

In Search of Valor

Gary Corbin

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*To all of the people
who have read each book I've written.
Your faith in me and your unflagging support
keeps me writing.*

Chapter One

The short, squat man shaded his eyes, as much to hide his face as to shield his vision against the intense late-summer sun. “Built like a fireplug, sweats like a pig,” his football coach used to say. Mostly to get under his skin, but also to make an excuse for not letting him play quarterback. Never mind that he had the best arm on the team and could read defenses better than anyone. That he could outrun all but the fleetest of wide receivers and running backs, and every last defensive lineman who lumbered after him in parks-and-rec league. That he’d broken records for touchdowns and passing yardage in junior high ball. And—

Dammit! Focus! He cursed himself and shook his head to force the distracting thoughts away. Look for the girl. Ensure she’s a safe distance from Ground Zero. And that she didn’t return to her car and drive to where her kid played under adult supervision...for now.

He smiled. Such a great plan. If he didn’t have such an important job to do at the moment, he’d pat himself on the back, literally. Something his coach would never do.

Movement caught his eye to the left. A tall, curvy woman with light brown skin and thick black curls emerged from the parking structure. Even wearing those stupid oversized sunglasses, he recognized her. The bitch. He’d never forget that face. That condescending stare, telling him he wasn’t good enough for her.

She’d regret that decision. He’d make sure of it.

He watched her walk for a moment, striding toward the center of campus, checking her cell phone. Oblivious. Unsuspecting.

Perfect.

He tapped a message into the burner phone in his hand. "Move. Now." Hit Send. Then he walked in the opposite direction from her, tossing the burner into a garbage can on the way to his car, never looking back.

Chapter Two

Valorie Dawes averted her hazel eyes from the intense morning sun, an unseasonably warm mid-September day on the campus of the University of Connecticut. She'd dressed for the heat: shorts, running shoes, and a "Property of UConn Huskies" t-shirt. Nevertheless, sweat dripped down her back, soaking not only her skin, but also the sturdy backpack holding her books and laptop. She brushed damp, light-brown hair away from her face and stretched her wiry, five-foot-six frame onto her tiptoes to see over the heads of a few oncoming upperclassmen. Still no sign of her.

She checked the time on her cell phone. She'd arrived at 9:25, five minutes early, but that was fifteen minutes ago. Maybe she'd gotten the location wrong.

Val searched the busy sidewalks, crowded with students hurrying to their next air-conditioned classroom. Still no sign of Rhonda LeMieux's tall, curvy frame. Despite having moved to the mainland in her teens, Rhonda continued to operate on what she called "Jamaica time." Her habitual lateness had made her a favorite whipping post of their cantankerous professor of Criminology, Warren Hirsch. Doubts crept into Val's mind once again over her choice of a research partner for the Crim 101 term paper, the first class in her chosen major.

She scolded herself a moment later. Rhonda had mentioned when they'd first met that she had a daughter, and as a young single mother, she worried constantly about the girl's well-being. No doubt something had come up with the girl's care, and—

"Well, well, what have we here?" said a familiar male voice.

She turned toward the glass doors of the Student Union entrance. A thin-shouldered, blond-haired man wearing khaki shorts, a Polo shirt, and deck shoes stared back at her behind expensive Oakley sunglasses. He uncrossed his arms and pushed off of his shaded perch, ambling toward her with a silly grin on his face. "If it isn't the famous Val Dawes, all by her lonesome."

"Hoping to stay that way, too, Robb," she said, sighing. If anyone on the UConn campus represented privilege and arrogance, it was Robbin J. McFarland. "Esquire," as he'd emphasized when introducing himself on the first day of classes a few weeks before. She'd joined the few women and most of the men in the classroom in a group eye roll, but Robb remained oblivious.

"What are you waiting for, the press to show up and interview you *again*?" he said with a sneer. "Oh, right. *That* hasn't happened yet. That must be *absolutely* killing you, am I right, *Val*?"

"My name's Valorie," she said, then smirked. "Only my friends call me Val."

"Well, *excuu-uuse* me." Robb stepped closer to her. "I wouldn't want to presume. I only wondered if you'd reconsidered my offer."

"Which one?" She eased away from him, squeamishness rising in her abdomen, and scanned the sidewalks again for Rhonda. "The four awkward invitations to go out with you, or the even more absurd notion of partnering with you on the Criminology paper?"

"Oh, so you do remember." He smiled, which made his face resemble a snake's, or a fully shaved weasel. He wiped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief and edged closer. His six-foot-plus frame towered over her. "Well, I thought we could kill two birds with one stone and discuss our project over dinner tonight." He reached out to touch her. Val batted it away, hard.

"Ow!" he said, rubbing his arm. "Geez Louise, Dawes. Such a slender little thing, but you sure pack a punch."

"Sorry," she said, not sounding sorry. "Martial-arts reflex. Happens every time someone misunderstands the word 'no.' Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I see my real research partner."

Sure enough, a tall, dark-haired woman sashayed up the walk with an enviable air of confidence. She appeared to be in her early 20s, with smooth, light-brown skin and a toothy smile. A bright yellow sundress hugged her curvy figure, and three-inch heels brought her eyes almost even with Robb's. Unlike Val and Robb, Rhonda seemed unaffected by the late August heat.

