



K.K. BECK

# Tipping the Valet

A WORKPLACE MYSTERY

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# TIPPING THE VALET



*a workplace mystery*



K. K. BECK

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# TIPPING THE VALET



## CHAPTER ONE



I HOPE THAT FELONY CONVICTION won't screw it up for you," said Jessica, Tyler's boss. "They're super-picky. I've told them we run a background check on everyone, so I hope they won't run one of their own."

Jessica was an energetic, no-nonsense blonde in her twenties, and her title was Seattle Account Manager for Elite Valet, a national company based in Pittsburgh. She was unloading orange traffic cones from the trunk of her car to replace a bunch that had been squashed by inattentive customers leaving the lot. Tyler Benson, whose title was Lead Service Associate, was stacking them up inside the valet booth in front of a casino in a suburb of Seattle. Tyler was about Jessica's age with sandy hair and blue eyes. He wore black pants, a white polo shirt, and a black nylon windbreaker with the hot pink ELITE VALET logo on the left side.

It was early evening and the lime-green neon sign that said DONNA's over the entrance of the stucco Moorish-style building was flickering. Another valet, a wraith-like young man named Brian, sat in the booth scribbling in a notebook, which Tyler happened to know was his vampire screenplay. Brian lifted his feet so Tyler could stow the cones, and kept writing.

Tyler was excited. Jessica had just told him that Elite Valet's premium account, a chic downtown restaurant called Alba, needed some extra help tomorrow to accommodate a large private

party. And the best news was that if they liked him, it could be permanent if another slot there opened up. He'd love never to have to work Donna's Casino again, even though he was lead valet. The tips at Alba would be fabulous.

"You got enough tickets, Tyler?" Jessica said.

"Yeah, we're good, thanks."

Jessica slammed down the trunk lid and drove off. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, Tyler caught sight of a large, square mass lurching toward the valet booth. It was a hefty man in a black suit, staggering from east to west as he approached in a purposeful but out-of-control manner.

"Geef me keys," yelled the man, lurching toward the booth and startling Brian, who looked up from his notebook with alarm.

He was one of the guys the valets referred to as "the Russians," a mysterious group of scary-looking Slavs who had taken over one corner of the cocktail lounge as their clubhouse. If Tyler had been Hughie, the manager of Donna's, he would seriously consider eighty-sixing the whole crowd. But Hughie, a kind of loudmouthed fool whom Tyler avoided as much as possible, probably appreciated their huge bar tabs. He was always hanging around their table, all friendly and joking around.

Tyler tried to intercept the Russian, tapping him on the shoulder. The man turned and gave him a massive bear hug and breathed a lot of booze into his face. He began to mutter into Tyler's ear in some Slavic language, and Tyler wasn't sure whether he was threatening him or being super-friendly. Probably the latter, because he now planted a sloppy kiss on Tyler's cheek.

Before he knew what had happened, the man had shoved him aside and pushed Brian aside as well. He now began pawing the keys hanging on rows of cup hooks on the board. Brian, perhaps terrified he would end up in a bear hug and also get a wet kiss, hastily grabbed the right keys off the board and handed them over. "Thank you for coming to Donna's Casino and Roadhouse," he simpered, part of the standard script Elite Valet required them to recite.



Before Tyler could do anything, the Slav was bounding toward the parking lot at an amazing speed for such a heavy, wasted guy. Logan and Carlos, two more valets, were ambling back from the parking lot toward him.

"Stop that guy," yelled Tyler. Carlos and Logan looked startled and stepped gracefully out of the man's way, turning to observe him as he barreled past.

"Maybe we should have called Security," said Brian. "Isn't he, like, really drunk?"

Tyler said, "Yeah, he was probably too drunk to find his keys, but that didn't matter because you were *so helpful*." In Brian's defense, however, it did occur to Tyler that no one could really have come between that guy and his car.

By this time Carlos and Logan had moseyed all the way back to the valet booth, and the drunken Russian, now behind the wheel, had driven past the booth, squealed to a halt, let out an earsplitting whistle, and opened the passenger door, while from the darkness another Russian, the skinny blond one with the scar, had dived in beside him.

