his phone on a Saturday. None had so far, but Ostrowski promised a call to Jerome as soon as he had more information. Jerome arrived in Abingdon with dark thoughts of an impending imprisonment at the forefront of his brain.

And promptly drove right past the courthouse - twice. To be fair, he expected a big marble building with columns or something of the like. He finally figured out that a short, brick building which looked like a post office was actually the courthouse. Then, he drove around a bit to find someplace to park, eventually leaving the truck in the parking lot of some sort of center for the arts on the other side of a large, fancy hotel from the courthouse. He arrived ten minutes late to find an annoyed looking man in his mid-thirties and a woman who appeared to be in her forties waiting for him. Both were dressed in perfectly tailored suits which looked like they had just been dry cleaned.

They recognized him as he walked up - not too hard since he was wearing the collar. Of course, the man was Special Agent Mazzota. The woman introduced herself as Assistant United States Attorney Ann Taylor. Jerome apologized for being late and the woman smiled at his explanation.

"Yeah, we get that a lot. The first time people come looking for the courthouse they expect something big and impressive and they get . . ." She let her voice fade as she waved her hand at the building. "The funny thing is that apparently there used to be a unique and impressive courthouse, but they tore it down and gave us this. Not sure why - before my time."

With that, she turned and walked in the glass doors, followed by Mazzota and Jerome. Inside, they were met by a man wearing khakis and a polo shirt which had a five pointed star in a

circle embroidered over his heart. Ms. Taylor stopped to introduce him.

"This is Marshal Bates. He's here because somebody has to make sure we don't plant bombs in the courthouse and because if we aren't able to trust local law enforcement - something your actions have made Carlos suspect might be true - then we may have to lean on his people for muscle."

The four of them walked down a hall and went into a small room with a table and several chairs around it. As soon as they sat down Special Agent Mazzota turned to Jerome.

"Okay, you've got us all here. Tell us whatever you thought was so important it couldn't wait until Monday."

Instead of answering him, Jerome reached into the manila folder he had brought with him and pulled out a piece of paper. He handed it to Mazzota. "Here's the letter of use which I told you I needed a prosecutor for. Once I have a signed copy of this I will tell you what I know."

"This is garbage. You can't expect to be able to tell us . . ." In mid sentence, the FBI agent stopped when the prosecutor put her hand on his arm and motioned him out of the room. She excused herself as well and the marshal followed her. Jerome found himself sitting in the room alone.

It seemed like he waited for an eternity. Jerome did his best to stay as calm as possible, but his body had definitely decided this was a fight or flight circumstance and the adrenaline pumping into his system was not helping his nerves. He tried to say the Prayer to Saint Michael, which he had memorized specifically for this situation, but he kept foundering after "Sancte Michael Archangele, defende nos in proelio." This was probably because the rest of the prayer was about rebuking and defeating the devil and Jerome was actually dealing with people of good intent. Perhaps they had been misled down a wrong path, but he did not think of any of them as actively pursuing an evil intent. In the end, he fell back on an old favorite.

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen."

The Prayer of Saint Francis summed up the driving forces of Jerome's personal theology. It

always comforted him and provided a reminder of Christian purpose. He repeated the prayer twice, said a decade of the rosary, and returned to his original prayer. His head remained bowed in prayer when the federal agents came back into the room.

He finished a last few lines of the prayer before raising his head. The attorney and marshal looked uncomfortable; the FBI agent looked skeptical. After a moment, they continued into the room and sat down. This time the prosecutor took the lead.

"Father, we've just spent a good bit of time talking to your boss. You realize that he's willing to sacrifice you in order to make a point? He doesn't like the death penalty, so he's willing to let you go to jail?"

"Ms. Taylor, we are both willing for me to make that sacrifice. Both of us serve God and God does not favor the destruction of any of his created, even those who have committed grave sin."

She nodded her head and gave him a look that mixed exasperation with irritation. "Yes, I thought you might say something like that. So, I also spoke to my boss and he approved the agreement. Here's a copy of your document. Understand, if you balk any further we will consider the agreement null and void and you to have obstructed justice. We will prosecute if you do not live up to the agreement you have made."

With that, Ann Taylor handed over a copy of the paper in her hand to Jerome and others to the the FBI agent and the marshal. Jerome took it and checked it over to make sure it was the same paper he handed to Ms. Taylor. It was simple to check because the entire agreement because it consisted of a single sentence:

"The United States government agrees that neither it, nor any of its political subdivisions, shall seek the death penalty for any deaths related to the fire and explosion which took place on the 18th day of July in this year of Our Lord."

Below the sentence was Jerome's signature and Ann Taylor's along with a line where Ms. Taylor had written in the date. It was all there and everything was in order as far as Jerome could tell. He settled back and described the events of the night before. They had him repeat it at least ten times, asking him questions about it each time. Most of them wanted answers that Jerome did not have. He did not know where the deputy's brother lived. He did not know who "Brownie" was exactly. He did know what a "melungeon" was when the prosecutor asked, but only because he had looked it up on the internet: "a tri-racial, micro-minority group found exclusively in the Appalachian Mountains."

The questioning drug on for well over an hour before the meeting finally broke up. Everybody shook hands and the federals walked Jerome to the front door of the courthouse. At the door, the FBI agent told them he wanted to talk to Jerome alone for a second. The prosecutor asked if it was something she needed to be part of, but he told her it was just about security concerns and she stayed inside as the agent walked Jerome out.

