

CHAPTER TWO



Cassie hit the gas pedal. Her mind raced as she tried to keep one eye on the motorcycle, which had dropped back a little, and the other on the road ahead. She was speeding through an industrial area. Where were the cops when you needed them?

Up ahead on her right was a railroad yard. She didn't like to take the truck through there, as she'd have to cross two active railroad tracks and navigate several sidings where empty train cars were stored between uses. She decided to chance it. Those tracks would be harder for the motorcycle to navigate than they would be for her cumbersome truck and loaded trailer.

She didn't signal as she approached the entrance to the rail yard. Cars and utility vehicles zipped past on the other side of the four-lane road, heading back the way she'd come, but traffic overall was light. She checked the sideview mirror. The motorcyclist stayed in the outer lane, gripping the handlebars with both hands. At least he'd put the gun away, if only temporarily. Her confidence ratcheted up a notch.

You can do this.

If only she could put in a call to the police, or even to Adam. But the turn was fast approaching, and she needed to

concentrate. She couldn't slow down. The cyclist was gaining on her.

At the rail yard's driveway, she gritted her teeth, hit the brake, and swung the truck to the right. She had to slow down a little, allowing for the dumpster she pulled. When she straightened the wheel, she checked her mirrors, in hopes the cycle had shot past the opening in the outside lane.

But no, there he was behind her. Again.

Cassie pressed on, hitting the first unused siding a bit faster than she'd have liked. The truck lumbered over it, and the dumpster bounced and rattled behind her. In the side mirror, she saw a length of two-by-four tossed out by the trailer's recoil when it hit the steel rails. *Good. Maybe that will slow him down.*

One of the two active crossings she'd need to negotiate loomed up ahead. Her chest tight, she breathed a prayer of thanks that no trains were passing through at the moment. She hoped they wouldn't for another thirty seconds, and she could get across safely.

Wouldn't it be wild if I barely made it through and a train whooshed in behind me to cut him off?

That wasn't happening. She jostled over the crossing, which was somewhat easier than the siding, as the roadway had been built up around the tracks there. She pushed the gas pedal down, not caring if more construction debris flew out of the dumpster. The more the better, as far as she was concerned. She could apologize to the police later, if she survived.

The motorcycle zipped through the marked crossing. Cassie clenched her jaw. She needed something rougher—something she could take, but the motorcycle couldn't.

A few yards ahead was another siding, but two empty boxcars sat on it. She swerved left, onto a gravel lane alongside the tracks. Probably for worker use. Could the truck take a dive across? Crushed rock edged the rails and wooden ties. The steel ribbons stuck up a good four inches or more above the sleepers. Could she do it without bursting her tires?

Lord, help me! Her heart pounding, Cassie made her move. The front end of the truck struck the near rail and crashed down between it and its twin a few feet beyond. Was her momentum enough? *Whump!* The cab made it over. She gunned the engine, praying the back wheels would follow. Watching in the rearview mirror, she let out a yelp as the back of the truck flew upward then down with a jarring thud. The dumpster, still hitched, skewed and teetered.

Oh, no! If that tips over on the tracks ...

She reminded herself the track in question was a siding, not an active road for commercial trains. Thankful for her seatbelt, she clutched the steering wheel so hard she couldn't feel her fingers.

On level ground now, she could no longer see her dumpster in the rearview, but the sideview mirror gave her a view of it jerking upward and sideways, then spewing construction litter as it crashed to the ground behind her. The truck still moved forward. Cautiously, she tapped the gas pedal. No drag, so the tires were intact. She checked the mirrors again.

Behind her, on the far side of the track she'd hurdled, something was different. For just a second, she touched the brake and squinted into the glass. The bike was lying down, and the rider ... Her heart clenched. Had she killed the guy? Her remorse was swiftly tempered as she remembered he'd drawn a gun on her.

There! He rose slowly, removing his helmet.

