

Book Ins 1

By two in the morning, Jailer Jennings had booked in three DUIs. Eight hours down and four to go before he could go home, catch some zs, then return to do it all over again.

After two years working the jail, Tom Jennings viewed most drunks as clones of their intoxicated peers. He'd heard, "I only had two beers," so often that he no longer shook his head in disbelief or judged them as desperate liars. Instead, he smiled. It was a joke, police humor.

Gazing between the jail bars, sitting at the book-in counter, Jennings was introduced to a cross section of humanity: the criers who might later be discovered hanging with a bed sheet around their necks; the big mouths that talked tough then pissed their pants; the chronic huffers and meth heads with their glazed eyes, mouths ajar leaking spittle; the polite, even apologetic prisoners who could stick you with a pen and sign their name in your blood before you knew it wasn't red ink; the crazies or MIs, dumped into this facility, who were more likely to be victims than perpetrators; and the friendly regulars who greeted you by name, then asked, "When we eat?"

The jail was stifling. Now, even in mid-spring it was already hot. There were no windows to open, just steel walls guarding ancient stale air. Vents, designed for climate control, instead funneled water and sewage out of flooded cells from their deliberately backed-up toilets. And the buzzers, bells, pounding, and yelling were enough to wish deafness from the hearing.

Of course his weight didn't help. Obese, he resembled a mutant Idaho potato in a jiggling gelatin suit. Even in his short-sleeved uniform and without the body armor that patrol officers wore religiously, Jennings could feel the constant trickle of perspiration roll down his fleshy chest.



“Cottonwood County Jail, Deputy Jennings,” he said into the headset’s mouthpiece, husky voice resounding like the DJ he once was.

“Yes, I’m . . . I’m calling about Valerie Popalavata,” a woman’s voice said hesitantly. “She was arrested earlier. Is she okay? When can she get out?”

“Just a second . . . She can bond out any time as long as she’s not driving.”

“How does she bond out?” questioned the female caller.

“She can call a bonding company to get her out, and they’ll put up most of the money, or she can pay the entire cash bond herself. Or someone else can pay it. Are you that person?”

“I’m Jesse Thomas. How much is it?”

“Five hundred dollars, cash only,” the officer replied.

“Where’s her car?”

“Hold on. I’m checking . . . Randy’s Towing. Do you know where it’s at?”

“Oh, yeah. What will it cost to get it back?”

“You’ll have to call Randy’s. We never know.”

“Val and I are roommates. We share an apartment. She’s got the only car that’s running; now it’s been towed, and I don’t have the money right now to get her out.”

“The bond is \$500 if she wants out tonight, or she can wait until court on Monday morning. Once she’s out she can call you. I believe she had a cell phone at book in, but if not, we have a pay phone in the lobby. We don’t take checks, credit, or debit cards. Cash only.”

“Is she okay?”

“Hard to say.”

“I mean, is she safe?”

“Yeah, ten-four, she’s in jail, safer here than driving around drunk, that’s for sure. She’s passed out. We’ve got another one coming in now, so I can’t talk anymore. If you want her out tonight, come down with the cash. You can call us from the lobby.”

“Thank you. And your name?”

“Deputy Jennings.”

“Thank you, Deputy Jennings. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Good night, Ms. Thomas,” he replied and hung up.



Jesse's breathing was calm and steady. She was relaxed. She had answers. She could get the money. Valerie would be out in time.

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"Deputy Jennings," his voice echoed over the jail intercom.

"I'm Jesse Thomas. We spoke earlier. I'm here to bond out Valerie Popalavata."

"I'll be out in a minute. Have a seat if you want."

Jesse thought she knew that voice.

The door opened and the hippo-like mass of Jennings squeezed through, filling the visitor's lobby. The overhead lighting bounced off his bowling-ball head. "Hello, again," he said. "You have the bond for Valerie Popalavata? It's five hundred cash."

She didn't acknowledge his girth, but cranked her chin up two notches. Looking into his eyes, she said. "You're Taz from KZOK!"

"How'd you know?"