"Father Tolton, what you've given us probably isn't going to break the case wide open, and it certainly doesn't justify what was signed away today." He raised his hand to halt Jerome before he could interrupt. "Yeah, I know. You have obligations to your church and she's

probably right," he nodded his head back toward the prosecutor, "when she says the current administration wasn't going to sign off on this as a capital murder case over Catholic and liberal opposition." Special Agent Mazzota's tone left no doubt what he thought about that. "Anyway, you should not go back to Bartlette County. If local law enforcement is involved in this, you will not be safe. They probably don't know about this yet, but eventually, we'll have to involve at least Virginia State Police and there will be leaks. Too many of the troopers and locals have worked together for too long for it not to happen."

"I can't." Jerome began. "I've got . . ."

Mazzota cut across him. "Don't give me that 'man of God' crap. That collar doesn't make you bullet proof. This is starting to look really bad and if they get wind of you they won't hesitate to make a Black, Catholic Yankee disappear, whether he is a priest or not."

Jerome fixed the FBI agent in his gaze and spoke more firmly. "I am going back to Bartlette. I will be careful about it, but I will not flee. I have both a duty to the Church and to God and I will neglect neither."

The two men stood staring at each other for several moments before the FBI spoke. "I ought to put you in protective custody right now. Everybody in the world would go nuts if I did though. Besides, it would tip our hand too early." He reached into his pocket and pulled a card out of his wallet. "Here. That's got my direct number on it. If anybody from law enforcement other than FBI shows up, you call me before you go with them. Avoid local law enforcement as much as possible. We don't know exactly what's going on yet, so we don't know who all is involved. You're being an idiot. I can't stop you from being an idiot. All I can do is try to mitigate the damage." With that, the special agent turned and walked back to the courthouse door. A second later, Jerome started walking back to his truck.

Sunday passed uneventfully. In fact, Jerome spent most of the day in another parish. The priest in Holy Family parish was visiting a sick relative so Father Gabe covered his Saturday vigil masses at Saint Joseph in Grundy and Saint Mary in Richlands and Jerome agreed to cover the Sunday masses. This meant that Jerome was up six in the morning and on the road by seven. He arrived at Saint Elizabeth in Pocahontas, Virginia at eight-thirty. At nine he held mass for twenty-three people. Maybe that was a normal turnout; maybe it was extra because people wanted to check out the visiting priest. Jerome never could tell in these rural towns and it made little difference. The Church took its duty to minister to rural areas seriously and if this church only served ten people that would be ten people who would be abandoned by the Church otherwise. Consequently, individual churches here in the mountains were not parishes unto themselves; they were all part of a larger parish and the priest rode a circuit, driving from county to county, town to town in order to have mass at each church. The only problem with this system was that it meant the priest had to leave fairly quickly after mass ended at one church so that he could get to the next church in time and he was always a little late at the next church. Jerome stayed to shake hands and exchange pleasantries with the parishioners at Saint Elizabeth for about fifteen minutes and that was exactly how late he was in getting to Saint Theresa in Tazewell. The parishioners took it in stride and five minutes later he got mass started. After that mass there was a parish lunch which Jerome stuck around for and it was well after four by the time that he got back to the rectory of Saint Berlinda in Bartlette County.

On Monday morning, Special Agent Mazzota called Jerome at seven in the morning. Mazzota told him that two agents, one from the FBI and one from the State Police, would come around at eight and drive him to the State Police office in Wytheville, Virginia. At five before eight a man walked in with in a well worn jacket and tie and introduced himself as Special Agent Gilliam of the Virginia State Police. He showed Jerome his badge and identification and they left immediately - barely giving Jerome time to yell to Father Gabe that he was going. In the SUV Jerome was introduced to FBI Special Agent Slemp. The three of them left on the two hour drive to Wytheville.

The building they finally came to was a square red brick edifice with inset glass windows that looked like they were tinted black. The agents walked him into the building and left him in a conference room with no windows. Just short of twenty minutes later two different men walked into the room. The first was Special Agent Mazzota and the second, older man introduced himself as Captain Fraley, the division commander in the Fourth Division. Jerome had no idea what the Fourth Division was, but since the Captain came in with the lead FBI agent, he assumed the police man must be fairly senior.

"Sorry to drag you out here, Father, but we had to get you out of Bartlette. We had some things happened on Sunday which are going to cause more things to happen in the next couple days and you were in too much danger to leave there."

As Jerome started to speak the man raised both his hands in a halting gesture. "I understand that you don't want protection. Unfortunately, things are too dangerous right now for us to pay that much leave. Whether you want to be or not, you are in our protective custody until further notice."

With that, the older man turned Jerome back over to the two agents who had picked him up at Saint Berlinda. Jerome had pictures of being locked in a jail cell dancing through his head, but protective custody eventually boiled down to him being put up at a hotel with the agents in the room next door. The telephone in the room was disconnected and they took his cell phone. Jerome was reduced to watching television or praying. After watching a half hour of people screaming at the screen "No Whammy" and hitting plungers for random prizes, he concluded that television was just as worthless as it ever had been and settled down to read from the bible that the Gideons had so helpfully left in the drawer of the bed stand. That Monday was passed in prayer, reading, and eating whatever fast food the agents brought him. By eight the tension of the early morning followed by the monotony of the rest of the day combined and he fell into a sound sleep.

