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The Incident (Valerie, My Hero)

Chapter 1

“Come in, Ms. Dawes.”

Valerie stepped through the open doorway of Hartford Police Lieutenant Grissom’s cramped office, an all-shaded-glass enclosure trimmed with dark wood and beige government-issue metal furniture: chairs, desk, filing cabinets. Grissom’s bearlike figure seemed overly large for the room, and his dark black skin, broad nose, bulbous eyes, and untamed silver hair exaggerated the effect.

“Close the door, please, and have a seat.” Valerie shut the door. The breeze of its motion caused papers to flutter, pinned to the walls or stuck to the filing cabinets with tape and refrigerator magnets. A quick perusal of the magnets told her where Grissom preferred to get his coffee, pizza, and sub sandwiches. And that he was a huge Boston Red Sox and New England Patriots fan.

“Thank you for meeting with me, Lieutenant.” Valerie gripped the manila folder on her lap with both hands and sat in his worn, thinly padded metal framed guest chair. Grissom’s desk

towered in front of her, resting on cylindrical risers to accommodate his tall, massive frame. At 5'6", 125 pounds, she felt like a kid in the principal's office rather than a fresh graduate of the police academy. A moment later she stood and extended her hand across his cluttered desk, raising it uncomfortably high to clear the edge of the massive structure and all of the coffee cups, pencil holders, and other miscellaneous items stacked along its edge. Grissom remained engrossed in a document pulled from a manila folder. Her application, no doubt. Hopefully not reading it for the first time.

"Very impressive record at the academy." Grissom peered over his pince-nez glasses. He finally noticed her still-outstretched hand and took it briefly in his.

"Thank you, sir."

"Third in your class overall. First in marksmanship. Outstanding physical exam scores. Quite the runner, aren't you?"

Valerie allowed a tiny smile. "I ran track in high school and college, and also played some soccer and lacrosse."

"Captain of UConn lacrosse team, junior and senior years. ACC Champions, 1988. All-Metro soccer fullback in high school, 1983 and 1984. More first-place track ribbons than I could fit in this office. You've proved yourself a competitor, Ms. Dawes." He glanced at her again.

"And you look it, too. You're in good shape."

"Thank you, sir." She blushed and held her breath. Maybe she should say more... what, she had no idea.

Grissom set the application down on his desk and removed his glasses. "I'm glad of all that," he said. "It makes this much easier. Oh, and your exam essay on community policing was first-rate."

“Thank you, sir. But – *easier*, sir?” Valerie sat upright and rigid in her chair. This was not at all the interview she’d expected.

“I’ll come straight to the point, cadet.” He grimaced a moment, set her application down on her desk, and eased his frown into an embarrassed smile. “The name Valerie Dawes carries a certain amount of – *respect* around here.”

“I’m not trading on my uncle’s repu–”

“Of course you are. You’d be crazy not to.” Grissom removed his glasses and sat back in his chair as Valerie sat tight-lipped in hers. “Come now, Dawes. Are you trying to say your late uncle’s history does not in any way play into your choice to apply for a position in this department?”

Valerie darkened and stared down at her hands. “No, I’m not, sir.” She looked up. “But I want to be considered on my own merits, sir. On *my* credentials. Not his.”

“We wouldn’t have it any other way, cadet.” Grissom picked up her application again. “Your exam was among the best I’ve ever seen. Clearly you’ve prepared for this for some time.”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, sir. Since I was a child.”

“Since your uncle–”

“Before that.”

Grissom gave her a closed-mouth smile and a curt nod. “As you probably know, we’re on a bit of a push to hire more women and minority officers.”

She shifted in her chair, and it scraped the floor with a harsh, raspy noise. “I don’t want to be an affirmative-action hire. If I don’t out-compete the men–”

“You do, Dawes. Don’t worry.” He put his glasses back on. “We’d like you to start training the first of July. Can you be ready to work then?”

Valerie's heart pounded and she could not suppress a grin. "Yes, sir!"

"Very well." He stood and offered his hand. "Welcome to the Hartford Police Department, *Officer* Dawes."

Chapter 2

“You must be Dawes.”

Valerie turned to find the body behind the baritone voice that had spoken to her. *G. Kryzinski* read the brass nameplate pinned to his chest, just below eye level for her, on the dark blue uniform. Taller than average – probably about 6'2" – he was athletic in build, and probably had ten years on her. Three chevrons adorned his sleeves. A sergeant.

