

DUMPSTERS AND DRAGONS

Dumpster Diva—Book Two

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*“When the wicked advance against me to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes who will
stumble and fall.”
Psalm 27:1, NIV*

CHAPTER ONE



October

The irony of the empty disposable cup nestled in the truck's console was not lost on its driver. Here Cassie was, driving a garbage truck and creating more garbage as she went. "This job is garbage." She chuckled. It had been a long day.

She was running a little late for the last drop-off on her route, a construction site. Not her fault there had been a collision on Main Street, and she had already informed her supervisor of the delay.

She smiled at the thought of her boyfriend, Adam MacAllister, a dispatcher for Reuben's Rubbish Removal. He used to get so irritated when she ran behind schedule. Since they'd started dating, he treated drivers more as if they were real people, not just voices on the phone or radio.

The "Coming Soon" sign at the construction site loomed ahead, presenting a mockup of a future upscale community known as Newtonia Estates. *Bet I couldn't afford to live there. Certainly not on this salary.*

Cassie maneuvered her unwieldy empty dumpster into a cleared space on the tarmac, taking care to leave plenty of room

for the squad car just beyond. Its officer had pulled over a motorcyclist into the construction area, she assumed to write him a ticket. The police presence reminded her of her misadventures just a few months ago. She counted herself lucky to be alive.

She shook off the memories as she released the dumpster and prepared to haul the full one away. Looking in her side mirror to guide her back, she noticed a piece of debris hanging over the edge of the dumpster. Leaving something sticking out of the bin ranked as poor practice—it could easily fall out when she got back on the road.

“There’s always something,” she muttered.

She put the truck in park, opened her door, and slid off the seat, nimbly taking a quick step on the running board on the way to the ground. Then she trudged the length of her enormous rig and crossed the few yards to the container.

The “thing” turned out to be a discarded length of wood, notched and painted red at the end. She tried to push it in but met with resistance. She pulled down on it so she could lift the opposite end clear of whatever lay behind it, but her effort got her nowhere.

“Oh, come on!”

Now frustrated, Cassie climbed the thin metal rungs at the end of the dumpster and surveyed the waste inside. It looked like a giant’s game of Pick Up Sticks. Maybe the lumber was wedged well enough to keep it from falling out, but she decided to give moving it one more try.

Her eyes fell on what looked like a package wrapped in brown paper. She tilted her head and frowned. The package looked a little worse for wear, but still sealed.

Grabbing hold of the stubborn piece of wood to keep from tumbling headfirst into the dumpster, Cassie leaned forward and grasped the package. Years of getting books as Christmas presents told her the object inside was quite book-like, though

its weight didn't seem equal to a book that size. A thick sheaf of papers, maybe?

She set the package on the dumpster's edge and went back to finagling the piece of wood. With a careful pull, then a tilt and a heave, she got it fully inside the dumpster.

At last, she carefully climbed down to solid ground, reached up to grab the edge of the package, and headed back to the truck.

Now I'm really late. She decided to look at the package more closely later.

As she reached the cab, Cassie noticed the motorcyclist looking back at her. Even with his visor up, she couldn't tell much about him at this distance, but she could swear he was staring right at her.

Weird. If I were getting a ticket, I'd probably be looking at the officer or the ground, not around at other people.

She climbed back into the truck and laid the package on the passenger seat. Time to concentrate on correctly lining up her truck with the full dumpster, attaching it, and getting on her way again at last. By the time she pulled out onto the road, the squad car and motorcyclist were gone.

As they frequently did these days, her thoughts returned to Adam and their budding relationship. She knew it wouldn't always be smooth sailing, but she thoroughly enjoyed this stage with him. They saw each other at church almost every Sunday and tried to plan a weekly date.

The next traffic light seemed to stay red longer than was strictly reasonable. Cassie reached over to slip a finger under the edge of the package's paper wrapping. When it didn't come loose easily, she pulled it into her lap and used both hands, glancing up at the light to make sure it hadn't turned green yet. She set the paper aside and looked at the dark gray expanding file left in her lap. It was fastened with a black ribbon wrapped fully around it and tied in a neat bow. Reasoning the owner's name

might be inside, she pulled the ribbon free and prepared to take a look.

The sharp toot of a horn jerked her gaze to the road. The car ahead of her had already gone through the intersection under the now green light.

“Oops.” Cassie flung the folder back into the passenger seat and hurried on her way, muttering to herself. “That’s what you get for not paying attention.” She determined not to look at the folder again until she was back at RRR headquarters and in her own car.

Adam MacAllister leaned back in his chair and tilted his neck from side to side before rolling his shoulders. He had been sitting down too long, but he knew Cassie would finish her shift soon. He would take a short break when she got to headquarters.

