

Preface

Janice Edmonds, Valerie Foreman, and Harold “Happy” Fitzpatrick grew up together in the Missouri Ozarks. They had all been friends since they were toddlers. Valerie and Harold had been friends largely because their parents (Pete and Sarah Fitzpatrick and Bob and Brandy Foreman) had been friends and coworkers since before Valerie and Harold were born. Janice joined the group a few years later when her parents moved to Missouri from Puerto Rico.

Val has two sisters, Gertrude and Patricia. Val grew up in Sikeston, Missouri. Harold and Janice grew up in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. No one but Val called Harold by the nickname, Happy. Harold and Janice had been in the same grade ever since kindergarten. After graduation from high school, Harold joined the Marines and Janice went to college in Kentucky. A year later, Val went to college in Missouri. Their choices led to physical but not emotional separation.

The main character in Traffic is Valerie Foreman. She is the eldest daughter of Bob Foreman (FBI) and Brandy Bane Foreman (DEA), both of whom have leading roles in Grace (a trilogy). They also appear in Dragonfly and Serenity. In high school, both Valerie and Janice had feelings for Harold. These are sorted out, at least to some degree, in Serenity.

In Chapter One of Traffic, Valerie, 22 and has just graduated from the Police Academy. It is August 25th, 2000. Prior to attending the Police Academy, she had earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminology from the University of Missouri at Columbia. She is 5’9” and weighs 135 pounds. A pitcher on the Missouri State Champion Women’s Softball team, distance swimmer, and a practitioner of the martial arts, she is athletic with dark auburn hair and bright blue eyes. Valerie has gone home to visit her parents after her graduation from the Police Academy and is anticipating her first day as a rookie officer with the Orlando, Florida, Police Department.

CHAPTER ONE

LETTING GO

What am I gonna do with all this shit? Val asked herself as she dumped the contents of the trunk that she had hauled back from college onto the bed. It was weird for her to be sorting through this stuff now. Once, that trunk had contained her most prized possessions. When she had gone away to college, she had packed into it all the things that she thought she couldn't live without. Now, four and a half years later, most of what she had taken with her in 1996 had been replaced with new things that she couldn't live without. After graduation, she brought the trunk home to Sikeston, Missouri, where it had waited patiently for her to complete her training at the Orlando Florida Police Academy. Looking at what was now nothing more than junk, she wondered how eight weeks at the police academy, how becoming a cop instead of a criminology student, had somehow changed it all again, and how once again it was time to purge.

Overwhelmed and flustered she looked away to regain her composure. There was comfort to be found sitting on the window seat in the room that had been hers for the first 18 years of her life. Looking out of that window, she saw her childhood and felt the safety of her past. The mess on the bed represented the upheaval that came with growing up. In the yard, she could still see remnants of the low pitcher's mound that her father had made for her in high school. Her accomplishments as a fast-pitch softball player brought a smile to her face. Winning the state championship was something she would keep with her forever, and she didn't need a trunk to keep it in.

Val sighed deeply, looked around the room, and cursed.

After she had moved out, Gertrude, her younger sister, had moved into her room so that she, Gertrude, and her other sister Patricia, could have private rooms. Nevertheless, there were still artifacts that remained: artifacts of the prior owner that still said this is Valerie's room. For the week that Val was visiting, Trudy had graciously offered to let her have it back. The overture was not altogether altruistic and Val knew that she was expected to fully clean out all the remnants of her own childhood so that the room would finally belong solely to Trudy.

Val forcibly dragged herself back to the junk on the bed and shook her head. While she had been away at college, Val's parents had kept some of her things stored in the hall closet. That pile on the bed would soon grow. Val could hear her mom rummaging around out there and knew that she wouldn't have to wait long to see how big it would be.

These were the thoughts that Brandy disrupted when she returned with another box from the closet.

"You might as well go through all of it at the same time."

Her mom dumped out the contents of the box onto the bed.

Val looked almost forlorn.

"Seriously, mom, what am I gonna do with it all?"

Brandy didn't see the junk that Val saw. Brandy saw precious childhood memories of her daughter. She wanted to go through the pile and pick out the things that she couldn't live without, but it was Val's pile.

“Well,” Brandy said, “what most kids do who find a job that takes them away from home is to pack it all up in boxes, make their parents store it for five to ten years, and then call one day and ask why they saved it all. After that, the parents usually throw it all out or give it to a charity.”

Val put her hands on her hips and studied the pile of childhood debris.

“Let’s cut out a few steps then. I want this.” Val reached into the pile and collected a small red ring box. Noticing her mom’s quizzical look she drew out the medallion that hung around her neck.

“Happy gave me this for graduation.” Val showed her mom the engraved silver charm.

