

Bonus Chapter 166.5

Valerie

(July 3)

She had never been so scared. She was shaking and could barely feel the gun in her hand. A man was coming up to her parked truck. Could she kill him? Would she have to? He wants what's in the truck more than me, she thought. She was an attractive woman, but what she had in the back of the truck was even more of an attraction to most men these days. There were plenty of psychos out there doing whatever they wanted, especially now that there weren't any cops around.

Valerie had parked the truck by backing it in to the end of a dead-end street, so she could escape easily if she needed to. But, the street was narrow and the guy had purposefully blocked the street when he parked. She gripped her gun even tighter. He wouldn't get her without a fight.

It was dusk, which was about 9:00 p.m. this time of year, and hard to see. The streetlights weren't on; they no longer worked because thieves stripped them of the copper wire. Lights that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to install a few years ago were now being destroyed for a few dollars of copper. That summarized what was going on throughout Olympia, and why she was parked with a valuable cargo.

She looked around quickly to see if there was another escape route. Nope. She was parked on a street in a crappy closed down industrial part of Olympia with nothing but empty, burned out buildings and garbage blowing around. In the distance, she could hear the barking of wild dogs that no longer had people to take care of them.

Would it be loud? She wondered. When her gun went off and she shot the man, would it make her deaf? That would be better than what awaited her if she didn't shoot him. Maybe she could just scare him off, like what happened on TV, though her friend, Erica, had found out that warning shots didn't work. Valerie prayed that the same thing didn't happen to her.

She saw the headlights of another truck. This could be good or bad, she thought. It could be a good citizen arriving to help her or it could be another man who was helping the first one. The clip, or "magazine" or whatever it was called, held fifteen bullets. Thank God. She might need them all.

The second truck stopped. The driver yelled something to the first man and he turned around. He went over to the second truck. They were working together. This was not good.

She thought about hitting the gas pedal and trying to smash through the two trucks. That would never work, she realized. She could get out and try running.

No. She couldn't leave the precious cargo in her truck. She had a job to do. She always knew there was risk to what she was doing, but had never really realized just how dangerous this was until now. No, she would shoot them, and be deaf or whatever, before she'd let them have her or the fortune she was hauling.

The man from the second truck got out and started slowly walking toward her with his hands up.

As he got closer, she could see that the man had on a white t-shirt, a red hat, and jeans. Thank God.

She flashed her headlights at the man to signal that it was OK for him to keep coming. She relaxed the grip on her gun.

The man put his hands down and started walking normally. He walked quickly, but was trying to look like he was just walking like a normal person.

As he came up to Valerie's truck, she unrolled the window and he stopped close enough for her to hear him. "This one time at band camp," he said.

She was enormously relieved. That was the code phrase. Now she had to give the correct code phrase in response.

"Move along swiftly," she said with relief.

He smiled. "OK, we can do some business," he said. She felt her body relax. She was going to pull this off and get home safely.

The man signaled for the other guy to come over. He had a rifle and came running up. A third man, who Valerie hadn't seen before, came out of the truck with a rifle, too.

"That first guy spooked me," she said. "He didn't have a white t-shirt and red hat like I was told you have."

"Yeah," the man said, "he got here before I did and he didn't follow the plan, which was to let me approach you. Sorry about that." He was glad the first guy didn't get shot or spook her, causing her to run. It had taken a week of work to arrange this little transaction. He didn't want to go to all this work again, and risk the deal not going down, just because some rookie couldn't follow the plan.

The man in the white shirt looked at the truck. It was exactly what he expected she'd be driving.

"How much you got?" He asked, as he was scanning the area for threats. His riflemen, who had come up to her truck by now, were behind him were doing the same.

"Four hundred gallons," Valerie said. She couldn't help smiling. It was an emotional release after all the life-and-death tension she had experienced a few seconds ago.

"Diesel?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Awesome," he said. He wanted to say her name, but didn't know it.

"Awesome, whoever you are." He knew how much risk she was taking by doing this.

"I've got the other stuff you need," she said, reaching over to the passenger seat.

"I'll come around to your side," the man said, going in front of the truck and over to the passenger side door. He opened it and grabbed one of the items on the passenger seat.

Suddenly he felt uncomfortable. Embarrassed. He looked at her.

"It's fine," she said, waving her hand at him. "I've seen men in their underwear before."

The man undid his belt and took off his jeans. He looked at her again as if to say, "Sorry, ma'am."

He grabbed the white one-piece mechanic's uniform she had on the passenger seat. She giggled. Here they were in a very dangerous situation and he was worried about not undressing in front of a lady.

He put them on quickly and poked his head back into the cab of the truck. "You got the other stuff?" He asked, hoping she did.

"Yep," she said, pointing to the ID card on the passenger seat. "You have everything you need, 'Mr. Driskell.'"

"Is that my name?" The man asked with a smile. "Couldn't you have picked something cooler? Like 'Steele'?" He was on a very dangerous mission, but couldn't help flirting with her. She was cute.

Valerie suddenly got serious. "That's a guy who was recently killed. I stole his ID. He looks like you, so it was perfect."

"Oh," the man said, "I'm sorry."