"Is this boy bothering you?" she asked in her island lilt. "You let me know, and I'll have my Jamaican boyfriends take care of him, eh?"

Robb blanched, edging away as Rhonda approached. "Miss Dawes and I were just discussing the potential of teaming up on—"

"*Ms. Dawes and I,*" Rhonda said, her eyes hardening, "are already a team. No room for you, boyo."

"Oh, really?" Robb said. "And what do you bring to the table, *Miz LeMoose?*"

"De name's LeMieux. That means, de best." Her accent became more pronounced—intentional, Val guessed. Rhonda's grin widened as she went on. "And I live up to my name. Now go play on yo sailboat, or whatever you do in Martha's Vineyard." *Maw-taw's Vin-yawd*, to Val's ears.

"*Narra-gan-set*, please," Robb scoffed. "For Gawd's sake. Don't lump me in with the freaking Kennedys." He turned away, his nose high in the air, and strode off, muttering and shaking his head in disgust.

Val expelled a loud breath and glanced at Rhonda. "What a character," she said.

"Get used to it, my friend," Rhonda said. "These rich UConn boys think themselves to be king. And we are their pawns, no?"

"Not in my world," Val said. "So, are we a team for real, then? We have to confirm with Dr. Hirsch by Thursday afternoon."

"It would be my honor to partner with the niece of the great Valentin Dawes," Rhonda said, tugging her toward the building's entrance.

Val jerked to a stop, forcing Rhonda to halt her progress as well. "None of that, okay?" Val said. "Yeah, my uncle died a hero, and he means much more to me than anyone will ever know. But I'm not trading on his fame, and I don't expect

you to, either.”

Rhonda hung her head and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Valorie. I meant it as a joke, only. Forgive my bad taste.”

Val sighed. She envied Rhonda’s unpretentious, laid-back style, one that contrasted so much from hers. She needed to learn how to be like that, somehow. “Of course. Apology accepted. So, why don’t we get a cup of coffee and plan our project? I’ll buy.”

Rhonda grinned and extended her hand. “You got it, partner!”

Ten minutes later, Val and Rhonda squeezed into adjacent seats at a tiny table in the crowded Student Union café. “I insist,” Val said when Rhonda protested Val paying for their coffee. “I offered. Besides, don’t you have a baby to feed?”

Rhonda laughed, a sound Val found infectious and charming. “Jada is only eighteen months old. She hardly eats anything.” She showed Val a photo of a curly-haired girl in a pink dress whose smile seemed a miniature carbon copy of Rhonda’s.

Val’s heart melted at the sight of the little girl. “That’s the same age as my niece, Alison,” she said. “I love that little imp so much! And what a pretty name!”

“I knew I liked you for a reason,” Rhonda said, grinning. “It’s Jamaican, like my father, and it means ‘God’s gift.’ And she is, to me. In fact, she is part of the reason I was late this morning. I drove almost the whole way to her day care center before I remembered we were meeting today.” She checked her watch, a cheap Rolex knock-off. “I need to pick her up at day care in a half hour, so we’d better work fast. What topic should we choose?”

They opened their laptops and discussed the approved topics listed on Professor Hirsch’s faculty page. “I like ‘Women in Crime: Victims and Perpetrators,’ but is that too predictable for us?” Val said.

“Maybe,” Rhonda said. “What about ‘The Rise of Hate Crimes’ or ‘Police Use of Force’? Same problem?”

“Those sound great to me—I love doing statistical research,” Val said. “But what about you? As a future social worker, maybe we should choose a topic focused on families.

'Intergenerational Recidivism,' maybe, or the 'The Contributions of Poverty and Class to Urban Crime.' Are those better?"

Rhonda frowned. "Those don't sound like good fits for a future policewoman."

Val waved her off. "They're all relevant. Besides, I'm not a hundred percent decided on my major," she said. "You know, I've always thought I'd become a cop, since I was a kid. But over the last few months I've had second thoughts. I might be happier doing social work, too—helping troubled families in a more constructive way, before they get swept up by crime—as victims or perpetrators.. Locking them up after they commit crimes seems kind of a negative approach."

"If you grew up like I did, you'd definitely look at cops as a negative approach," Rhonda said. "My brother spent a week in jail for a crime he didn't commit. 'Mistaken identity,' they said. Yeah, it was a mistake all right. They arrested him for being young and black."

"That's terrible," Val said. "To be honest, though, my focus would be on supporting young women and girls—victims of abuse and such." She went quiet, her heart pounding.

A silhouette filled the open doorway...the shadow of a large, overweight man, tufts of black and silver hair shining in the reflected light of the hallway. His heavy breathing filled her tiny bedroom with aromas of whiskey and sweat—

Rhonda cocked her head. "Is that motivated by personal experience, or—"

"Just something I'm interested in," Val said in a rush of words, pushing the memory out of her mind. "We'd best not get sidetracked here. You said time was short, right?"