That was enough. Cassie accelerated and wound her way through the railroad yard. As she passed the office on the far end, a man stepped out the door, staring at her. He yelled something, but she couldn't tell what. This wasn't the time to stop and explain. She looked closely before propelling the truck out onto the two-lane road. She didn't come this way often. Could she wend her way back to RRR headquarters from memory? Or did she need to stop and ask her phone's GPS—or her dispatcher—for assistance?

Helpful signs and a glimpse of an overpass ahead told her she was on the right heading, and she pushed on. She'd veered at least two miles off her route, maybe more. She should call and tell Adam she was a few minutes behind schedule, but she was all right. She'd check over the truck's tires and undercarriage when she reached the RRR yard, but if there were no damages, she didn't see any good reason to upset him today.

But what about the motorcycle hoodlum? Should she report his actions? She squeezed her lips together. Her heartbeat gradually returned to normal. She didn't really want to deal with the police. She'd had enough of that in June.

Lord, if I need to call this in, show me now!

Immediately, she felt she was being presumptuous. How would God show her? Would a police car appear magically beside the road ahead of her? No such luck. Besides, she didn't want to stop now unless she absolutely had to. She glanced at the dashboard clock. She'd be late checking out today as it was. And if the incident turned out to be important, she could fill Adam in later.

Still feeling unsettled, she forged onward and at last drove into the RRR yard. Adam's shift had ended twenty minutes ago. The evening dispatcher answered her radio call. Disappointed it wasn't Adam, she told him, "This is 23. I'm about to check out. Have to park the full container I brought back from Newtonia Estates."

"You're late," Brett Nolan replied.

Cassie gulped. His clipped tone reminded her of the curt way Adam had treated her when she first started driving for RRR. Nope, she didn't want to share her story with Brett.

"Sorry about that. I had a bit of a delay at the construction site. I'll be done in ten minutes."

She had to hurry to make that come true. Parking the now half-full dumpster was no problem. At least she didn't have to wash out the inside of a compactor. She checked the hitch and the tires on both the truck and the dumpster. All were still

inflated, and she thanked the Lord she'd made sure they were full of air when she set out in the morning. She couldn't see any damage anywhere. *Amazing!*

"Brett, this is 23. I'm off the clock now."

"Roger that."

At the last moment, she remembered the packet she'd left on the passenger seat. It had fallen on the floor when she charged over the last siding. She bent over the seat and snagged it along with the paper wrapping, then climbed out of the truck and walked to her car.

She finally had time to check her phone. Adam had tried to call her and sent a text. She tapped her screen to see his message.

Hey, I hope you're ok. I was going to wait for you, but I told my mom I'd go over for dinner. Answer when you can.

Hurriedly, Cassie typed.

So sorry! No worries. Have a good time with your family. You can call me after.

She considered adding an emoji, but Adam rarely used them, and she didn't want to get too mushy. She sent the text and started her car.

The quiet drive home was almost anticlimactic. Had she really seen a gun? Maybe it was something else, and she'd jumped to conclusions. Maybe it was a toy. Or maybe that guy was some nut job who hated women truck drivers. Humming "It Is Well with My Soul," she pushed the motorcyclist out of her mind.

The apartment smelled great as she entered, thankful her roommate, Jenna Sperling, was home and cooking. They were old school friends, and Jenna had invited her to share the apartment several months previously, when Cassie took the job with RRR in the same city where Jenna worked.

"Spaghetti?" Cassie called.

Jenna came to the kitchen doorway. "No, lasagna."

"Yum."

"Rough day?" Jenna asked.

"Kind of." Cassie set the package on the back of the couch and peeled off her light jacket.

"What's that?" Jenna asked.

"I'm not sure yet. It's actually something I pulled out of a dumpster."

Jenna laughed. "It was bound to happen someday, I guess."

Cassie walked over to stand beside her and held out the packet. "Take a look inside and tell me what you see."

"Is this a trick?"