“That’s right. I’m Valerie.” She extended her hand, grateful to have company in the briefing room. She felt like a complete geek showing up so early for work on her first day.

“Gil. Welcome to Hartford P.D.” He nodded and smiled. “Partner.”

Valerie blinked. “You drew the short straw, eh?”

Gil looked her up and down and his smile broadened. “I’d say not.” He turned and walked toward the coffee urns at the side of the room. “Actually, Dawes, I requested you.”

“Really?” She hadn’t intended to sound so surprised. “I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be.” He turned to glance at her when he reached the coffee pots. “Can I buy you a drink?” Now a boyish smile.

“Sure. Black, two sugars. Thanks.”

Gil poured the coffees and stirred two packets of sugar into one of them. “Don’t get me wrong, Dawes. I know about you – your reputation. Outstanding cadet, family legacy, expert marksman, big into community and ‘broken window’ policing.”

Valerie nodded. “Fair enough. But you have me at a disadvantage. I know nothing about you.” She sipped the coffee. It was lukewarm, weak, and bitter.

“Eight years on the force. Just made sergeant. Refused a desk job – I want to stay on the streets. So I was made swing shift supervisor for Clay-Arsenal. Essentially, the straw boss for the beat cops in that neighborhood – *our* neighborhood. Had to transfer in to get that – from South End.”

“That’s why you needed a partner?”

“Smart girl.”

“Woman.”

A nod, another boyish grin. “I stand corrected.”

“But why me? You could have chosen almost anyone, with your rank. Someone with experience.”

Gil shook his head. “Nope. Well, maybe, but I didn’t want to. One reason was, I wanted someone with a fresh perspective. Two, I wanted to train you – my way.”

Val nodded and set her awful coffee down on an empty chair. “Makes sense. But you had several newbies to choose from. Why me?”

Gil smiled, then grimaced as he sipped his coffee again. “This stuff’s awful, isn’t it? First thing I’m gonna do is change the coffee service.”

“Second,” she said. “The first thing is, you’ll level with your partner when she asks you a direct question.” She met his surprised look with a steady stare.

“Once again, I stand corrected,” he said. “And that toughness you just showed me fits your rep. *That’s* why I chose you as my partner. He stepped away to toss his coffee into the sink.

She gave her own cup a disapproving stare, then focused back on him. “I’m flattered, Gil. I hope I can live up to your expectations.”

Gil nodded and a smile curled at the corners of his lips. “You will, Dawes. Just do me

one favor.”

She cocked her head and gave him a look of mock suspicion. “What’s that?”

His smile fell into a line across his lips. “Be honest with me,” he said. “Always. As I will be to you.”

“I will.”

His gaze bore down at her and he sat in the hard wooden chair next to her. “This is very important, Dawes. By being honest I don’t mean just being truthful when asked. You need to feel like you can talk to me. Anytime, about anything at all. Talk to me.”

She gave him a solemn nod and turned away, even as his words triggered memories she’d much rather suppress.

“Val. You have to talk to me.”

Valerie doodled on her sketch pad, propped up against the sky-blue beanbag chair on her bed. She didn’t acknowledge that her brother had spoken, or was even in the room.

“Come on, Valley Girl,” Chad said. “Say something.”

She doodled on. Seconds ticked by. Lots of them.

“I’m not leaving until you talk to me.” Chad, four years her senior, could be so annoying and stubborn. He didn’t used to be. Maybe all kids got that way once they got into high school.

Pencil scratched on paper. Her expression remained blank, her focus steady on the page.

“Even if it takes all night. Even when you change clothes for bedtime.”

“Tsh.” The first syllable, if one could call it that, escaped her lips.

“All right! A reaction at least. Come on, talk. What’s the matter? Did you get teased by the boys on the bus again?”

Sketch, sketch.

“Did you get in trouble at school?”

She sharpened her pencil with one of those tiny plastic sharpeners, a violet piece of plastic with a razor positioned at an angle that scraped half the pencil away before it created a decent point for drawing lines. As usual, she lost patience with it before the point formed properly. She drew parallel lines a millimeter apart across the page.

“Valerie. Come on. What’s wrong with you?” Pleading now.

“Nothing.” She rubbed the tip of her pencil against the back of the sketch pad until the burrs disappeared from the tip and twin tracks merged into one. He waited.

A knock came at the door. “Chad? Val? Are you in there?”

She glared at Chad. “Why didn’t you tell me that Uncle Val was coming over for dinner?”

