

*Waltzing
at Midnight*

NOTE FOR
ROSIE

Robbi McCoy

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at
Midnight*

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Dedication

To Gladys, for your many gifts of words and the delight that you took in each of my successes.

About the Author

Robbi McCoy is a native Californian who lives in the Central Valley between the mountains and the sea. She is an avid hiker with a particular fondness for the deserts of the American Southwest. Robbi's previous publications include numerous articles and short stories and two books, a hiking guide, *Geology Trails of Northern California* (Gem Guides), and *Late Bloomers: Awakening to Lesbianism After Forty*, a collection of coming-out stories. She also enjoys gardening, culinary adventures and the theater, and is the author of several ancient computer games. An English major with a minor in computer science, she works full-time as a software specialist and web designer for a major West Coast distribution company. *Waltzing at Midnight* is Robbi's first Bella Books romance.

Chapter One

I wasn't normally someone prone to panic attacks or even excessive nervousness, but ever since I had started working on Rosie's campaign, almost from the first day, in fact, I had caught myself more than once feeling that something big was about to fall on my head. A rush of adrenaline, followed by a fierce sensation of immediate danger, caused me to mentally, and a couple of times literally, duck. It was disconcerting. It was hard to ignore. The adrenaline was real and the heart palpitations which followed were notable. There was something about the atmosphere at campaign headquarters that made me unusually wary.

When I mentioned this to Faye after the first couple of weeks, she dismissed it as a normal response to the high level of excitement in the office. I wasn't used to such energy. My life was usually so quiet. I think what she meant was that my life was hopelessly dull. I decided she was right. The feeling of anxiety was uncomfortable and it remained with me, but I tried to turn it into something positive and direct it toward the work we were

doing.

After two months, I was no longer distracted by this sensation, which was, I decided, a natural reaction to being so far removed from my comfort zone. But it was still there, an uneasiness that nipped at the edges of my consciousness almost all the time whether I was at the office or home with my family.

“Thank you so much, and remember to vote on November third,” I said into the phone for about the thirtieth time already today. Getting people to the polls was our main goal. The 2007 election had no big issues, no presidential race, nothing pressing to coax people out. There were a handful of bonds, some city council seats, a couple of propositions which weren’t especially controversial and the mayor’s race. This was probably a good year for cutting my political teeth.

Clark, Rosie’s campaign manager, met the UPS truck outside at the curb and was just coming back in carrying a box. “This is the new batch of buttons,” he said, dropping the box on his desk.

Ginny, our regular UPS driver, followed him in with a hand truck and three more boxes.

“Let’s see them,” I said, coming over to Clark’s desk. He was tearing one of the boxes open while Ginny and I waited.

“Yeah, let’s see,” Ginny said, peering expectantly over Clark’s shoulder.

Ginny, a woman in her early thirties, showed up each day with our deliveries in her brown shirt and shorts and then volunteered for Rosie’s campaign on her days off. She wore her long blond hair in a ponytail through the back of a baseball cap. It swished about a lot because she was always on the run, jumping in and out of her truck. Clark produced a handful of buttons and passed them over to us.

Rosie’s image appeared in the center of the button, smiling, waving. Around the outside, in red lettering, were the words “Vote For Rosie—Knock Kiester on His.”

“I like that,” I said, pinning one on. “He should have changed his name if he wanted to be a politician.”

“It hasn’t hurt him much, though,” Clark pointed out. “Making people remember your name is half the battle. You couldn’t really forget his, could you? So we’ll use that to our advantage.”

“Give me a bunch of them,” Ginny said. “I’ll pass them out to everybody on my route today.”

Clark gave her a box of buttons, signed her paperwork, and then she was out the door, ponytail swinging.

There were three of us in the office this morning, me, Clark and Tina. Tina was the company receptionist, so she was here full-time, but the rest of us were volunteers for Rosie’s campaign. As the day wore on, more volunteers came and went as their schedules allowed. We had converted Monroe Advertising into campaign headquarters, pretty much curtailing business as usual. The closer we got to election day, the less likely any advertising business would be happening here. Rosie had sent her other regular employee, her graphic artist, home to telework for the remainder of the campaign so he wouldn’t be stumbling over us.