“Courage-Serenity-Wisdom.” She read the words aloud and thought about Harold Levindusky; only Val called him Happy. A small tear came to the corner of her eye. She had desperately wanted her childhood friend to become so much more as an adult.

Brandy took it in her hands, admiring it.

“Janice has one just like it.”

“She does,” Val admitted. “But it’s not exactly the same as mine. I looked.”

Val showed her mom where Harold had inscribed a small heart in it near where the word serenity was engraved, but was careful not to show her what was inscribed on the back.

“Janice’s has an engraving there too, but it’s different. It looks like a Turk’s head knot. You know? It’s that one that looks like a cross between a doily and drink coaster?”

“What’s it mean?” Brandy asked.

“I don’t know, mom,” Val said, as thoughts of GySgt. Harold Levindusky and Janice Edmonds raced through her head. He was now in Paraguay and she was in North Dakota at an Air Force Base: three close friends now scattered over the globe.

“If I did, I might be packing a bag for ... somewhere else instead of Orlando.”

Val looked into the pile again.

“I want this, and this, and this.”

She picked out a photograph of herself, Happy, and Janice. She took a baseball hat from her high school team, and a diary.

“That’s a nice photograph of the three of you,” Brandy said.

Val just nodded, still stifling a tear.

“Let’s let the girls pick out any clothes they want and then you can decide on what to give away and what to keep.”

“You’ll need more than that,” Brandy said. “What about your clothes and ...”

“No, mom,” Val interrupted. “I’m not a college student anymore. Next week I’ll be a cop on patrol in Orlando. I’ll need all new clothes: clothes that say I’m a woman not a college student. I already took my Karate Gi, my nunchuck, katana, gloves, sidearm, t-shirts, and six pairs of jeans when I went to the Academy. All that stuff’s still in Florida. I bought new uniforms, shoes, sneakers, and some other workout clothes while I was down there at the academy.”

“So, you have your workout gear, your pistol, and your uniforms.” Brandy looked at her sternly.

“Were you ever planning on going out? Or doing anything not related to the job?”

Val laughed somewhat stiffly.

“Not really. At least not right away. If I want to go out, I’ll get something to wear when the time comes.”

Just then, Val noticed that Trudy and Pat were standing in the doorway.

“Come on in, girls. Take what you want, but don’t fight over any of it.” Trudy and Pat were more than happy to oblige. When they had finished, there were a few softball trophies and some trinkets that Brandy wanted.

After carrying the boxes down to the living room, Val collapsed into an easy chair and let out her breathe in a long woosh indicating that she was exhausted.

“You did good,” Brandy said. “I can’t wait to tell your father that we can use the hall closet again.” Brandy headed towards the kitchen, laughing.

“I’m getting a glass of tea. You want some?”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Val replied somewhat absently as she noticed the newspaper on the table beside the big chair. She remembered when she was small and thought that the overstuffed chair might swallow her whole, and laughed. She was going to miss this house; this place. She would miss her family. She fingered the medallion that had hung over her heart for the past four months and sought the serenity to accept the fact that this house might never again be her home. Val picked up the paper, mostly to distract herself from becoming all sappy, and started flipping through the pages.

“Hey, mom?” Val said, as Brandy came back with two glasses of tea. “Did you see this story about ... um ... chemical attacks?”

“No,” Brandy replied, seating herself in the matching easy chair.

Val read the headline aloud: “GAO REPORT: TERROR GROUPS CAPABLE OF CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL, RADIOLOGICAL ATTACKS.”

“Wow!” Brandy exclaimed. “What’s this world coming to?”

“You should know, mom,” Val replied. “You’re the senior federal agent.”

“This is more in your dad’s wheelhouse,” Brandy parried. “He’s with the FBI and he’s even more senior than I am.”

“Yeah,” Val said and tossed the paper back on the coffee table. “I don’t need that kind of stress right now.”

Brandy laughed.

“Starting next week when you put on that uniform, those types of reports will come up during your daily briefing.” She wanted to add that Val should go ask her Aunt Sarah about what terrorists are capable of, but Val wasn’t ready for that yet.

The two women spent a little quality time with each other before getting back to the task at hand. Most of it consisted of Brandy telling her daughter stories about her own career with the FBI and the DEA. It had been hard, she admitted, to find her place in the male dominated profession. Her skill with weapons and martial arts was what had earned her the respect she deserved. Eventually, the conversation returned to the reality of the moment and the need to continue packing. It had taken her a while, but Brandy finally convinced Val that moving to Orlando was permanent and that there would be no coming back.

Valerie and her mother spent the remainder of the afternoon going through the rest of her things deciding what should be stored, what should be given away, and what should be packed. Later that night, as Val fell asleep, her mother’s words echoed in her head: You’re leaving, and there’s no going back.