“She speaks!” Chad raised his hands to the heavens and closed his eyes, imitating an angel.

“Sh!” Val hissed.

“Chad? Is your sister in there too?”

“Yes, Uncle Val. I’ll bring her downstairs with me.”

“The hell you will,” she said.

“Val, you’re too young to be swearing.”

She shrugged and returned to her drawing. At eleven years old, she was too young for everything, unless a grown-up needs something from her. A few minutes passed in silence, then heavy footsteps sounded outside the door.

“Chad?”

“Yes, Uncle Val?”

“Dinner’s ready. Where’s your sister?”

Valerie pleaded with her eyes and waved Chad off with her hands. He ignored her.

“She’s in here.” He turned back to her. “Maybe you should talk to him. If anyone can understand you, it’s got to be someone who shares your name.”

If anyone... but even so... he’s a grown-up. A male grown-up. One of the enemy.

But he was Uncle Val, her godfather.

She doubted it. But she could try.

“Where do you live, Val?” Gil guided their cruiser east on Albany Avenue. He had taken her out on patrol immediately after the morning orientation session ended – two hours of pep talks and Powerpoint presentation by desk jockeys. Probably the same people that made the coffee.

“Not far from here.” She pointed out her passenger-side window. “About three blocks from that U-Shop, toward the cemetery.”

“Really?” He gave her an appreciative nod. “Me too. We’re practically neighbors.”

“No kidding?” She turned toward him. “I thought you lived in South End.”

He scoffed. “Hell no. On a cop’s salary? I wish.” He slowed and peered through the windshield at the group of black youths loitering outside a boarded-up pawn shop. “This spot’s usually trouble,” he said. “These kids have no job, nothing to do, no parents – or none paying attention, anyway. We have to keep our eye on them.”

“What are their names?”

He gave her a quizzical, sideways stare. “Names?”

“Yeah. Like Gil, Valerie – you know. Names.”

“Don’t be such a smartass.” He almost suppressed a grin. “I know what the word means. I don’t know their names. Well, most of ‘em.” They passed the gang at low speed. “The tall one, he’s called Horse. Don’t know where the nickname came from, but it fits. He’s big, dumb, fast, and gets taken for a ride by every mare in the stable. Guy must be hung like a—”

“Horse. Yes, I get it.” Val rolled her eyes. “Let’s swing back around. I want to talk to them.”

“Later,” Gil said. “If we go back now, they’ll scatter, thinking we’re gonna bust their asses for something. Not that we shouldn’t. They’re always up to something.”

“You have quite the outlook on life.” She shook her head. “So did you move to Clay-Arsenal when you transferred, or have you always lived here?”

“When I transferred. I lived in the Barry Square area before, east of Maple. Another lovely spot.” He shook his head and snorted. “Hell, I got robbed twice down there myself. Those bastards are nervy.” He stopped at a light and checked his hair in the rear-view mirror.

“I’ll say. Robbing a cop? Off-duty, I take it.”

“Well, I say ‘robbed’ in the colloquial sense. They ripped off my apartment. TV, stereo, cash. Even a gun, the first time.”

“Service revolver?” Her eyes widened.

“No. Little .22 pistol I kept around – I’ve always had my own guns.” The light changed. He put the car back in motion. “In this line of work, it pays to be familiar with a variety of weapons.” He turned right on a side street and drove slowly through the neighborhood.

“What do you mean? The .38’s they give us pack plenty of pop, they’re reliable, and accurate as pistols go. Why would you need a .22?”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes, then shrugged. “I see Uncle Val didn’t teach you all the inside dope on policing.”

“N-no,” she said. “Hey, take a right here.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Okay. Why?” He slowed for the turn.

“I want to get back to Albany Avenue and do a little walking. Maybe meet Horse and all his thoroughbreds.”

“Ay carumba, you are persistent,” he said. “They’re called The Stallions, by the way – the gang, I mean. But you’re gonna wish they were geldings, believe me. They’re gonna have fun with you.”

“Because I’m a woman?”

“Because you’re a woman with a gun. I can smell their pheromones from here.”

Val sighed. “And you’re one of the progressive men on the force?”

Gil grinned as he took another right, heading north back to Albany Avenue. “You just wait. You’re going to meet some guys that make me look like Hillary Clinton.”

“Ew,” she said.

Gil laughed. “I rest my case.” He pulled the squad car over and parked. “Okay, Officer Dawes. Time to meet and greet. Your first hour of live Community Policing has begun.”