His personal phone vibrated, stopping his hand on its way back to his coffee mug. He grabbed the cell phone from the edge of his desk and saw his mother’s name on the screen. She usually didn’t call until his day off.

“Hey, Mom. You okay?”

“Well ... I don’t know.”

Even with the slight distortion of the phone, Adam sensed more tension in her voice than she wanted him to know. He wheeled his chair to the far end of his desk to be farther from his boss’s office door. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Josh. Sean and I are at our wits’ end with him.”

Josh was Adam’s stepbrother. Since Adam was sixteen when his mother remarried, he hadn’t been thrilled about getting a nine-year-old brother and four-year-old sister in the bargain. In time, they had learned to get along, but he and Josh were still not particularly close.

“Did something happen to him?” Adam prompted.

“He hasn’t been getting good grades at school, not even in

his major. We just found out they may revoke his scholarship.” Her voice was so tight now, she must be in tears.

“Oh, wow. That’s serious. What’s the problem?”

“I’m not sure if he’s just goofing off, or if he’s paying too much attention to girls, or what. But his grades so far are pretty bad.”

Adam vaguely remembered his mother mentioning that Josh had a crush on one of his classmates, but he didn’t know if that had gone anywhere. He probably shouldn’t get into all that right now. “Right. Mom, I’m still at work right now. How about if I come over when I get off?”

“Would you? I’d really appreciate it. I’m sure Sean would like to see you too. I’ll hold supper until you get here.”

Adam was not at all certain his stepfather would be glad to see him, but he said, “Sure. We’ll talk about Josh’s situation then.”

“Thank you, honey. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Adam pondered what his mother had told him. He pictured his dirty-blond stepbrother carousing at a party instead of doing his homework. It seemed unlikely. Something else must be going on.

Cassie’s determination slipped soon enough. At this time of day, traffic backed up frequently at intersections, and her impatience grew. It wasn’t long before she eased the file folder back into her lap. She peeked under the flap and saw the words “TOP SECRET” in a bold serifed typeface.

For a moment, only her eyelids moved, fluttering in disbelief. Had she stumbled on a CIA contact drop? No, that was silly. The CIA wouldn’t let its materials end up in dumpsters. She pulled the first page partway out of the file and noticed two more details. First, an insignia she didn’t recognize marked the

page under the words. Second, lines of ink faded out above and below the words “TOP SECRET,” as if someone had over-inked a rubber stamp and rocked it back and forth. She wasn’t sure if the file being hand-stamped made it more or less likely to be real classified material.

She dragged her eyes away from the folder long enough to advance a few car lengths before the light turned red again. She would have to wait through another cycle before her light got back to green.

Those few seconds awoke her common sense. The look of the file suggested a prank. Or a teenager’s personal papers. Puppy love letters from a crush, maybe. Although that would not explain the insignia. How about part of a scavenger hunt?

In geocaching, a player followed clues to a hidden container, where they could remove a prize and leave something for the next person to find. It had been quite a fad in her childhood.

Or this could be one of those roleplaying games her roommate played online, with people she’d never met in person. Some of the players lived out of town. Once in a while, the “game master” would hide a clue in the real world and challenge the participants to find it so they could “level up,” or whatever. Cassie had never tried such a game, despite Jenna coaxing her to try.

It was finally her turn to go through the intersection. Cassie set the folder back on the seat beside her, more curious than ever. At least now she would get away from the main roads and see much less traffic the rest of the way back to Triple-R.

She saw hardly any other cars after her next turn. Cassie relaxed. She glanced at the file, then at the road, then at her side mirror.

A motorcycle throbbed along behind her. It must have turned onto this road shortly after she did. It kept its distance until an oncoming car passed. Then she heard the bike’s engine roar, and it quickly gained on her.

Cassie quirked an eyebrow at this rebel without a cause, who

would get a measure of glory from passing her in a cloud of exhaust. She slowed slightly to give the rider plenty of room to pass her before the next curve in the road.

As the biker approached her blind spot, Cassie got the impression of the stereotypical motorcycle enthusiast: shiny black helmet, black leather jacket, black pants, leather gloves. Even the motorcycle was black. In fact, the rider was decked out just like the motorcyclist the cop had pulled over at the construction site.

It would be best to stare straight ahead when he came up beside her, but she couldn't resist a glance. She noticed a tattoo on the sliver of neck she could see between the man's helmet and jacket. It looked like part of an animal, but she couldn't tell what kind.

All other thoughts flew out of her head when the rider took one hand off the handlebars and reached into his jacket. That hand reemerged holding a pistol.