They kicked the options around and chose the "Women in Crime" topic. "If we don't, it'll be left to the Neanderthal men like Robb McFarland," Rhonda said. "I hate to think what that paper would look like."

After dividing up the initial research responsibilities, Rhonda gulped down her coffee. "I need to get to the day care center," she said. "It's over on the west side, just off campus. Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

“I’d love that,” Val said. “The surplus store is out that way, and I need a more comfortable desk chair.”

“I can drop you off after we pick up Jada,” Rhonda said. “It’ll give us a chance to chat more about the paper.”

Instead, however, their conversation shifted to more personal topics during the traffic-jammed ride across Storrs, a campus-focused village in the city of Mansfield. “Is your uncle the reason you want to go into law enforcement?” Rhonda asked.

“He definitely inspired me,” Val said. “I saw how he made a difference in the community through police work. That’s my real goal. I’m just not sure anymore if that’s the right path for me. What about you? What motivated you to pursue social work?”

“When I first started, I wanted to make a difference in the community, like you,” Rhonda said. “Now I just want to help women avoid the mistakes I made, try to keep them out of trouble.” She fell silent a moment.

Val considered asking her to elaborate, then decided to steer the conversation toward less troubling topics. “You mentioned spending a year in college before you had Jada. Was that here, at UConn?”

Rhonda shook her head. “I had a full athletic scholarship to Yale,” she said. “Volleyball and track. But I had to give it all up when I came back to Mansfield to take care of my mom.”

“Wow!” Val said. “I have a partial scholarship—track and soccer. I didn’t know women could even get a full ride for sports.”

“Ah,” Rhonda said. “That may be the only advantage of being a black woman in America. They assumed, correctly as it turns out, that I also had financial hardship. And finding female athletes of color with good grades is a very competitive market, it seems.”

“That’s awesome,” Val said. “The scholarship, I mean. Will you be running track at UConn?”

Rhonda scoffed. “Not while raising a baby and working full time. Besides, it’s best if I keep a low profile. Rizzo, my baby’s daddy, has threatened more than once to sue for custody...or just take matters into his own hands. I haven’t even told him about returning to school. I’d rather he doesn’t find out.”

“He threatened to take the baby from you?” Val said, her voice hoarse. “That’s outrageous!”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Rhonda said, pulling into the parking lot of the day care center. “A few months ago he saw me out to dinner with a man. He tried to pick a fight with the guy...until my date stood up. He was six-five and built like a steamroller. Rizzo suddenly realized that he was double-parked. I haven’t seen him since.”

Val laughed out loud. “You have a great way of putting things, Rhonda. Hey, is it okay if I come in with you? I’d love to meet Jada.”

Rhonda enveloped Val in a bone-crushing hug. “Girl, I think I already love you like a sister,” she said. “Come on! Shoot, I’m already five minutes late.”

They hustled inside, and a mousy, brown-haired white woman with horn-rimmed glasses greeted them. “Are you picking up, or dropping off?” she asked with a saccharine smile.

Val and Rhonda exchanged puzzled glances. “You don’t honestly think I’m her daughter?” Val said.

“Name?” the brown-haired woman responded without hesitation, fingers resting on her computer keyboard.

“LeMieux. My baby’s name is Jada.” Rhonda showed no surprise or impatience at the receptionist’s cluelessness.

The receptionist smiled again and tapped at her keyboard. Puzzlement spread over her face. “Jada? J-A-Y-D-A?”

“No ‘Y’,” Rhonda said, sing-song. “LeMieux is L-E—”

“Ah, here she is,” the receptionist said, but her smile evaporated. “There seems to be some confusion.”

“What sort of confusion?” Rhonda said, her face forming a worried frown.

“She’s already been picked up,” the receptionist said. “About twenty minutes ago, by her grandmother.”

“Her grandmother?” Rhonda’s frown deepened. “That’s impossible. Could you please check again?”

The receptionist clicked a few keys, frowning, but said nothing.

Val edged closer to Rhonda. “Are you sure your mother didn’t come by and get her?” she asked.

Rhonda’s eyes teared up, and she glanced at Val, her lips trembling. “I’m sure,” she said. “My mother died six months

ago.” She paused a moment to regain her composure. “Her life insurance policy is paying my tuition.”

“I’m sorry,” the receptionist said. “We show that Jada left under the care of an approved guardian. The woman identified herself as Karina LeMieux.”

Rhonda burst into tears and slumped into a chair, moaning. “He did it. That son of a bitch took her!”

Val drew a steadying breath and turned to the receptionist. “Miss, about the woman who took Jada. Did you get a signature, an I.D., anything?”

The woman pecked at her keyboard and stared at the screen. “I wasn’t here—somebody else checked Jada out,” she said. “But her grandmother is in our system as an approved guardian.”

“How is that possible? She’s deceased, as Rhonda just told you!” Val said.

Rhonda groaned. “I never got around to updating my records here after Ma died,” she said. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God!”

Val leaned across the desk, her face inches from the receptionist’s. “You need to go check to make sure that little girl isn’t here,” she said. “*Now!*”

The receptionist froze for a moment, then disappeared through a door behind her.