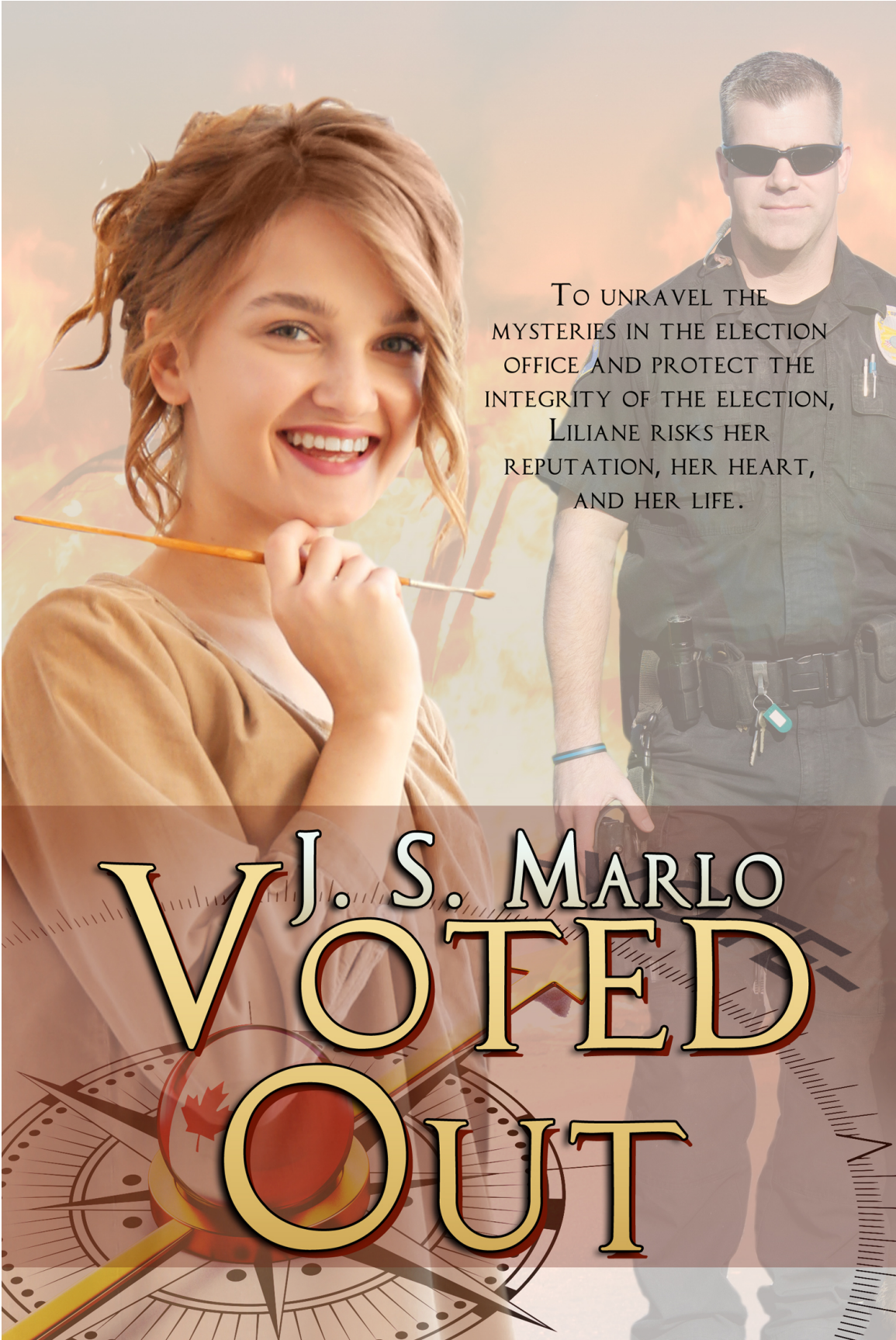


The book cover features a composite image. On the left, a young woman with light brown, wavy hair is smiling, holding a paintbrush to her chin. On the right, a man in a police uniform and sunglasses stands with his hands on his hips. The background is a warm, orange-hued sky with faint clouds. The title 'VOTED OUT' is prominently displayed at the bottom in a large, stylized font, with a compass rose graphic integrated into the letter 'O'.