Rosie charged in about ten o’clock, looking invigorated. Despite the brutal pace of her schedule, she seemed to have limitless energy. “Good morning, all,” she called, her presence filling the room. Then, taking Clark firmly by the shoulders, she said, “Clark, everything’s coming up Rosie!”

“I know,” he said exuberantly.

“Why don’t we have a button that says that?” I asked.

“Good question, Jean,” Rosie said, spinning around to look at me. “Clark, see what you can do. Let’s try to keep line two free today, okay? I’ve got to return some calls. I’ve got a business that’s going down the drain in the midst of all this campaign folderol.”

Rosie shut herself in her office, leaving us to the task of selling her to the voters. The momentum was building, along with the exhilaration we all felt knowing we were going to win. The volunteers were in a high-energy state. The candidate was soaring.

Through the window between Rosie’s office and the reception

area, I could see her at her desk, talking animatedly into the phone. She was an attractive woman, made even more so by the jubilant personality that radiated off her. Her light ash brown hair was graying around the edges, cut short, lying naturally with no part. She didn't wear much makeup, but she didn't need to. She had clear skin and round, expressive brown eyes. The usual creases in the forehead and on either side of the mouth, and the usual softness of features that come with age gave her an experienced, intelligent look, the look of a woman who deserved respect. You saw a lot of her front teeth because she was always either smiling or talking expressively. She was open, natural and genuine. I had never known such a charismatic woman, and she made me feel extraordinarily dull by comparison.

Rosie had been pushed into running for mayor of Weberstown, shamed into it by her friends and colleagues who insisted that the only place she could really do the work she wanted to do for the city was at the helm. That's what I'd been told, anyway, since I hadn't known Rosie before I walked through this door to volunteer. Now it seemed impossible to me that I hadn't at least known about her. She was involved in practically everything that happened in this town, in every arena, especially the arts, to which she seemed particularly devoted. She was a woman at the top of her game, by anyone's standard.

It hadn't even occurred to me, living out my self-centered life among my small circle of acquaintances, that elsewhere the town was bustling with all of this activity. I had learned more about my town in two months than I had in forty years. And I felt ashamed that I hadn't previously given a thought to people like Rosie who worked tirelessly without my gratitude to improve and preserve my way of life. There were just a handful like her, but together they exerted enormous influence over how our community grew and prospered while the bulk of the citizenry did nothing or, worse, just complained. I hadn't been doing my part all these years, that was apparent, which was doubly embarrassing considering that I was a native and Rosie was an out-of-state transplant.

Rosie had a rare gift, the power to motivate people. If she

could motivate me, who wouldn't she be able to motivate? The more involved I got with this campaign, the more compelled I felt to be active myself, the more desperate I felt to accomplish something, as though I was in a foot race at the back of the pack, falling further and further behind. The momentum here was so unforgivably fast. With my limited skills and even more limited experience, there wasn't much I could do of importance, but, certainly, helping to get Rosie elected would be something that would have important consequences.

After spending Monday at headquarters working the phones, I went door-to-door Tuesday, peddling Rosie to stay-at-home moms, retired people and the unemployed who were home watching truck driving school ads on TV. If no one answered the door, I left a flyer.

"I hope we can count on your vote," I said to a young woman with a wide-eyed toddler peering around her legs. Then I was back into the street.

It was a hot October day just over a month away from the election. This wasn't my neighborhood, but was similar with its rows of California tract houses with painted cedar siding, three-car garages and no side yards, a respectable middle-class residential area. City-planted ash trees lined the street on either side. A dog barked at me from behind a six-foot redwood fence. I'd never have thought I'd be out knocking on strangers' doors, but I was enjoying it. It was easy enough to hand out leaflets and talk up your candidate, especially if you really believed she was the woman for the job. When I started, I didn't have much of an opinion, but a couple of weeks later, I was thoroughly convinced that Rosie was that woman.