Tuesday morning, he woke at seven. It was the longest he had slept in years and he would have slept further except one of the agents had come into his room through the adjoining door. "Sorry to wake you Father. I thought you would want to see what's going on in Bartlette County." With that, he flipped on the TV and changed it to one of the news channels.

"... started early this morning and has been going on for several hours now. I've got to say, Darlene, that I've never seen such a concentration of federal law enforcement before. There seem to be at least a hundred marshals and FBI agents. They are all over the county knocking down doors and arresting people. So far, we think they have arrested at least four law enforcement officers and several civilians. The FBI spokesman, a Special Agent Mazzota, is refusing to comment as to whether this has something to do with the so called "Ambush in

Bartlette" which took place a couple weeks back and led to the death and injury of several law enforcement agents and civilians."

They sat watching the television, flipping from news channel to news channel. All of them were filled with talking heads who had some basic information, but not much in the way of accuracy. About eight-thirty, one of the channels reported a rumor that there had been a shootout at one of the houses the federal agents raided. By nine-thirty the news channels were reporting all sorts of rumors about firefights as federal agents tried to arrest local law enforcement officials. One channel even reported a rumor that there was an armed standoff in Yared where the police had holed up in their station and were refusing to come out.

By eleven, federal officials gave in to the pressure of the escalating rumors and held a press conference. The United States Attorney for the Western District of Virginia spoke from a federal office in Abingdon flanked by high ranking men from the FBI, DEA, Federal Marshals, and Virginia State Police. The only person that Jerome recognized was the State Policeman; Captain Fraley of the Fourth Division stood there in his highly pressed gray and black uniform with highly polished silver bars shining from his collar. The only person who spoke was the U.S. Attorney.

"I have a prepared statement and will take no questions. At four this morning a joint task force of DEA, FBI, Marshals, the Virginia State Police, the Chicago and Detroit Police Departments, and the Florida Bureau of Investigations cooperated in Operation Ever Halt. This operation was a multi-state effort to stop a major pipeline for illicit drugs, primarily abused opioids and benzodiazepines. We took down major sources of the drugs in Florida, Chicago, and Detroit as well as a major warehouse for it in Yared, Virginia."

"In the Yared portion of the operation, we arrested a number of individuals, including three senior police officials in Yared and two deputies in the Bartlette County Sheriff's Department. Several other individuals in Yared were arrested for their part in the conspiracy to distribute drugs. Additionally, search warrants were served on the houses of each of these individuals, the Yared Police Department and the Bartlette Sheriff's Department."

"There are several rumors about supposed gunfights. Only one event involving the use of a firearm occurred. When the police entered the residence of one of the deputies the man ran to his closet. As the agents entered his bedroom the man had just grabbed the rifle and when he refused a command to drop it they tazed him. The rifle went off, but it shot into the ceiling, injuring no one."

With that, the U.S. Attorney shut down the press conference, promising a full press release by four that afternoon. A few reporters shouted questions, but the Attorney and other men simply turned and walked out of the room.

The next day his keepers drove him back to the red brick building, depositing him in the same conference room as before. This time Captain Fraley was alone when he came into the room. The Captain explained that they were going to release Jerome today because they thought they had everyone significant under in custody. Then he got to the meat of the matter.

"I understand, from Special Agent Mazzota, that your Bishop sent you down here to figure out what happened to Father Pahl during the ambush?" When Jerome nodded he continued.

"Okay. I can't tell you much in the way of specifics, but here's a general summary of what happened."

"It was a multi-state drug ring, dealing mainly in pills. The pills were coming from several places around the country and were being stored in Yared. It was a really old-fashioned model of drug distribution which we don't run into often with pills. Anyway, the bad guys were tapped into the Sheriff's department and Yared PD. On top of that, while the Sheriff wasn't taking a payoff or anything, he turned a blind eye to their activities for years. However, they had a problem. Sheriff Minton has had a three heart attacks in the last four years and he probably won't run for office again."

"Everyone expects Captain Robert Ross - you probably know him as 'Bo' - to become the next Sheriff and he is honest and entirely too competent for these guys. So they decided to take him out. The firefight in the alley at the back of the courthouse was their second attempt; the first was aborted because Deputy Ross showed up at the ambush sight with a State Trooper in tow."

"At the courthouse, the two deputies escorting the Pahl brothers were supposed to stop in the alley with the prisoners and let them have a smoke. The attorneys and priest weren't supposed to be there. When Deputy Ross came out to get them moving again, the men in the car at the end of the alley were supposed to fire shots over everyone's heads and in the confusion the deputies in the alley were supposed to kill Ross and the two brothers."

"When the gunfire began, Ross ran to get the door to the courthouse open and one of the deputies in the alley shot him in the back. In fact, he seems to be the only person the ones in the alley shot. Everyone else was hit by gunfire from the end of the alley."

"The propane gas explosion was done on purpose. The guys at the end of the alley meant to kill everyone, including their co-conspirators. They shot a hole in the propane tank and threw a flare into the resulting cloud. They thought there would be a little explosion and they would then go down the alley and kill the people while they were stunned. Instead, they got a big explosion which blew half the Sheriff's Office down. They panicked and fled through the woods."