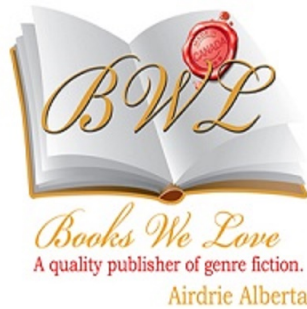
TO UNRAVEL THE
MYSTERIES IN THE ELECTION
OFFICE AND PROTECT THE
INTEGRITY OF THE ELECTION,
LILIANE RISKS HER
REPUTATION, HER HEART,
AND HER LIFE.

J. S. MARLO
**VOTED
OUT**

Voted Out
By J. S. Marlo

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

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Hugs! JS

Chapter One

~My blood type is coffee.~

The chime of the doorbell intensified Liliane Irwin's frantic heartbeat.

She hadn't felt that nervous since her daughter's father kissed her, and from there it had slid downhill so fast it broke a world record.

Relax, Liliane. It's not like you've never spent the night with a man.

Acutely aware of the signal she sent by letting him stay in her house for a few days while her nineteen-year-old daughter toured Europe with her best male friend, Liliane forced herself to breathe in and out as she peered through the living room window into the darkness. Her guest would chew her head off if she opened the door without checking his identity.

In the night, turquoise northern lights danced around the crescent moon in the western sky.

Her gaze traveled from the driveway, where he parked his rental car, to the porch illuminated by a lantern missing its pointy hat. There he stood, facing the front door, a duffel bag slung over his left shoulder.

She recognized his profile and the emblem stitched on his bag.

Here goes the beginning—or the end—of this relationship.

A surge of adrenaline jolted her body as she rushed down the stairs to open the door. A warm summer breeze wafted into the entryway. "You're late, handsome."

He smiled. A rugged smile that could instill fear as easily as it could ignite passion in the heart of the recipient. "There was a suspicious package at the airport. It took hours to sort it out. Did you get my message?"

His not-so-explicit text message had consisted of four words. *Probably be very late.*

"Yes. Come in." She hurried to close and lock the door before any unwelcome winged creatures fluttered in. "Since you cancelled our dinner date, I stayed at work late to search previous employment records."

The man whose slightest touch awoke the butterflies in her stomach enlaced her with his arms. “As long as you didn’t find that search as fascinating as me, I can handle the competition.”

Silent laughter rocked her belly, stirring the butterflies into a frenzy. She caressed his chin. His five o’clock shadow, peppered with gray stubble, gave him the appearance of a bouncer ready to throw out a rowdy client.

The man had haunted her nights for months. That he might be ousted from her unconscious mind by the results of her covert evening search spoke of the severity of the situation in the election office.

“It was a dreadful search with appalling results.” She hadn’t fully wrapped her mind around the discoveries she’d made. Yet.

When she was offered the easy, stress-free, part-time position of finance officer for the upcoming by-election, Liliane couldn’t turn down the opportunity of making a few extra dollars. The job in itself was easy and interesting, and had she not known the rules, questioned the entries, or noticed the inconsistencies; it might have remained stress-free and part-time.

He massaged her back with slow, gentle strokes, working his way down her spine, then up again. “Is that why you look tired and tense? Or is it because you haven’t eaten yet?”

“I need a long shower.” To wash off the dirt she’d unearthed. “I picked up a pizza on my way home. The leftovers are in the fridge, if you’re hungry.”

His eyes shone a stormy shade of gray as he slithered a hand under her shirt. “I am hungry. What would you say if we started with dessert in the shower?”

