

CANDIDATE FOR MURDER - EXCERPT

The jingle of the bell over the front door announced the entrance of the police department's desk sergeant, Tonya. Startled out of the snooze into which he had fallen while resting his jaw against a cold compress, David looked up from her desk.

Tonya slapped a paper bag down onto the desk in front of him. "I thought you could use this." With a shake of her head, the middle-aged desk sergeant took note of the tear in David's suit coat and of his disheveled appearance. His gold police chief's badge was displayed on the utility belt he wore over his dress slacks.

David peered into the bag and discovered that she had brought him a bear claw.

"If anything, you proved your lack of partisanship to the citizens of Spencer," Tonya said. "How many police chiefs would arrest *both* nominees for mayor—one of whom is destined to be your boss after the election?"

"How many people running for office would get into a fist fight with their opponent in front of a hundred people?" Taking the pastry out of the bag, he grumbled. "Dad used to say that only a crazy person would throw his or her hat into the ring. So you know that by virtue of the fact that they're running for office, every candidate is mentally incompetent."

"That's why I don't vote." Tonya waved for him to get up from her desk.

David almost choked on his bear claw. "You don't vote! Do you know how many countries in the world have dictatorships where people don't have any say in what the government decides to do? Your vote is your voice. You need to exercise it."

"It's a right," Tonya said. "Not an obligation."

"People like you deserve what you get." David waved the pastry at her. "I don't ever want to hear you complain about our country going to pot again."

The door to the police station opened again. Instantly, Gnarly and Storm stormed in, practically dragging Dallas behind them. Once inside, she dropped both of their leashes and closed the door. Since he was in the midst of getting up from Tonya's desk, David was unprepared to defend himself when Gnarly leaped from the floor to snatch the bear claw out of his hand. As soon as he noticed that his breakfast had been taken, David turned to lunge for the German shepherd only to have Storm dart between the two of them to cut him off. Without pausing, both dogs galloped across the squad room and up the stairs to David's office.

"They're like the canine Bonnie and Clyde," Tonya said.

Seemingly unperturbed, Dallas set a lunch container on the reception counter. "That's okay, my love. I brought you a better breakfast." She didn't notice the arched eyebrow Tonya was directing toward her in reference to the danish. "I felt so bad about our date gettin' ruined last night," she said, holding out an egg casserole baked into a single serving dish. "And you had to spend the night here with the candidates in jail—"

"They're still here!" Gasping, Tonya whirled around in her chair. "Do you *want* to get fired after the election?"

"They both assaulted a police officer." David pointed to the welt on his cheekbone. As he took the breakfast goody from Dallas, he gave her a soft kiss on the lips. "After spending all night listening to them blaming each other for getting arrested, an hour ago I called Fletcher and told him to come take over the babysitting."

Dallas followed David to the empty desk where he sat down to eat. "You would think that since they're such highfalutin, important folks, people would have been here like that"—she snapped her fingers—"fixin' to get them released."

"Their party bosses have been calling everyone on the town council and every other political office all night," David said. "These two idiots are the cream of the crop. I can't understand how anyone could've voted for them in the first place. I certainly didn't!"

"I know for a fact that Nancy Braxton didn't legally win her party's nomination," Tonya said with a shake of her head. "My daughter-in-law works for the county clerk. She was there when they tallied the votes. The leaders of Nancy's political party didn't want her opponent to get the nomination. They felt he was too white and had the wrong genitalia to represent their party in this election. It's high time for Spencer to have a woman mayor—even if that woman is an incompetent bitch."

"Are you saying that the party committed voter fraud?" David whirled away from his coffee mug, which he was in the middle of filling, to face her.

"Tiffany told me that the vote was close and that the party leaders just tossed out about a hundred ballots for the other candidate. Nancy won the nomination by only sixty-four votes. If they had counted those other ballots, Braxton's opponent would've been the nominee and would've won by around forty votes."

"Has anybody reported this? Why didn't you contact the board of elections after you heard about it?" David asked over the top of his coffee mug.

"And what would the board of elections have done?" Tonya asked. "They would've asked everyone who was in the room what happened. Everyone would've said that nothing happened, knowing that if they didn't, they'd be blacklisted by those in that party who hold political offices. Worst yet, what if something had come of it? No whistle-blower wants to end up like Sandy Burr."

“Who’s Sandy Burr?” David asked.

Tonya’s eyes grew wide. She turned to David, who was sitting at an empty desk, and Dallas, who was perched on a corner of it—one long leg draped across the other. They were both looking questionably at her.

Tonya had known David since his childhood. Over twenty-five years earlier, she had started working at the Spencer Police Department for David’s late father, Patrick O’Callaghan, who had been the chief of police.