When Jerome tried to ask questions, the State Police Captain made it clear that he had given all the information he was going to about the ambush. He was not going to tell Jerome anyone's name or explain how the police got their information. And that was fine. While Jerome was curious about the ins and outs of what was going on, he had no actual need of that information. He knew, and could tell Bishop Mannion, why Father Ted Pahl was dead: he was killed by drug dealers because he was somewhere he was not supposed to be.

Chapter 14

Brad sat in the third pew on the right hand side of Mount View United Methodist. The service had been going on for well over ninety minutes by now and showed no signs of letting up. Ever since the new pastor arrived the services had averaged two and a half hours. Brad did not care for the young man. The previous pastor, Brother Carl, had been unpretentious, friendly, and (most importantly) had kept his services somewhere between an hour and hour fifteen minutes. The new pastor, Elder Todd Brooks O.P., was young, passionate,

charismatic, and driven to bring everyone to Jesus. His services lasted at least two hours and his sermons were usually the greatest part of that. In fact, the young Elder was somewhere around the sixty minute mark of his current sermon and showed no sign of slowing down. He was going on about something having to do with prayer and the Apostle James. Brad found himself unable to concentrate on the fine points of the sermon.

He glanced at his watch. It was ten thirty-six. In less than half an hour mass would start at Saint Berlinda with Maggie sitting dutifully on the third row of wooden chairs. Before Elder Todd Brooks O.P. came to town, Brad used to go to services at Mount View United Methodist at nine and then meet Maggie at Saint Berlinda for mass. However, faced with a choice, Brad was a Methodist and he would go to his church rather than hers. Besides, Mount View United was the biggest church in the county and Brad figured his membership was worth at least two hundred fifty votes every election. In a county where only about five thousand people voted during the last presidential election, two hundred and fifty votes were precious.

Things with Maggie were almost back to normal. She sniped at him a little this morning because he would not be at Father Tolton's final mass at Saint Berlinda. Brad smiled a little. His wife was starting to return to herself around him and he would soon be rid of this troublesome priest.

The most surprising thing had been Abby's reaction to all of it. Of course, living in the same house as they did she heard the whole fight between her daughter and Brad and she thought the way they were acting was silly. "My Charley and me used to have fights bigger than that at least once a week and he wasn't a fan of priests either. Sometimes I think the only reason he ever went to mass was so he could stand outside and smoke with his buddies in the Knights afterwards. Anyway, the way you two were before wasn't natural. You have to blow up once in a while to relieve some of the pressure. Otherwise you'll just start to quietly hate each other. Now, get over yourselves." Abby gave that speech after a couple days of watching them walk on eggshells around each other and she had not said a word about it since. However, she still rolled her eyes when she saw them being careful around each other.

Meanwhile, as his domestic life came back together, the county fell apart around them. An army of federal agents and state troopers hit Bartlette County on Tuesday morning. It seemed like half the town of Yared was arrested, including everyone on the town council and the three officers at the top of the six person police force. Then they arrested two deputies from the Sheriff's Department, Sergeant Ian Minor and Captain Jeff Sargent. When armed men broke in his front door, Jeff scrambled for the rifle in his closet and they tazed him in the back just as he was pulling it out, causing him to fire into his ceiling.

Brad only learned about this when he was awakened by a call from the Sheriff. Sheriff Minton was beside himself. After Brad got the Sheriff settled down he got a quick shower and headed into the office. Then he started making calls. Every call to FBI Special Agent Mazzota went straight to voicemail. When Brad called the local State Police post, the phone was answered by Kyle Dotson, the First Sergeant. Kyle was polite, but he was clearly under orders not to talk to anyone in local law enforcement. After a couple minutes Kyle made an excuse and hung up. Brad was left sitting in his office at six-thirty with nothing to do.

Before seven-thirty, the Sheriff called four times. Each time he was more worked up, but had no new information. At eight, Brad started to walk out of the courthouse to go down the street

to get breakfast, but when he opened the door and saw the street flooded with police cars he went back inside, called the Sheriff, and found out that every deputy had been called in to the office.

By nine both Yusif and Paula were in the office. Both had heard about the arrests on the news and had questions, but Brad knew no more than they did. He tried calling the Attorney General's office in Richmond. He got fobbed off on some flunky who told him that they would get back to him "as soon as practicable." Then, he made another fruitless attempt to call Special Agent Mazzota. It was at this point he decided to treat the situation as a political problem rather than a law enforcement one.

He started at the top and worked his way down. Brad headed Senator Salyer's last campaign in far Southwest Virginia and his first call went to the Senator's office in D.C. Surprisingly, he got through to her on his first call. She was watching the news herself and wanted him to tell her what was going on. When Brad told her he was being frozen out she seemed to take it as a personal affront. Her voice was tinged with determination and a bit of anger as she promised him that someone in the FBI would be in contact before the day was over. After finishing that call, Brad began calling every delegate or senator he knew in Virginia's General Assembly. Once he mentioned the fact that Senator Salyer was helping with the FBI, quite a few of them promised to help with the Attorney General and the State Police.

At around eleven there was an announcement made to the press by the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Virginia, but no one had contacted Brad. Finally, at around three in the afternoon, a call came in from Captain Fraley at the State Police Division headquarters in Wytheville. The Captain had direct orders from Superintendent Boles to brief Brad on the operation and if he could come to Wytheville the next morning the State Police would fill him on everything they knew. Shortly after that a call came from a D.C. number and a Special Agent Sanderson told him that Special Agent Mazzato would be at the Wednesday briefing to answer any questions he had for the federal government.