Lured by the delicious sensations he unleashed, she toyed with his belt buckle. “I love dessert on Sunday nights.”

~ * ~

Coffee. I need coffee. Liliane regretted not taking the extra five minutes to brew a cup before leaving home.

After living more than three years in this northern Manitoba town, she should have known better than to count on a short lineup at either of the Tim Hortons’ drive-thru locations on a Monday morning.

One day wishful thinking would cause her death.

In the meantime, she ought to stop falling asleep in the wee hours of the night and waking up at dawn, or she wouldn't survive the week. She wasn't twenty—or thirty—any more, though he'd made her feel like a teenager last night.

As she turned right at the intersection, a truck ran the red light, grazing her front bumper and missing her by a hair. A buzz cut hair.

Sweet chocolate, are the cops after you? If not, they should chase you.

In the best of times, Liliane didn't suffer fools gladly. Today, her patience had drowned at the bottom of a cup of coffee she hadn't drunk yet.

She parked between the two-story building that housed the new library and the old flat brownish building where the first library was erected more than half a century ago. The old building was scheduled for demolition, but since City Hall hadn't contracted out the project yet, the council agreed to lease it for two months to the local returning officer.

As Liliane exited her car, a sapphire blue minivan parked beside her, its color sparkling in the sun. She liked the shade. It looked prettier than dirty beige, the only color available when she bought her hatchback on sale two years ago.

Nathalie, the technology officer, emerged from the minivan with a coffee in her hand. "Hey, Lily. How long did you stay last night? And don't lie to me. I drove by after I went out for supper with Susan and the boys. Your car was here."

Though they hailed from different walks of life, Liliane and Nathalie shared a friendship that sprang from the four workouts a week they stomached together and the coffee breaks that ensued. Not only was lying to Nathalie not an option, but it was also pointless. Her friend belonged to a restricted group of individuals who dared calling her Lily and who could peel the truth from her.

Liliane leaned against the side of her ugly car. "I needed to go through some documents while no one occupied the office."

A disapproving look darted from Nathalie's eyes. "I don't think I need to remind you how unsafe this part of town is at night, so why on earth didn't you tell me about your plans? I would have stayed with you."

Staying late had been a last-minute decision resulting from her cancelled dinner date. She could have informed Nathalie, but Liliane didn't want to interfere with her friend's Sunday night ritual. Supper with her daughter and two grandsons.

No point ruining both our evenings. “Next time, I promise to include you, but you can’t tell anyone.”

Her friend’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “Oh golly, are you trying to nail Touchy Feely?”

The aroma from Nathalie’s cup along with the nickname toyed with Liliane’s mind. She needed a cup, soon, before she suffered from precipitated withdrawal. “Who’s Touchy Feely?”

Nathalie stared at her like she’d colored her hair green. Pea green. “Thomas Finch. Our outstanding returning officer. You didn’t know it was the reason every woman calls him TF behind his back?”

It appeared Liliane had made a mistake in believing it was because it corresponded to his initials. Nathalie’s revelations added another layer to the scheme Liliane had unearthed by accident.

A car she didn’t recognize pulled into the parking lot. If they kept chatting outside any longer, they risked attracting someone’s unwelcome attention.

With a tilt of her head, Liliane suggested they proceeded toward the office. “Listen, Nathalie, you and I will need to talk, but in private.”

A conniving smile crossed her friend’s ageless face. “I drove by the Recreation Center this morning. A sign says it’ll re-open tomorrow afternoon. Unless that talk is urgent, we could go Wednesday morning at 5:30. It’ll be quiet. Besides, our last workout dates back two weeks. We both need the exercise, or we’ll have to go shopping for bigger pants.”

Waiting two days didn’t present a problem. By then, Liliane might have a clearer picture of the situation.

“Wednesday sounds good. We’ll talk then.” As the words breezed through Liliane’s lips, a silent groan rumbled in her chest.