"No, it's a fact check. I think I know what I saw when I stopped at a red light, but it was so bizarre, I'm not sure I believe it."

"Oka-ay." Jenna flipped up the flap with the untied ribbons streaming and peered inside. "Whoa!"

"Yeah. So ... I really did see *Top Secret* on the first page?"

"You did." Jenna frowned and slid the thick bunch of paper out of the folder. It was held together by two folding clips on the left side. She laid the outer folder on the arm of the couch.

"Do you think it's legit?" Cassie asked. "Or is it some kind of joke? Or I thought maybe a game or something."

Jenna riffled the half-inch stack of pages and paused at a couple of spots. "If it's a game, it's a complicated one."

Cassie picked up the expanding folder and checked inside. "Hey, look at this." She fished in the pocket and pulled out a small spiral-bound notebook.

"What's in it?"

Cassie edged closer to her roommate and opened it. "Seems to be full of ... I don't know. Some kind of coded lists, maybe?"

"Hmm. At least half the pages in this bunch are printouts of computer coding." Jenna shook her head in frustration. "You may be right about its being part of a game. But I can't think which one it would be."

“Well, you can’t be familiar with every computer game there is.”

“Far from it. But look here.” Jenna pointed to the insignia Cassie had noticed earlier on the front page. “Some of the inside pages have this design on them. A pair of crossed swords.”

“Do you think that’s a company logo or something?”

“I’m not sure. Let me think about it.” Jenna flipped through a few pages. “This looks to me like coding for instructions for an online game.”

“Okay. You do online gaming.”

“Some. I’m not an expert, though, and I’m not a programmer. I could be way off base.” She looked up with a smile. “My honest opinion? I think you’ve found someone’s plans for a new computer game.”

“I guess that would be a relief.” For a moment, Cassie considered telling her about the gun-toting motorcyclist. But it would only alarm Jenna. Her sweet roommate had wedding plans to make and a full-time job to worry about. Cassie didn’t want to add to her stress.

“Let’s eat,” Jenna said.

“Good idea.”

As she laid their plates and silverware on the table, Cassie mused, “How could I find out more about the file I found? Assuming it is for a game?”

“I could do some Internet searching after supper.”

“Oh, you don’t have to. I’m sure you’ve got a million other things to do tonight.”

Jenna put on two oven mitts and turned to the stove. “Tell you what. You help me pick out the design for the wedding invitations and start my list of people to send them to, and then I’ll spend an hour on your mystery codes.”

Cassie nodded slowly. “You need to set the date before you can order the invitations.”

“Yeah.” Jenna scrunched up her face. “Travis is going to check with his supervisor to find out when he can take a couple

of weeks off. He's only got one week of vacation left for this year, so if we want more, we'll have to wait until the new year at least. But I can choose the design and be ready when he knows."

"Okay, we'll work on that and then the coding. What about the Internet café you used to go to once in a while?"

Jenna set the casserole dish down on a hot mat. "The Wizard's Brew?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"I haven't been there in ages. Haven't had time."

"But people still go there to play, right?"

"I think so. I drove by it the other day, and it was open. But it's mostly high school and college-age kids. Well, a few adults use it, too, but you know those things appeal more to ..." Jenna paused. "Guess I'm classifying myself with the immature. I do love the logic of those games—some of them. It's exciting, and leveling up gives me a sense of satisfaction. Especially if it was a real challenge."

"I guess I can understand the attraction," Cassie said with a little shrug. "I was always busy, and it kind of seemed like a time-waster to me, like spending hours at a time on social media."

Jenna gave her a wry smile. "I like doing that too. I guess I'm just a fritterer at heart."

"I was thinking maybe there'd be someone there who could tell us what the coding means."

"Tell you what, on Saturday we'll mosey over to the Wizard's Brew and see who's hanging out. Maybe you're right and we can find someone who can demystify that arcane file for us. But I'll have to leave afterward for my conference."

Cassie grinned. "I'm in. And I'm starving. I'll say the blessing."