And what would I be doing otherwise right now at one o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon? Groceries? Dry cleaners? Things that needed doing, I supposed. It was beginning to get on Jerry's nerves, my volunteer work. He wanted me home when he came in, and, as I'd only recently realized, he wanted me receptive to his mood, to a discussion of his day, not preoccupied with my own day's events. He definitely didn't want me to talk about them,

cutting into his time, as it were. The jobs I normally took, low-paid office work, didn't detract that much from my home life. Those jobs left me mentally unencumbered and home to greet Jerry when he arrived. Amy, too, wasn't getting the attention she was accustomed to, but this was temporary, would be over soon, and then I would quit neglecting my family. Now that Amy was in college, though, and really didn't need her mother hovering about, this work of mine was doing her no real harm.

"Oh, yes," an elderly man said after I introduced myself. "We're going to vote for Rosie. You bet."

"Can I put a sign on your lawn?" I asked. He agreed, helping me hammer in the stake.

We were going to win, I could feel it. Rosie for Mayor signs littered the streets of Weberstown, welcoming me everywhere I went. As I turned into my street at the end of the day, a six-foot sign planted in my front yard waved me into the driveway, testifying to my family's political involvement. Just across the street the Strattons boasted an equally impressive endorsement of opponent and incumbent, Hugh Kiester.

I hurried into the house, my feet aching, and threw together a meal of tuna salad sandwiches, ready just in time for Jerry's arrival. He came over and hugged me at the kitchen counter, the stubble on his face scratching my cheek. "How was your day, hon?" he asked.

"Fun. I did the door-to-door bit."

"I'm a little worried about you walking the streets in strange neighborhoods."

I stuck a plate in front of him and gave him a paper napkin. "I've got my mace." I put the sandwiches on the table and sat down. "We're up in the polls again. Rosie's got it nailed. I'm so excited!"

He smiled affectionately, crow's feet appearing around his light brown eyes. "Yes, you are. This work seems to have done you a lot of good." He bit into a sandwich. "It hasn't improved our meals any, but I guess if it makes you happy, it's a good thing."

Happy? Is that what this is? I asked myself. Wasn't I happy

before?

“Maybe you should consider finding a full-time job after the election,” Jerry said. “Something interesting, not like those things you’ve done before, but something that would absorb you like this, push you a bit.”

“I thought you were feeling neglected,” I said, taking a sandwich.

“Well, it was a selfish attitude. Jeannie, I’ve been watching you lately, and I’ve made some observations.” He stopped eating and looked at me purposefully. “Maybe you didn’t realize it—I know I didn’t, but a couple of months ago you were a miserable woman.”

“What?” I objected. “I was not miserable.”

“I think you were. And now you’re not. Think about it. You’re so full of life now, so enthusiastic about what you’re doing. It’s fun to watch. Amy thinks so too. Ask her.”

I said nothing, thinking about what he said. Yes, I felt different, more energetic, more anxious to get up in the morning and get going. I might have been bored before, but certainly not miserable. I was happily married to a successful CPA with two well-adjusted, healthy children, one of them cavorting across Europe, one of them still at home, attending our local community college. What was there in this scenario that could possibly make me miserable? I just needed something of my own to do, probably, especially with the kids out of the nest, if not literally, then at least emotionally.

Yes, Jean, I thought, you’re a cliché—a forty-year-old wife and mother with the kids grown, feeling left out of the world and desperate for a life of her own.

“Where is Amy, by the way?” Jerry asked.

“Still at school, I guess.”

Jerry got a bottled beer out of the refrigerator and twisted off the cap. I was reminded of the time before we were married when he had opened a beer with his teeth to impress me. You could still see the chip, small, but right there on the edge of his front tooth.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing. Maybe I should go to college,” I said, “one of the business colleges or the community college.”

“Yeah, you and Amy could trade notes.” He sounded amused.

“I’m serious. Why shouldn’t I go to college?”