A water pipe had burst in the wall of the Recreation Center, wreaking havoc with their training schedules. The time had come to resume their workouts before it hurt too much, but getting up at 5:00 a.m. to go to the gym didn’t sound good. It sounded like a terrible idea. An idea she no doubt would regret on Wednesday morning.

I need coffee. Strong coffee.

Liliane entered the lobby of the election office behind Nathalie.

Seated at a low desk, which served as a barrier between the lobby and the corridor leading to private offices and conference rooms, the receptionist welcomed them with a gloomy expression. “You’re late, ladies. The meeting started five minutes ago.”

Nathalie threw a quizzical glance in Liliane’s direction. “Did you know we had a meeting?”

“No. I’ll meet you there in a moment.” That neither of them was informed of the meeting raised another flag in Liliane’s mind, but not as flamboyant as the one flapping in front of her.

Her friend ventured into the corridor, and within seconds, disappeared from view.

Liliane approached Gloria’s desk. “What’s wrong? And don’t say *nothing*.”

The receptionist, an elderly indigenous woman with a mind as sharp and witty as her tongue, had to be one of the most effervescent people Liliane had ever encountered. No matter the time of day or evening, Gloria welcomed everyone, clients and workers alike, with a cheerful voice and grinning face. Unless something bad happened, this morning shouldn’t be an exception.

“Please don’t feel bad, Liliane.” The apologetic look Gloria gave her threw Liliane for a loop. “It’s not your fault. I’m very grateful for the chance you gave me.”

Her brain had paused on *not her fault*. “What is not my fault?”

“You meant well when you hired me.” There was no mistaking the quivering and disappointment in the receptionist’s voice. “You couldn’t have guessed Mr. Finch promised the job to his sister. I’ll leave when she arrives.”

As understanding dawned on Liliane, it ignited her feisty spirits. “Listen to me carefully, Gloria. Thomas’ sister, whoever she is, isn’t sitting in your chair. I expect to see you here every single morning and you’re not leaving until we close every single night. I hired you because you were the best. You are not going anywhere. Are we clear?”

The older woman sat a bit straighter. “But Mr. Finch—”

“I’ll take care of Thomas.” Regardless of the consequences she might face, Liliane vowed to prevent Thomas from firing Gloria in order to hire his sister. “Don’t worry.”

A genuine smile inched its way across the receptionist’s face. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, tell me there’s a pot of coffee somewhere in the building?” Before confronting Thomas, Liliane needed coffee, strong coffee, to drown her homicidal impulses.

“Let’s go look in the kitchen.” Though her job description didn’t include making coffee, Gloria took it upon herself to brew a fresh pot every few hours, a thoughtful gesture appreciated

by every member of the staff, with the obvious exception of Finch. “If not, I’ll brew another batch and bring you a cup in the conference room.”

~ * ~

When it involved other people, Thomas Finch couldn’t stand tardiness. He always made a point of being on time, unless he had a good excuse, which his underlings should understand happened frequently to a man in his position.

Through the bathroom window, he’d glimpsed his technology and finance officers chatting together in the parking lot. To his annoyance, the window didn’t open, preventing him from eavesdropping on their conversation, but it would be a pity if an inopportune friendship developed between the two women.

Nathalie entered the conference room as Thomas finished introducing the man on his right.

Had his technology officer kept her mouth shut in the parking lot, she wouldn’t have missed the first five minutes of his meeting. That kind of behavior ought to be nipped in the bud if he didn’t want to lose control of his team.

Standing tall at the end of the long rectangular table, Thomas waited for the woman to sit before addressing the issue. Words sank in better when he towered over his employees. As he readied to speak, Liliane showed up with a cup of coffee in her hand. His new finance officer scrutinized him with an expression he couldn’t decipher.

Irritated by her poise, he indicated an empty chair at the end of the table. “Take a seat, Liliane. You’re late.”

