

The Incident

by Gary Corbin

Chapter 1

Valerie's heart ached as she approached the casket; was that from the rapid pounding in her chest? Every step she took was tinier and slower than the one before. She couldn't see inside the coffin yet. It was open, but elevated on a viewing platform, putting the top edge a few inches higher than her wiry 5'4" frame.

She was dressed entirely in black, but in slacks and a tight-fitting, short-sleeved top, rather than a dress. Her father had argued with her about that, but she was fifteen, she could choose her own clothes, and heaven knows, she had plenty of black in her wardrobe. Besides, Uncle Val would have wanted her to be comfortable and "ready for anything." Who could be ready for anything in a dress?

Truth be told, she hadn't liked wearing dresses since she was nine – since The Incident. That's how everyone referred to the worst day of her life: with a vague euphemism, to hide its ugly truth, a handle everyone could hold, a way for people to work past their discomfort while

pretending to be very mature and open, yet respectful.

For other people, that is – everyone except Valerie, and until two days ago, her favorite uncle Val, her hero and namesake. Cut down in the line of duty at 45 by a criminal's bullet, Detective Valerie Dawes died a hero not only in her adoring teenage eyes, but in the eyes of the entire city of Hartford.

It isn't fair, Valerie had cried, not fair at all. Uncle Val, who had taught her so much. How to cope with her fear of other adult men after The Incident. How to defend herself. How to avoid those uncomfortable situations in the first place. And, perhaps most importantly, how to feel good about herself again, to throw off those feelings that it was somehow her fault, something she'd done wrong rather than that creepy man.

"Valerie," her father whispered behind her, "are you going up, or...?" His voice trailed off.

She looked up and saw that there was nobody in front of her; the casket stood alone on the stage. The line in back of her was long; it filled the hall and trailed out the open door of the funeral home, down the steps and out of sight. She knew, but couldn't see, that it curved around the building, dozens upon dozens of community members shivering in the cold autumn breeze, yellowed oak and red maple leaves slapping the faces of the mourning crowds, all come to see their fallen hero. *The entire city of Hartford must be here*, she thought.

"Do you want me to go up with you?" her father said, whispering again. She could smell whiskey on his breath – no, bourbon. Cheap bourbon. Even at fifteen, she knew the difference – a legacy of her parents' alcoholic neglect.

"No," she said, checking her black barettes to make sure her short brown hair was still in place. "I want to go up alone."

She felt bad about saying that a moment later as she began walking toward the dais. *Dad*

probably needs the company, she thought. Val may have been my favorite uncle, but he was Dad's only brother.

Valerie walked on. *Someone else can take care of Dad, she thought; maybe Mom will show up, hopefully without the latest trailer-trash boyfriend. I need this moment alone with Uncle Val. Our last moment together.*

She shook off a pang of selfish guilt and proceeded to the first step up to the platform. Taking heavy breaths, she pressed one foot on the step, lifted herself up, set her other foot on the next step. She could see flowers in the casket just below the top edge. She cast her eyes downward as she took the next step. Valerie wanted to wait, to see him all at once and on purpose, not inadvertently, nor a little bit at a time as she ascended the stairs. *I'll pick my moment to see him, she decided.*

She shuffled over to the casket, eyes still at her feet. Another deep breath. *Okay. Ready.*

She looked at his still figure, lifeless in the casket, and hot tears flowed down her face. *This isn't Uncle Val, she raged inside. He was always so vivacious, so very much alive. This is someone else. It's not real!*

She heard, or felt, movement in back of her. She whirled. A tall figure in a plain black suit cut just a little too small for him was coming up the steps onto the platform, his head bowed. "No!" she whispered in a cracked voice. "Don't come up here yet!"

Her dad stopped, lifted his head, and gave her a plaintive look, his sadness accentuating the deep lines etched into his weatherbeaten face. He indicated the long line in back of him. His dark eyes were close to tears too. She shook her head. *No. This is my time. You'll have your own time.* Dad stopped, sighed, folded his hands in front of him, then nodded once at her. He looked away. She turned back to the casket.

Uncle Val, she vowed, I will make you proud of me. I'll carry on your work, just like we talked about. I'm going to be just like you, Uncle Val. Or at least, as good as I can be.

She stiffened her upper lip, and tasted the salty tears flowing into the corners of her mouth. She looked at her uncle's lifeless form one more time, then turned and hurried off the stage.