“No reason. You’re an intelligent woman. I guess we can afford it, at least the junior college. You’ve got until January to decide on a major. Pick something lucrative, okay? If my wife’s going to get a career, I’d like it to pay. Not like this campaigning stuff. You’re working more than forty hours a week with nothing to show for it. At least at that dentist’s office, you brought in a pretty decent paycheck.”

“There’s plenty to show,” I countered. “And next month when Rosie’s elected, it’ll show well enough.”

“I hope she appreciates what we’re going through,” he said.

I mussed his thin hair. “Poor lamb.”

At ten o’clock, I confiscated the remote control from Amy and switched to the local station to watch Rosie in a debate against Hugh Kiester. The third candidate, Mike Garcia, wasn’t considered a serious contender and had not been invited. Rosie appeared behind a podium in a broad-shouldered red jacket and white blouse, precisely groomed and made-up, every light brown hair in place—and the gray ones too—her cheeks slightly ruddy, her lips bright red, a smile on her face, as usual. I smiled too, remembering her complaining to Clark about having to wear lipstick on camera. She didn’t like it, thought it made her look like a clown, but everyone insisted that there was no choice in the matter, that’s just the way it had to be, like a law of physics or something.

“She’s a good-looking woman,” Jerry said.

Yes, I thought. She’s beautiful.

Kiester was droning on about his public service career, about how qualified he was for the position. “My opponent has no experience dealing with the complexity of big city finances,” Kiester said. “I ran a multimillion dollar company for fifteen

years, and I've been working in city government for eight years, as a member of the planning commission and then as mayor. I know how to make long-term plans for our future growth. As mayor, you have a responsibility to deal with public funds wisely and with foresight."

"The city is practically broke," Rosie said. "Are you bragging about that, Hugh? During your term, the monies have been so badly mismanaged that if Weberstown were a charity, it would be criminally prosecuted for fraud. The reserve was in the millions of dollars when you became mayor. Today there is no reserve to speak of."

Rosie's manner was spirited and good-natured, as though she were enjoying the game. She was relaxed. He was tense and on the defensive. You could tell he was frustrated, had no means to slow the momentum of phenomenal Rosie.

"And on the issue of planning for the future," she said, "the plan submitted by your planning commission last month, a year late and forty million dollars over budget, is doomed to be voted down by the council. It's unrealistic and even in opposition to the county and state plans. Environmentalists and state offices are hollering bloody murder. But I've got to give you the fact that it's farsighted. Fifty years! No other city's plan has been able to see that far into the future, Hugh. Maybe you ought to rent out your crystal ball."

I smiled along with Rosie as she and the camera turned to Kiester, whose face was contorted into a grimace trying to become a smile.

"Isn't he a jerk?" I said. Jerry patted my arm to placate me.

The mediator asked about job creation. This was one of Kiester's vulnerable areas. Rosie was going to smear him. I was definitely enjoying myself.

"Bringing new jobs to our county is one of my top priorities," Kiester said. "We have implemented several new programs to make this area attractive to business, including the one-stop permit office which will open in January. In the recent past we've asked new and expanding businesses to shoulder too great

a percentage of support for our infrastructure. I've ordered the council to review the business tax structure and look into the fee system, land use and environmental regulations, and several areas where we might ease some of the burden away from businesses willing to locate here and employ our citizens. Two companies which will employ a total of two hundred and eighty-five people have committed just this month to relocating to our city."

When it was Rosie's turn, she sparkled at the camera and said, "If you can't get a job done, take credit for somebody else doing it. The two relocating companies the mayor refers to were secured through the negotiations of the Vision Partnership, a cooperative of civic leaders and businessmen and women, of which I am the director. The Partnership was formed because we're deeply concerned about the lack of jobs in our community and we've been unable to move city government to act. One of the reasons we haven't been more successful is that businesses are alienated by the apparent apathy of city government in assisting them. The regulations are oppressive, the taxes are restrictive, and the red tape involved in getting licenses and permits is prohibitive. Not a single piece of legislation has been passed in the last two years to ease these constraints, and the one-stop permit office, which we've been pushing for at least three years, has been too long coming."