The Wednesday morning briefing was not a friendly affair. Nevertheless, it was eye opening. Before they began, Brad was required to sign a document stating that he would not disclose the information in the briefing to anyone in local law enforcement – including the Sheriff and his own deputy prosecutor. Then the FBI took over and briefed Brad.

There was nothing terribly surprising about the first part of the briefing. The Poplins were involved in a large scale drug ring which enjoyed their protection in Yared. Everyone in Bartlette County knew the Poplins were crooked, although their level of involvement in a multi-state drug ring was more than Brad had thought them capable of. He knew they were involved in cock fighting and gambling on high school football, but never suspected they were doing much more than providing a safe haven for small time drug dealers in town. Still, it was not that he thought large time drug dealing was beyond their desire; he had just thought it beyond their grasp.

In fact, the Sheriff's refusal to do anything to clean up Yared was one of the main frustrations of Brad's time as Commonwealth Attorney. As it turned out, the State Police and FBI were also less than impressed by the Sheriff's inactivity. For a long time they suspected he was involved. However, after planting false information with the Sheriff three times and waiting to see if there was any reaction from the drug ring, they were eventually satisfied that he was

not passing information to its members. Their conclusion was that the Sheriff was either not willing to risk the political fallout of cracking down on Yared or that he was lazy – probably both.

However, they were convinced that the Sheriff's Department had a number of corrupt deputies. Of course, Brad knew which deputies had been arrested, but it was still something of a shock when they told him that Jeff Sanger was the person who decided that Bo Ross had to be killed. Apparently, he thought was that with Bo out of the way he would have the inside track to become the next sheriff. Ian Minor, Dave Jordan, and Oscar Mickleson had each pointed a finger at Jeff.

When Brad pointed out that the former deputies and Yared police officer lacked much in the way of credibility, Agent Mazzato played a number of recordings which the FBI recovered from Ian Minor's phone. The man had recorded a lot of conversations with his fellow conspirators. In many of them there were discussions about what Jeff wanted done and there were two in which Jeff told Ian he wanted Bo out of the way so that he could become sheriff. It was damning.

The first attempt to kill Bo had been at a trailer on Baylor Ridge. They waited until the other two deputies on duty were tied up elsewhere and then called in a domestic disturbance. With everyone else busy, they knew Bo would have to respond himself. The plan was to kill him and blame it on the man who lived in the trailer. However, Bo got the call while he was getting some coffee with Trooper Pillay and, bored at one in the morning, the trooper decided to back him up. When the deputies saw two cars arrive with flashing lights and realized the second was a state trooper they retreated into the woods and left.

The second attempt to kill Bo was more complicated. The Pahl's were coming to trial and everyone knew the Sheriff would assign Bo to look after court security for such an important case. Technically Teddy Qualls was the bailiff, but he was over sixty years old and retired on duty. Generally, Judge Isom just let him sit in a chair and doze during court as long as the Sheriff sent over help during serious cases.

It was easy to get Carr and Boyd assigned as court security. The Sheriff had no money for overtime and everyone knew a jury trial would mean working extra hours. When Boyd and Carr volunteered it saved the Sheriff from forcing someone else to work without getting paid.

According to the FBI, there were two plans. The first called for Carr and Boyd to take the Pahl brothers from the courthouse, but not deliver them to the holding cell in the Sheriff's Department. They would stop in the alley and give the Pahl brothers a couple of cigarettes to smoke. After some time, Bo would come out of the courthouse to see what the delay was. As soon as the door closed behind Bo in the alley, Minor and Jordan were going to open fire. If they could get clear shots they would shoot the Pahl brothers. If there was no clear shot they would shoot over everyone's heads. However Bo reacted, once he turned his back on the deputies in the alley, Carr was going to pull out an old pistol he had taken during a search of the Pahl house and shoot Bo in the back. Everything was going to be blamed on an escape attempt by the Pahl's.

Unknown to Carr and Boyd, the actual plan was for everyone in the alley to die. Minor and Jordan would start by shooting the Pahl's. Then, as soon as they saw Bo go down they would

open fire on the deputies as well. They were also going to shoot a hole in the propane tank in the alley and set off a fireball to destroy evidence and stun anyone still alive so that they could walk down the alley and finish the job.

However, once time came to put everything in action, things starting going wrong. When the deputies started to take the Pahl brothers out of the courtroom their attorneys insisted on walking with them. The deputies refused at first, but Grant Lasley started to throw a fit and Teddy Qualls told them to let the civilians walk with them. Qualls was a sergeant, and Bo was back in the Judge's office at the time, so the deputies had to let the civilians come with them. They stopped in the alley as planned with a herd of people instead of just the two prisoners. The two deputies took a position on the side of the alley next to courthouse, leaving the others clustered on the side next to the Sheriff's department.

Bo came out about fifteen minutes later. Minor and Jordan were in a car in the parking lot and as soon as Minor saw the door close behind Bo he pulled the car up and Jordan opened fire from the back seat with an AR15. He sprayed fire at the Pahls and the civilians. When Bo ran to open the door to the courthouse Carr shot him in the back four times. Three of those bullets hit the kevlar vest Bo was wearing and, although the vest held, the force of the bullets slammed Bo into the door and knocked him off the porch behind the trash cans.