“I prefer to stand.” Her back against the whiteboard, Liliane defied him in front of the others. “And for your information, Thomas, I cannot be late for a meeting I wasn’t informed was taking place this morning. Next time, you should make sure we all receive the memo.”

A deafening silence fell upon the conference room.

Thomas could hear the furious beating of his heart with every ragged breath he took. “You’re out of line, Liliane. If you don’t want to lose your job, you better learn to watch your mouth.”

“Well, since we’re talking about jobs, I’d like to remind you of a chapter in the rulebook. You know, the one about hiring family members to work in the office?” The sultry tone with which she spoke bordered on insolence. “The rulebook does say you’re allowed to hire your wife, or your

son, or your *sister*, but only in the absence of qualified applicants and with Election Headquarters' approval."

The intense desire to teach her a lesson surged inside his chest, but he curbed his impatience. In the past fifty-five years, Thomas had dealt with stronger women than her, and in the end, they had all surrendered to his will. "I've been returning officer for more than twenty-five years. I hope you're not planning on quoting the entire rulebook back to me."

"Not all the chapters, Thomas, just the sections you seem to have forgotten." The woman's audacity grated on his nerves. "If you recall, you were golfing the day we hired the receptionist. You may not be aware of all her qualifications, so let me enlighten you. Gloria isn't only smart, friendly, and computer savvy, she can also operate the archaic phone system they installed, she speaks English, French, Cree, and Dene, which comes handy when dealing with the many First Nations in our district, and she's willing to work seven days a week. In other words, she's more than qualified. Don't you agree?"

Liliane is defying me in front of the staff so the indigenous woman can keep her job as receptionist? Thomas couldn't decide if he'd overestimated or underestimated his new finance officer, or if she was misguided or foolish. "Of course I do, but we can't give her a raise if that's the reason you're bringing this up. So, is there anything else, or can we go back to this meeting?"

Liliane's gaze pierced through him like a dagger. Still, she ought to realize he had won the argument. Though his sister became an unfortunate casualty, this little incident didn't cause any damage to his leadership or his reputation.

"Well, since we solved Liliane's problem—whatever her problem was—let's move on to the next one." Thomas returned his attention to the employees seated around the table. "Over the weekend, I was informed of the upcoming visit of an electoral observer from Headquarters. In my opinion, this is a waste of our time and the taxpayers' money. We're doing a great job and we don't need some bureaucrat from back east looking over our shoulders for a week, do we?"

The no-no's whispered around the table pleased Thomas.

"Keep in mind, the man is only an observer. He doesn't have permission to interfere with your jobs. You don't owe him any explanations, or any answers, and you can refuse him access to your private offices. To stop him from disrupting the normal operations of this office, avoid him." Though Thomas couldn't deny him entrance to the election office, he'd be damned if he'd let the

unwelcome visitor meddle in affairs that didn't concern him. "Leonard and I will do our best to keep him busy and out of your hair. Any questions?"

"Two questions." Liliane raised her cup. "First, when will this observer arrive? And second, who's Leonard?"

The mild bursts of laughter echoing in the room didn't amuse Thomas.

"Unless his plane is hijacked or shot down, the observer should make an appearance sometime today." More chuckles resonated in the room, but this time, he joined in before gesturing toward his right-hand man. "Now, Leonard, if you could please rise and introduce yourself. Again."

The man seated at his right stood up. "I'm Leonard Hassler, the assistant returning officer. I will keep Mr. Observer occupied."

A brazen smile tugged at Liliane's lips, a smile that unsettled Thomas.

Steps resounded in the corridor.

"Mr. Finch?" Gloria's silver head peeked around the doorframe. "There's a gentleman here to see you. His name is Damien Godfrey. He says he's from Headquarters."

"Thanks, Gloria. Leonard and I will be right there." Thomas dismissed the receptionist with a swat of the hand. "The rest of you, get back to work."

Time to throw the watchdog a few bones. With any luck, the observer would choke on them.

~ * ~

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Thanks & Happy Reading!

J. S. Marlo

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