

*The Waltz of Broken Dreams*

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*The music starts...*

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*These folk seem to think it's hot out*, AJ thought to himself as he circulated around the tent. It was in the 80s, and moderately humid, but it was nothing compared to what Hector's Junction was like. *Damnyankees could never take the heat anyway*, AJ thought.

New Hampshire seemed like a nice enough state, at least in July. He knew that he'd come to hate it in December, January and February, though.

It was the first time he'd done anything like this before. Grab a presidential campaign and ride it along, freelancing dispatches as he went. He'd picked this one, because the Senator seemed like a nice kind of guy who talked straight. There seemed to be a goodly collection of reporters already on board for the trip. AJ wondered how long it might run.

The candidate was standing under a yellow and white striped rental tent – *are all rental tents yellow and white striped?* he wondered – chatting with potential supporters and donors. They were at the home of some state senator, who obviously did something besides be a state senator, based on the size of house and the waterfront yard. New Hampshire had the lowest paid legislators of any state – 200 dollars a term – and perversely, the richest legislators. You had to be independently wealthy to run or you couldn't support yourself otherwise.

He weaved skillfully in and around the local pols who were all jockeying for spot to meet the candidate. There was a food table set up on the flagstone porch off the house, and AJ headed

straight for it. He began to load up a paper plate with hotdogs and potato salad. Someone bumped into him as he was pouring himself some soda pop and it splashed a little on the table.

“Excuse me,” a woman’s voice said, “I’m terribly sorry.”

The voice was distinctly Mid-Western, and pleasant. AJ turned around. The woman was shorter than him by a good six inches, with pleasant brown hair and average looks, approximately his age. But what caught his attention were the eyes. They were blue, and they were alive with curiosity and intelligence. “’S’all right,” AJ said. “No harm done, Miss...?”

“Newburg, Beth Newburg,” she said. She glanced at his press badge. “You must be new.”

“Couple of days ago. AJ Dawson,” he said, putting down his pop and extending his hand.

Her eyes widened, and she lowered her voice. “You’re AJ Dawson? The one who wrote the story about the widows in Syria and won the Pulitzer?”

“My second,” AJ said, smiling at the recognition. “And you’re with?”

“*Prairie Today*, in St. Louis,” Beth said. “Are you still with the *Reporter*?”

“No, I’m taking some time off. Thought I’d do a little freelance work.” AJ shrugged. The truth was that he was on a forced vacation. He’d seen some nasty stuff in Syria, and Ted thought it was affecting his work, so he took AJ off duty and ordered him not to leave the country. He was here because he felt silly sitting around his apartment, and he needed something to do.

“So you’re going to be joining us then?” Beth asked, smiling and nodding at someone who said hello as they passed.

AJ nodded. “Are there many of us?”

“Us as in reporters in general, or us as in newspaper people?” Beth asked.

AJ waved a hand. “Either.”

“There are quite a few reporters,” she said. “There’s the TV crew from CNN and the crew from CSPAN, and then the guys from the big dailies in New York, Chicago and Washington are all here.” She shrugged. “The TV guys keep to themselves though. As for the regional papers, there’s one other, from the *Sentinel*. Jim O’Brian. Know him?”

AJ nodded. “We met a couple years ago at an awards banquet. Nice guy. Where is he?”

Beth pointed. “Over there, schmoozing with the press secretary.” O’Brian was older than both of them by a goodly bit, with graying hair and a neatly trimmed moustache.

There was a splash down by the water. There were kids playing in the lake. Except for the pair of TV cameramen circulating, the whole thing looked like an over glorified family reunion where folks came dressed up. “Not much to see right now is there?” he asked, gesturing around at the small gathering. There were maybe 45 people, but the potato salad tasted pretty good, and hot dogs were probably Fenway Franks, by the taste.

Beth shook her head, and smiled at him. AJ thought it was a pretty smile “Don’t feel bad, I’ve been at this since June. The crowds were even smaller then. The weather was worse, too, seeing as we were in South Carolina. God, it was hot.”

AJ grinned. “What part of the Mid-West are you from originally?” he asked.

“Missouri, near Independence. I grew up within spitting distance of the Truman Historical Site,” she said. “It was never as humid there as it was in South Carolina last month.”

AJ nodded. “I suppose so. I grew up in coastal Virginia. I’m used to it.” He shrugged and saw that her paper cup was empty. “Since I’m standing here, can I ladle you some of this nameless punch? I’m desperately hoping it’s spiked, because I’m starting to get really bored.”

Beth laughed. “Please,” she said. “And I don’t think it is, but it would sure be interesting if it was.”

“It would make great television,” AJ continued as he ladled her a new cup “Especially if somebody got up on the table and started dancing with a lampshade on his head...”

“Stop,” Beth giggled loudly. “You’re awful!”

“Well, that’s why folk tell me not to quit my day job,” he said. “You know, I was having my doubt about this adventure, but now I think I’m going to like it here.”

“Oh?” she asked, “Why is that?”

AJ shrugged. “Because politics has always been the theater of the absurd, and I’ve always had a keen appreciation of the absurd.” He paused. “And besides that, nobody’s going to try to shoot me while I’m here.”

Beth had to swallow quickly. She’d been drinking her punch. “Don’t do that!” she exclaimed. “I almost snorted my drink out my nose!”

“Yeah, but it was cute,” AJ said.

Beth smacked him on the arm. “You are awful!” she said, but she was grinning.

“So what do we do for fun on this trip?” AJ asked.

“When we stop for the evening, we find a bar and shoot some pool or something like that,” Beth said. “We’ve been to some really sketchy locations.”

“I can imagine,” he replied. “So how about I buy you a drink tonight, make up for being a brat?”

Beth looked at him curiously and blinked. “I’d like that, thank you.”

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*...the dance begins.*