While that happened, Minor got out of the car with his Stevens 200 30-06 and fired four shots at the propane tank in the alley. One round missed entirely and one hit at enough of an angle that it ricocheted into the ground. However, two of the bullets struck true and propane spewed into the alley in a white cloud. Jordan kept firing the AR15 to keep everyone pinned down and hoping to set off the propane. After a few seconds they realized gunfire was not going to set off the gas and fell back on their backup plan. Minor had a street flare ready; he lit it and threw it into the alley.

The explosion was much larger than anything they had planned for. Special Agent Mazzota spent several minutes trying to explain the forensic lab's explanation for the size of the explosion, but most of it went over Brad's head. Somehow the weight of the gas, the heat of the day, and the enclosed area all combined to create an explosion which tore into the Sheriff's Department and started secondary fires. It also scared the hell out of the shooters. They jumped back into the car and took off.

Then they began the coverup. They drove the car, which had been purchased for a couple hundred dollars cash from a man in Kentucky, out to an old strip job and set it on fire. After that Minor drove to Pikeville, Kentucky where he would claim to have spent his day off shopping and eating at Jerrys. Jordan was supposed to do the same thing in Bristol, Virginia. However, a state trooper recognized the "Don't tread on me" flag painted across the entire tailgate of Jordan's truck and chased him down to tell him about the explosion. Thus, an hour after causing the explosion Dave Jordan was on the scene investigating it.

After they realized that the people in the alley survived, the conspirators became hypervigilant - looking for anything that might signal someone knew what they had done. The appearance of an unknown attorney trying to speak privately with Yusif spooked them. That was the reason Jordan went to Roanoke and beat the attorney to within an inch of his life. And it turned out to be for nothing; the attorney had nothing to do with the murders. He had been hired by the Democratic Party of Bartlette to feel out Yusif as a possible candidate for

Commonwealth Attorney in the next election.

Brad smirked to himself. If they'd just approached Yusif directly that poor guy in Roanoke wouldn't be missing a couple teeth right now.

In any event, the attack in Roanoke triggered the reaction by the feds. When Brad left the State Police office the only question in his mind was how many people he would be charging with capital murder.

Chapter 15

Bo Ross sat in his patrol vehicle, in the parking lot of the Ezee Stop in Yared. It was three a.m. and the store was closed. In fact, everything in the entire county was closed at this time of night. Still, someone had to be out on patrol and the midnight to eight a.m. shift fell to him and two other deputies. Prior to "the incident" Bo had been the chief of patrol, but afterward the Sheriff decided there was too much publicity and too many distractions for Bo to continue in that job and reassigned him as shift leader on the midnight shift.

"The incident" was the term the Sheriff used to describe the day Bo was almost killed. In all the movies the person shot suffered traumatic memory loss, but Bo remembered the incident about as clearly as anybody could. The Sheriff had saddled Bo with three of the least reliable deputies in the department for court security. In fact, the reason that he did not escort the Pahl brothers back to their holding cell personally was that Judge Isom called Bo back in chambers to voice his displeasure. By the time Bo left the judge's chambers Boyd and Carr had already taken everyone out of the courthouse.

Bo followed as quickly as he could and found everyone lounging in the alley. He walked off the porch and started over to the prisoners, while he told Carr to clear all the civilians out of the alley. He had just started walking over to get the Pahl's moving toward the door to the Sheriff's Department when there were a series of loud noises and the Pahl brothers were both thrown backward into the building behind them. More shots followed and the civilians scattered. The two other deputies took cover behind the propane tank that provided fuel to heat the courthouse.

Bo turned and ran back to the courthouse door. It was the only way out of the alley that could be reached without letting the guy with the firearm have a clear shot. He had just gotten his key in the door when a sledgehammer hit him in the back - several times. He was slammed forward into the door and fell off the side of the porch behind bins in which trash and recyclable materials were kept. At first he was just stunned. Through a haze, he heard more gunfire and then there was a huge explosion which he felt more than he heard.

This time he was knocked out. When he came back around all of the plastic bins were on top of him and he was covered in trash. He dug out from under them and found himself in Hell. A huge hole was blown into the side of the Sheriff's Office and there were flames everywhere. Everywhere he looked in the alley he saw a man with multiple bullet wounds or serious burns. He grabbed the first person he came to, one of the Pahl's attorneys, and started hauling him back to the safety of the courthouse. When they got up on the porch Bo's keys were missing. He looked around but they were nowhere to be seen, so he just started going back and grabbing other men and laying them on the porch in front of the door.

When he had all the casualties around the door, he started banging on the it and yelling for Sergeant Qualls. He didn't know how long it took, but eventually Judge Fleming opened the door and Bo started moving all the casualties inside. A couple of Mount View police officers arrived, but the fire had gotten too intense for them to come down the alley to help. After he got the wounded inside, he started perform first aid as best he could although he doubted any of it had actually helped except for the tourniquet he put on Attorney Lasley's arm.

When the judge touched Bo's arm he realized that the gunfire and explosion had made him almost deaf. Judge Fleming was yelling something Bo could barely hear as though he were at the end of a long tunnel filled with a ringing silence. After a couple seconds, Bo shook his head, told the judge to call for help, and told him to get Qualls to check to see if anyone else needed help. Then he went back to trying to render some sort of first aid.

The Paramedics took a long time to arrive and they pulled Bo off, gave him a quick once over, and sent him off to side, out of the way. He sort of collapsed once he sat down in a corner with nothing to do and the next thing he really remembered was being helped onto a gurney so the medics could transport him to the hospital.