Rosie gestured in a relaxed manner with her hands, talking into the camera as though she were addressing a friend. She was so good at this! "And, as the mayor has just told us," she continued, "he has finally asked the council to review some of the restrictive policies, policies he promised in his previous campaign to revise. How many terms do we give Mr. Kiester before we get some results? Since he took office, twenty-two private-sector employers in the city have shut their doors. Four hundred and twenty-one people lost jobs." Rosie paused for effect. "No, he didn't cause an atmosphere discouraging to business, but neither did he do anything to improve it. As far as I'm concerned, the single most urgent issue for this community is unemployment. Put people back to work and you'll reduce crime. Bring more

business to town and you'll increase the tax revenue. I've shown my commitment to this issue through the creation of the Vision Partnership. Mr. Kiester has shown his lack of commitment through inertia." Rosie glanced at Kiester, the camera dutifully following her lead. He coughed nervously. Rosie continued. "We need to inject some life into this lackadaisical government. We need to get off our Kiester." Rosie hit the podium with her fist. I laughed out loud.

"Isn't she something?" I said after the debate.

"Mom," Amy complained. "Enough already. People are gonna think Rosie's your GF or something if you don't cool it." My daughter got up from the couch, standing to her astonishing five feet nine, her lanky form slumped at the shoulders. Both of my children were tall, unlike me, and Amy was having a hard time accepting her attributes. For her sake, I hoped she had reached her full height. Already she wore only the flattest shoes she could find and her posture was suffering. Despite her awkwardness over her tall frame, however, she wasn't the least bit shy.

"Well, don't you think she's impressive?" I said. "She's the perfect role model for someone your age."

Amy sang in a mocking voice, "She's the tops, she's the tower of pizza."

"Pisa," Jerry corrected.

"Really? I like it my way." Amy tossed her head to throw her long hair out of her face.

"Hey, princess," Jerry said, "how about taking all these newspapers and putting the bins out for pickup?"

"Yes, my lord and master," Amy said with a low bow. "Your wish is my command."

"Jerry," I asked, as Amy took an armload of newspapers from the room, "are you going to vote for Rosie?"

"You know I am," Jerry said. "You'd probably kick me out if I didn't."

"But wouldn't you vote for her anyway?"

"Probably. It's hard to know with you campaigning us to death. We're getting a biased view."

“Well, if you just look at the facts—”

Jerry held up a hand. “Whoa. Let’s not. I’m going to bed. Are you coming?”

I nodded. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

As soon as Jerry had gone, Amy returned, flung herself on the couch and switched stations to tune in to some reality show. “You’re pretty sure Rosie’s going to win, Mom?” she asked.

“How could she lose against that imbecile?”

Amy tossed her long hair yet again and leaned her head on the back of the couch. “Yeah, she’ll probably win. Kiester is so gross. People are tired of seeing his face.”

This girl understands politics, I thought. “Don’t stay up too late. School tomorrow.” Before going to bed, I cleaned off the kitchen counter, except for the pile of Rosie propaganda at one end. There she was smiling up at me from a flyer with that magnetic personality. Seeing her image there, I couldn’t help but smile myself.

From the moment we met two months ago, I’d felt the special energy she radiated. “Welcome aboard, Jean,” she had said, shaking my hand heartily. Her presence was powerful. When she looked at you, you knew she was seeing you, really seeing you. And she was honest and intelligent, so much more intelligent than Kiester. I didn’t suspect, when Faye coerced me into volunteering, that I would end up believing so firmly in my candidate, that I would want so much for her to win. I’d always assumed, like most people I knew, that politicians were self-serving manipulators. Rosie was exactly the opposite. She acted out of altruism. Her business, and the business of the community, seemed to be what she lived for. With no husband, no children, she gave herself over to public life.

Faye thought it would be good for me to get involved in something. “And you’ll be setting a good example for your daughter,” she said, a timely example, since this was Amy’s first election. That’s the way, Faye, hit a mother where it counts. I had argued at first about not having the time, about not knowing anything or even caring about politics. For the sake of our long

*We hope you enjoyed this
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