“Investigative journalist,” Tonya said, “who was found in a bathtub at the Lakeside Inn with both wrists slashed. The suicide note found on the bed said that he was sorry. The last person he’d been seen with was Nancy Braxton; they’d been in the hotel’s lounge about twelve hours before his body was found by a maid. He’d been doing a story about her charity organization. Your father, who’d only been chief for a few months at that point, and Bogie were the first on the scene. Burr actually told his sister and a couple of friends that if he ended up dead because of the story he was chasing, they shouldn’t believe that he’d committed suicide.”

“Did Dad ever close the case?” David asked.

Tonya shook her head. “He was forced off of the investigation by the state police because Nathan Braxton, Nancy’s husband, complained to the governor. Nancy felt that Pat O’Callaghan wasn’t giving her the respect she deserved. Since Nathan was the Redskin’s quarterback who took the team to the Super Bowl, the governor couldn’t yank the case away from us fast enough. The state police immediately closed it as a suicide—though everyone knows that it was murder and that Nancy did it.”

Immersed in the story of the long-cold murder case, they all jumped when the front door opened and a short, exceedingly slender man with black hair and thick, dark eyebrows stepped in. With his slight frame, heart-shaped face, and dapper, tailored suit, he resembled a leprechaun. “I’m looking for Police Chief O’Callaghan,” he told, rather than asked, Tonya.

A young woman with short ash-colored hair who was dressed in an ill-fitting pantsuit and flat shoes slipped in directly behind the leprechaun.

David stood up from the desk where he was eating. “That would be me.”

Barging forward, he extended his hand to David. “I’m George Ward, the state chairman for Nancy Braxton’s party and this her assistant, Erin Devereux, Ms. Braxton’s executive assistant. I understand there was an incident last night.”

David answered him by pointing to the bruise on his jaw.

“The bruise on his cheek came from the other party,” Dallas said.

George laughed. “These political debates can get quite passionate.”

“‘Passionate’ isn’t the word I would use,” David said without humor.

“From what I’ve been told, Bill Clark started it,” George said.

“Those sources are wrong,” Dallas said. “Ms. Braxton was the one who threw a water bottle at Mr. Clark after calling him a warmongering fascist. You can see the whole thing from start to finish on the video I uploaded to my blog this morning.”

“Did you record the part where Clark called her a fat pig and told her to shut up?” George’s companion asked.

“She needed to shut up,” Dallas said. “It was a debate and his turn to answer the question, and she wouldn’t let him get a word in edgeways. I swear, it’s like no one ever told her that it’s better to keep quiet and let people think you’re dumb than to open your mouth and prove ’em right. Every time she opened her mouth, somethin’ stupid came flyin’ out.”

“I guess we know who the police department is supporting in this election,” George said. “Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Actually, you’re wrong,” Dallas said. “Mr. Clark isn’t any better. From what little I was able to hear from Mr. Clark, it was plain that if he had a brain, it’d die of loneliness. After seein’ those two in action, I’d vote for a snake before I’d vote for either of ’em. Snakes are smarter and won’t lie to you ’bout plannin’ to bite you in the butt the first chance they get.”

Tonya let out a loud laugh.

With a roll of his eyes, George dismissed Dallas as unworthy of argument and turned his attention back to David. “With all due respect, Chief, Ms. Braxton was simply defending herself, and you got in the way. She had no intention of striking you. That being the case, I can understand your arresting Clark, but Ms. Braxton?” He tsk-tsked at him.

At the end of the hallway, the door leading downstairs to the holding cells opened, allowing loud curses from the cells below to float upstairs.

“What have you ever really accomplished, Braxton, besides giving feminists a bad name?”

“Shut up, you sexist pig, before I come over there and—”

Fletcher, a young officer with only a few years on the force under his belt, jogged into the squad room. “Chief, how long are we going to hold those two?” he asked while jerking a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the cells. “They’re really getting ugly.”

“What do you mean, ‘getting ugly’? They were horrid before the debates even started.” Wiping his mouth, David packed up the casserole dish and handed it to Dallas while kissing her on the cheek.

A thin smile crossed George Ward’s lips. “With all due respect, Chief, the solution is really quite simple. Keeping Ms. Braxton locked up is going to do your office more harm than good. Word is getting out to the media, and my office will be forced to release a statement about how an overzealous small-town police chief with a political agenda overstepped his authority—”

“Overstepped his authority?” Dallas was on her feet. “Those two polecats would’ve torn the roof off of the Spencer Inn if David hadn’t broken it up.”

“Your candidate started it!” Erin said, jabbing a finger in Dallas’s direction.

“He’s not *my* candidate!”

There was a plea in Fletcher’s tone. “Chief, if Clark calls me a loser one more time, I swear that I’m going to shoot him.”

David sighed. “Okay.”

“So we’ll let them go?”

“No,” David said with a sly grin. “You have my permission to shoot him.”

Fletcher’s eyes bugged out. George Ward’s and Erin’s mouths dropped open.