"No problem," she said. "We weren't close, and at least his ID is going to good use."

"We gotta boogie," one of the rifleman said, realizing that "Mr. Driskell" was spending precious time in a vulnerable tactical position flirting.

Valerie took the keys out of the Ford F600 fuel truck she was driving and got out. The man, now in the white work clothes of the Olympia Transit Authority, came around to the driver's side and got the keys.

She handed them to him quickly and the other rifleman signaled for her to come with him.

"Thanks again," "Mr. Driskell" said to her. "We'll put this to good use."

"I know," she said as she was walking fast with the rifleman toward his truck. "That's why I did this."

She got in the truck with the rifleman she had been following. The third man got in the remaining truck and drove off.

"Where to?" the rifleman asked her.

"Back to OTA," she said, referring to the Olympia Transit Authority. She had driven her car there and then driven the fuel truck out. She had a hard time driving the big fuel truck, but it was easier than she'd thought it would be.

"I need to get back to work because I have a crime to report," she said. "Can you believe those damned gangs? Stealing a fuel truck like that. I was working late tonight and I must have been engrossed in the payroll report, and a fuel truck got out of the gate. Damn it. I'll have a lot of paperwork to do." She paused and added, "I'll need to investigate this one myself," she said with a chuckle. "I hope I catch the bastards who did this. I bet the surveillance camera shows who did it."

She looked at the rifleman and said, "Unless that thing isn't working again. Ever since yesterday it has been malfunctioning," she said with a smile.

The rifleman asked, "Why'd you do this?"

Valerie started to laugh. She pointed toward the wall of a building they were passing. They both laughed. Spray painted on the wall was "I miss America."

"That's why," she said. "I had to do something." She figured she could trust the rifleman, considering he had just witnessed her commit a massive felony and

knew where she worked. She had been hiding what she had been doing for weeks; she hadn't even told her husband. She couldn't contain it any longer. Her story started gushing out uncontrollably.

She described how she was the human resources director for OTA, which had several hundred employees. She was a senior manager there at the ripe old age of 43. She rose through the ranks by being smart and working really hard. But, as the Collapse approached, being smart and hardworking no longer mattered. Everything was so political. She couldn't handle it anymore.

She believed in public transit, in making sure everyone could get where they needed to go. She wanted to help people, which was why she went into public service. But that was not what her agency was doing now.

Now it seemed like everyone at OTA was stealing. Some directly stole things, like tools and fuel, or they constantly submitted false expense reports. Others indirectly stole things, like the unions. As the HR director, she saw exactly what they were doing.

The unions were out of control. They got whatever they demanded from the politicians who ran the agency. The final straw for her was a few months ago when it was obvious the agency was out of money, but the unions refused to take a pay cut. She could see that, if the unions didn't take a pay cut or agree to lay off some of the many people who didn't work very hard, none of them would still have their jobs. The government had simply run out of money. She couldn't understand why the unions thought there would just be more money, given the plunge in tax receipts. Maybe it was because, for decades, there always had been more money.

She constantly marveled at how the OTA buses drove around nearly empty, yet each one of those buses cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and burned thousands of gallons of diesel every year. Wasn't that bad for the environment? The sad thing was that the politicians told people that buses were good for the environment.

Burning diesel without actually transporting many people wasn't good for anything, except the people who sold diesel. And the people who sold buses, who donated to the politicians. The unions, too, made out like bandits with the empty buses. They created mechanics' jobs for dues-paying members to maintain those lightly-used behemoth diesel-burners. Other union members had jobs filling out all the paper work for the purchases and maintenance. Valerie was guilty of this, too, because her job involved this paperwork. But she was doing something about it.

While individual employees stole little things, the really big thefts came from senior management. That's where Valerie came in. She was trusted and confidentially got the word that the OTA's massive stockpiles of diesel were to be "transferred" to "contractors" for "safekeeping." Her boss actually had the gall to wink when he said that. She knew who the "contractors" were: gangs. Not the stereotypical ethnic gangs; the gangs getting the diesel were the white-collar gangs. The "Rotary Club" gangs, who were friends of the OTA higher-ups. The upstanding companies who did business with the government.

She knew that the OTA managers wouldn't talk openly about the thefts of diesel. They certainly wouldn't keep records, so she could arrange for a fuel truck to

disappear and her bosses would assume it was part of the “transfer” program. Or it would be a theft blamed on those damned teabaggers. Damn them.

But, still, Valerie lost a lot of sleep while deciding whether or not to do this. That fuel didn’t belong to her and it was very risky stealing it. What if one of the “contractors” found out a fuel truck was missing but it hadn’t been “transferred” over to him? The Rotary Club gangs could get very nasty when people stole from them.

She remembered the day she decided to do it. She was driving home one evening and saw a young family walking with what looked like everything they owned. They could sure use a ride, she thought. But there weren’t any OTA buses running. They were “out of fuel.”

In that moment, she decided to get a hold of a person she thought might be working for the Patriot underground. A few weeks later, she was in a bad part of town turning over some extremely precious fuel to the good guys.

“Drop me off here,” she said about a block from the OTA offices so she could sneak back into her office. “I have a lot more work to do.”