Now the FBI and State Police were saying that the whole thing was a plot to kill him by five of his fellow deputies. Worse, Brad Dollerby, the local Commonwealth Attorney, had decided that he was going to prosecute everyone involved in the incident himself. Even worse, the Sheriff was circling the wagons and seemed to be taking steps to marginalize the people he did not trust in the department. And, clearly Bo now fell into the untrustworthy category.

It did not sit well with Bo that someone had shot him and he was getting blamed. It did not sit well at all.

Chapter 16

Brad walked right past Paula and Jeanna and slammed the door to his office behind him. For most of the day he had been in general district court arguing against bail for Jordan, Minor, and Sanger. Judge Fleming would have shut down that stupidity in minutes and probably lectured the defense attorneys about filing frivolous motions. However, Judge Fleming was a potential witness and therefore he had refused to have anything to do with the case. Instead, Judge Heaberlin, a retired judge out of Abingdon, came over to hear the motion and it was a disaster.

Heaberlin let the three defendants call twenty-three family members and friends each swearing that the killers were angels who would never hurt a fly and valued members of the community with deep ties that guaranteed they would never flee to avoid trial.

When the defendants called Sheriff Riker, Brad was caught off guard. He knew the Sheriff was in the courthouse. In fact, eight members of the Sheriff's Department were in the courtroom, in uniform, sitting on the row directly behind the defendant's table. Still, it had been a shock when the Sheriff was called to testify for the killers. And once he started to testify things got nasty.

The Sheriff testified that the men were still valued members of his department with jobs

waiting for them. Also, he had evidence that family members of the victims in the Pahl case were the ones who ambushed his deputies. He had warrants for Howard Mullins and Kyle Young with him, issued by the magistrate that very morning.

The first time Brad heard any of this was while the Sheriff testified. His cross examination was exploratory and brutal. By the time it was over, the entirety of the Sheriff's evidence was exposed as being that each person he had just charged was related to one of the raped girls, each had a conviction for a violent crime in his past, and neither could account for his whereabouts at the time of the ambush. It was clear that the only reason the Sheriff had gotten his warrants was because the magistrate who issued them was one of the Sheriff's poker buddies and a fellow member of the local Elks lodge. It was also clear that the Sheriff was going to do everything in his power to disrupt the prosecution of his deputies.

Judge Heaberlin sat behind the bench soaking it all in. Once all the evidence had been presented he sat writing something on the pad in front of him for over five minutes, leaving everyone else in the courtroom sitting in silence. Then he issued his ruling.

"In the matter of Commonwealth versus Sanger: no bond or bail. In the matter of Commonwealth versus Jordan: no bond or bail. In the matter of Commonwealth versus Minor: five million dollars, bond to be secured by property or cash. Court is adjourned."

With that, the district court judge stood and walked out of the courtroom without any explanation of his decisions.

The frustrating thing about all of it was that Brad knew the defense attorneys would appeal the lower court's opinion to the circuit court and he would have to do the same hearing all over again in a few days. In the meantime, he would have to get the district court judge to rescind those warrants before two men who didn't do this crime got arrested for it. Neither Howard Mullins nor Kyle Young was a stranger to the local jail or the courthouse. In fact, the reason they could not account for their whereabouts at the time of the ambush probably had something to do with stealing or dealing. Brad wouldn't lose any sleep if they were hassled a little, but he didn't need this complication of his case.

After thinking about it a couple minutes, he decided to call Darla Begley, the attorney who usually represented Kyle Young. After a couple rings, a chipper female voice answered the phone.

"Law office."

"Hey, Darla, it's Brad. You representing Kyle Young on anything right now?"

"Hey Brad. I'm sure I am. He's got to have a driving while suspended or drunk in public going. Why? You looking to hook him up with something else or need him to talk with you about what some of his buddies are doing?"

"He's got a warrant outstanding right now."

Darla's voice became a mix of wariness and resignation. "What's he done now? Supposedly, that is."

"The Sheriff took out a warrant for murder this morning, but pocketed it until today's bond hearing. Tomorrow, I am going to go into court and get those warrants rescinded or dismissed or whatever I have to do to get rid of the damn things. Until that time the warrants will be out there. Deputies will probably try to arrest your client tonight. You might want to tell Young that he should spend the night somewhere else than his trailer."

"What? You want me to call my client and tell him to avoid arrest?" Darla's voice rose with anger. "I am not going to get an obstruction of justice charge. I won't do it for my clients and I am not doing it for you. You leave me out of this private little war you and the Sheriff are ginning up."

"Darla you have a duty under the Bar's ethics rules to . . ."

"Don't you tell me what my ethical duties are, mister high and mighty Commonwealth Attorney. I was doing this ten years before you even passed the Bar. Don't you ever call me and try to push me around like a pawn in your political games. Ever!"

With that, the line went dead. Well, crap. Brad thought. That could have gone better. Then, after a couple of seconds looking at the phone he picked it up and called out to Paula.

"Paula, is anybody representing Howard Mullins right now?"

Chapter 17

Yusif looked at the files and disks sitting on his desk and the two chairs in his office. After Brad indicted Brownie, Dave, and Jeff on capital murder charges, the feds finally agreed to allow him to discuss the evidence with others. The first thing Brad did was dump all the documents and recordings on Yusif with orders to organize them and put the evidence in order for trial. The stuff Yusif had around his desk was a tithe of the reams of paper which the feds and state police wheeled into his office two weeks back. The rest were in boxes which were stacked two deep up the wall to Yusif's right.