"Your voice! I knew it!"

Jesse wore black sweats and running shoes with a Nike swoosh. The light shining on her bright red, shoulder-length ponytail, shot out the back of her ball cap like an arc light in a sustained luminous glow. Her sparkling gray eyes intensified the fireworks while her cheeks displayed faint, captivating freckles like fading starbursts. Tom caught his breath.

"It's been a couple of years now since I was on the radio waves. Beside my mother, you must be one of the few who remember my brief career in radio. This was my slot, middle of the night, past my curfew."

"I called in to request my favorite songs. Nice to finally meet you, Taz, I mean Officer Jennings. Sorry about the circumstances. My friend just wouldn't stop drinking."

"She's still asleep, but we'll take care of this paperwork and get her released. Slow right now, so it shouldn't take too long. You found the money?"

"Yes, I've been saving to fix my car, but I've got to get Valerie out. We have a booth at the art fair this morning."

"Oh! You're an artist. What do you create?"

"Me, sculpture; Val paints."

"I used to work the art-fair security before I was hired as a jailer. I was a police cadet."

“Well, we need to get home so we can get ready, but if you’re not sleeping all day, consider yourself invited to our booth. Looks like our sales will go to pay back friends and replenish my sick-car jar.”

“I just might do that since you’ll be there, but I don’t think Ms. Popalavata would be too excited about seeing me any time soon. I did book her in.”

“She may not remember. She’s been getting worse lately, blackouts. This is it. If she doesn’t stop drinking, one of us will be moving out. Too bad. We’ve been friends since college, and we have the perfect loft apartment.”

“I’ll take the bond money so you can get her home, but I’d be surprised if she’s much help right away; I think she needs to sleep this one off.”

As she handed him the cash, she said, “I still can’t believe it. Who would have ever thought I’d meet Taz in jail? I wondered what happened to you.”

“Me, too. Visit me here anytime, but it’s usually crowded and expensive. We provide clothing, meals, and health care, but a downside to being locked up is that every prisoner resembles a die-hard Bronco fan.” Jennings chuckled as he prepared to tell the punchline. “The issued shirts and pants are bright orange, the underwear dark blue.”

“Inviting,” Jesse replied with a wide grin, “but I’d rather see you outside at the art fair.”

“I’ll get your friend and your receipt.”

Jesse offered her hand. “Thanks, Taz,” she said, as she raised her chin, made good eye contact, and gave him a light squeeze during the handshake.



Tom Jennings, whistling in the shower, was feeling refreshed despite his twelve-hour shift in an oven. He was looking forward to the fresh morning air and talking to local artist Jesse Thomas.

Never before in his two years on the job had he met someone while working the jail and then agreed to meet them socially. These circumstances offered a sign, an invitation for him to get his big butt in gear. This appealing redhead, who had earlier bonded out her friend, hadn’t done anything wrong—only right. No harm in him meeting her, he reasoned; it was permitted within departmental policy. She hadn’t been incarcerated, and this wasn’t even a date. Jesse was looking for patrons

to buy her art, and he had money to spend from a lot of mandatory overtime.

Tom took another swish of mouthwash, gargled, and swallowed.

He felt warm, but it wasn't from the shower or from money burning a hole in his debit card. Talking with Jesse got him reminiscing about his days as a DJ at KZOK. That was a previous world of greatest hits, endless all-night activity, and cultlike callers. He missed it. In comparison, his so-called law-enforcement career was a treadmill, seemingly a path to nowhere. Jail was a repetitive hell hole. He wanted to catch criminals, not book them, not feed them, and not nurse them. His career goal was to become the first Cottonwood County K-9 handler.

Because working a dog was a position in the patrol division, Jennings had his mind set on a transfer there, upon completion of his indeterminate jail sentence. However, there was a big hurdle before his dream could come true: He had to lose enough weight to fit in a cruiser. So when the patrol captain told him, "Road officers don't drive cargo vans," every muscle in his body tightened. "Just give me a chance," Tom had retorted, "I'm fat, not stupid!"