“Shoot Braxton, too,” David said. “We’ll tie blocks to their bodies and dump them in the middle of the lake in the middle of the night.”

George was the first to find his voice. “That is *completely* inappropriate, Chief!”

“He’s joking,” Tonya said with a sharp tone. “You are kidding, right?”

“Yeah,” David said with a tired sigh. “Bring them up to my office.” When George and Erin turned to follow him up the stairs to his office, he added, “Alone! I want to talk to the children alone.”

Her eyes wide, Erin pushed past George so that she could follow David. “You can’t interview Ms. Braxton without me.”

“Why not?” David’s tone dripped with the authority of his position as chief of police. This was his town, and he was the one in control of this matter.

Erin dropped back a step. After regrouping, she gave him a fiery look. “I’m her assistant. It is my job to always be available for her whenever she needs anything. Wherever she goes, I go.”

“If she needs anything during our talk, I’ll call you.”

David’s corner office occupied the second floor of a log building that resembled a sports club more than it did a police station. His office windows looked out onto the police dock, which held four speedboats and six Jet Skis. The police fleet also included all-terrain vehicles for patrol or searches in the deep woods up and down the mountain.

When David went into his office, he found Gnarly and Storm occupying the sofa—seemingly licking each other’s lips to pick up any remnants of the bear claw. Upon seeing David, the two large dogs stopped and looked at him with questions in their eyes. Their pointy ears stood up tall.

With a shake of his head, David crossed the office to take a seat behind his desk. Within minutes, he heard Councilman Clark and Nancy Braxton loudly protesting their treatment while Officer Fletcher escorted them up the stairs.

Bill Clark shoved his political opponent aside to enter the office ahead of her. His tie was undone. His tailored suit had been torn in the previous night’s altercation. “O’Callaghan, I knew you were stupid—”

Upon seeing not only Gnarly but also a second dog only a fraction smaller than the German shepherd glaring at him from the sofa, Bill Clark stopped to regroup.

Past middle age, Nancy Braxton’s face, which was as bloated as her figure, was the image of displeasure. To accentuate her equality to men, she was never seen wearing anything but a pantsuit. She glared at David with small, beady eyes. Fearlessly storming past the dogs, she charged his desk. “How dare you lock us up like two common criminals!”

“Seriously?” Showing no fear, David chuckled. “You two assaulted an officer of the law—”

“How were we supposed to know you were a police officer?” Nancy said. “You weren’t wearing your uniform.”

“You both know me,” David said. “You know that I’m the chief of police, and you both threw punches at me.”

“I wasn’t aiming for you,” Nancy said, “I was aiming for him.” She pointed at Bill Clark, who had cautiously maneuvered up to the desk while keeping an eye on Gnarly, who was watching him closely.

“Like any good mayoral candidate would have done,” David said.

“He started it,” she said.

“You started it,” Bill said.

“How dare you, Clark, bring up my getting expelled from Princeton Law School for cheating!”

“You were a cheat thirty years ago, and you’re still a cheat,” the councilman said.

“And you’re a blackmailer! I have witnesses who said that you pressured members of the town council into approving your clothesline ban!”

“Enough!” David shouted while holding up his hand. “I’ve had it up to here with your childish accusations!”

“They’re not childish,” Nancy said. “Political leaders need to be strong and decisive and of the best character—”

“Which *both* of you *lack*!”

“I’ve never!”

“On the contrary, Braxton! You do all the time!” David laughed. “I’m not some uninformed, unwitting voter capable of falling under your pathetic-though-well-rehearsed act of sincerity. I know you! I know both of you! You’re both the most self-absorbed, corrupt, power-hungry, pitiful excuses for American leaders I’ve ever seen.”

“Watch it, O’Callaghan,” Bill said through gritted teeth. “One of us is going to be your boss after this election.”

“And since you know us, you know that both Bill and I have *very* long memories,” Nancy said.

“So I’d watch my mouth if I were you.”

“I’m out there every day talking to the citizens in this town,” David said. “You two are so out of touch that you don’t realize how angry we are. You don’t know the real issues that everyone faces and the divide that has occurred between the locals and the city folks moving in. We see you two and the rest of the town council strutting around—all proud about how we placed our faith in you to make things right—yet none of you have ever lifted a finger to do what we elected you to do.”

“That’s just your opinion,” Nancy said.

“No, it’s not,” David said. “Yes, you two are the only names on the ballot. How you got there speaks to the condition of the political establishment itself. The fact is that no one in Spencer likes *either one of you*. If we had a real choice, we’d vote for *Gnarly* before we’d vote for you.”

Following the wave of David’s hand, they turned to where the German shepherd was sitting behind them, scratching his shoulder with his hind leg. His head was down, his ears were falling to either side of his head, and his mouth was hanging open with delight at finally reaching the spot that itched.

Bill Clark laughed. “Yeah, right.”