Yusif had read through everything and pulled out the stuff around his desk. He sat looking down at the most important reports and tapes from the boxes and wondered what he was going to tell Brad. Brad had asked for a summary today and Yusif knew what his boss wanted to hear. Brad wanted to hear that the cases were all in good order and would be easily proven in court. Yusif could not tell him that. Sure, a prosecutor would have to stumble in blind drunk to lose the cases against Brownie and Dave. However, the case against Jeff was worse than thin. It did not exist. Everything was supposition and statements by people who had a lot of incentive to put the blame on someone else. The recordings which were supposed to back the statements were useless.

The all important recordings were supposed to be the linchpin of any prosecution against Jeff. Only, they weren't. They were all snippets cut out of larger conversations and they were all ambiguous. Sure, Jeff complained about Bo being in the way of his aspiration to become Sheriff, but he never told anyone to do anything about it. Likewise, there were snippets of conversation about drug trade in Yared, but none of them showed more than the knowledge that Yared was the center of corruption and illegal activity in Bartlette County. Without more of

the conversations to give context, these scraps of dialogue lent themselves to whatever meaning the listener cared to give them. There was no way they proved murder beyond a reasonable doubt.

Yusif looked at the clock. It was half past two and Brad should be back in his office by now. He sighed and got up to walk down stairs. Putting this off would not make it any more pleasant. Brad was going to be in a foul mood this afternoon. The third Friday of the month was the Republican luncheon and those meetings were getting more and more acrimonious as Sheriff Minton and Brad faced off over the pending trial. It was becoming more and more obvious that the Sheriff's supporters were trying to push another attorney to challenge Brad for the Republican candidacy for commonwealth attorney.

Yusif found himself standing in the door of Brad's office. He had to wait for a couple minutes because Brad was on the phone griping to someone about the luncheon. Apparently, the Sheriff had announced that he would be running for Sheriff again "because there is no other suitable candidate." This kneecapped Bo Ross, who everyone knew planned to announce his candidacy next week. Brad saw Yusif and waved him to a chair in front of his desk. Then, he used Yusif as an excuse to end the conversation.

As he hung up the phone he glared across the table at Yusif. "Can you believe that shit? That old bastard screwed Bo over. He's already banished Bo to the midnight shift 'cuz he can't stand to look at him. And now Minton's screwing him out of the Sheriff's job."

"Can you do anything about it?" Yusif asked.

"Not a damn thing." Brad replied. "Everyone I can influence would already vote against Minton. If I openly endorse Bo all it will do is drive more people away from him."

Brad waved his hand. "Enough of the political crap. How are things with the ton of papers the FBI dumped on us?"

Yusif rubbed his hands together, pausing for a beat. "It's not good boss."

"What do you mean, 'It's not good?' The case the FBI put together is pretty much bulletproof. They walked me through the evidence and I didn't see anything wrong. What is it?"

"Well, it's solid for Dave and Brownie, but there's no case at all for Jeff."

"Look, Yusif, I know you like Jeff. Hell, I like Jeff. But he killed six people in that alley. He may have sent other people to do it, but he killed just as sure as if he pulled the trigger himself."

Brad was leaning forward in his chair pointing his finger at Yusif. A big man, Brad was used to being able to pressure other men with his size and he subconsciously reached for that advantage whenever he was in an argument. However, Yusif was offensive lineman large – a full two inches taller and sixty pounds heavier than his boss. He had also seen Brad in action for years and realized when Brad was trying to intimidate someone into agreeing with him. And Yusif did not intimidate easy. He did not lean into his boss, but he did not retreat an inch either.

"No, you look, Brad. There's. No. Case. Against. Jeff. All there is are the statements by three crooked-to-the-gills ex-police who are trying to get out of things by blaming other people. Absolutely nothing supports their story. I've gone over all the FBI stuff. There's nothing there. Nothing."

"Bullshit. I've heard those tapes. Jeff knew what was going on. He pushed it. He's the God-damned ring leader and it's obvious. You just don't want to believe because Jeff fooled us all. Hell, he still has you fooled! Do your fucking job. We are going to convict Sanger and he is going to get the fucking needle. No discussion. No debate. He killed them. He dies."

"But the people who actually shot everybody get a pass? Because the only way you can possibly make that case is to put them on the stand and they won't testify unless you take the death penalty away. They killed without remorse, Brad. And now they are lying without remorse. And you're falling for it. You are going to kill an innocent man based on their lies. You can't do that!"

"I can. I will. He is guilty as fucking sin and you and the Sheriff are the only assholes who think any of those assholes are innocent. Do your job and get the damn case ready."

Yusif looked Brad in the eyes and steadied himself. "I will not. You knew from the day you hired me that I go to a Church that doesn't believe in the death penalty. Still, you assigned me work on the cases in which you are trying to get it. Okay. I can hold my nose and do the work - as long as it's just. This isn't just. It's stupid. You're planning on letting two killers get away with it so they can help you try to kill the guy who you've got absolutely no evidence did anything. There's no evidence that Jeff did anything and I won't do it."

"Get out of my office." Brad's voice was flat, but his face was bright red and his eyes boiled with anger. "In fact, get out of the building. I don't want to see you at all until Monday. Now get out!"