They took off, the driver hunched over the wheel so that his red face was right next to it. Judging by his speed, his foot and all the substantial weight behind it had floored the accelerator. Tyler quickly grabbed his phone, called 9-1-1, and told the dispatcher that a very intoxicated individual had just peeled off northbound headed to Interstate 5 in a white 2010 two-door Honda Accord V-6 with custom chrome Acura rims. "God, Brian," yelled Tyler. "If he kills someone, their family can sue Donna's, because we handed over the keys."

"I think they'd sue Elite Valet, not Donna's," said Logan thoughtfully. "Or if they sued Donna's, Donna's would sue Elite Valet."

"Yeah, but either way, we're screwed," said Tyler.

"Not me," said Logan. "Sure, I work for Elite. But Donna is, like, my aunt."

"What!" Tyler was startled to hear himself shouting. "What do you mean Donna is your aunt? As far as I know, Donna is

dead!” The green neon sign with her name on it flickering out over the old highway looked like something from the 1950s.

“No she isn’t. She’s just retired. Her kid runs it now. My cousin Hughie. She told him to tell Jessica to hire me,” said Logan. “When they laid me off from my crap job at Subway. It’s just temporary.”

“Dude,” said Brian. “As soon as I sell my screenplay, I’m outta here, too.”

Hughie! That clown! Tyler had always thought he was just the incompetent manager! But apparently he was Donna’s son. One of the things Tyler had learned soon after leaving his leafy liberal arts college back East was that morons seemed to be in charge of a lot of things.

VOLODYA Zelenko and Sergei Lagunov, the two men who had made a hasty departure from Donna’s lot, were standing in the back of a body shop in Everett, Washington, an establishment that seemed to thrive, although the few body-and-fender-work customers who wandered in off the street were routinely chased away by surly staff members who said they were too busy to perform any body and fender work just now.

The big guy, Volodya, was in his mid-forties, heavy and jowly, with slicked-back iron gray hair and the face of a brutal commissar in a Cold War-era movie.

The skinny one, Sergei, was in his early thirties, and wore a dark suit, well tailored to his tall, thin frame. He had a blond, mullet-like hairdo and a thin scar running from one eye to the corner of his upper lip, pulling one side of his mouth downwards.

The two men were staring down at the body of Pavel Ivanovich Tarasov, a wiry-looking specimen with a lived-in face and strangely delicate hands suitable for reaching into dashboard crevices and tight spots around automotive frames. In life he had been a car thief and a specialist in setting back odometers and removing vehicle identification number plates from stolen cars and replacing them with VIN plates salvaged from junkyard hulks. He was known as Old Pasha, because a younger Pasha had once worked

here, but he was long gone, leaving Old Pasha's nickname as the younger man's only legacy.

"Why the fuck did you do this here?" said Sergei.

"Because he was here and I was here when I found out he fucked us over. He was selling our parts out of here! Son of a bitch sold a couple of BMW airbags on Craigslist!" Volodya shook a cigarette out of a pack and poked it into his face. "You know what? I think Veek and Cheep are fucking us over, too. In fact, I know they are."

Sergei ignored this digression. "So you *shot* him? There are other ways to handle that kind of shit."

Volodya flapped his hand in a dismissive way. "It was self-defense. I confronted him with what I knew and he attacked me."

Sergei pointed to a cheap .22-caliber pistol that lay next to a wrench and some shop rags on a nearby cluttered workbench.

"You shot him with that?"

Volodya nodded, and absentmindedly picked the gun up, wiped it off with a greasy shop rag, and put it in his pocket.

"But couldn't you have taken him? He was pretty old and a lot smaller than you." Sergei managed to deliver this opinion in an admiring and respectful rather than a critical way.

"He came at me with that!" said Volodya. He pointed down at the corpse. Near its delicate right hand with the curved, tapered fingers that would never again perform their delicate work, lay a blowtorch.

"Was it lit?"

"Yes, it was. I turned it off after I shot him. He was working on that Civic when I confronted him. He sprang at me like a panther. Look!" Volodya lifted up his elbow. In the dim fluorescent light, there did appear to be a singed patch on the arm of his shiny suit.

Sergei reflected briefly on the poor judgment behind confronting a man with a blazing blowtorch in his hand, but saw no reason to bring this up. Instead he said, "Does Dmytro know about Old Pasha?"

"No. And don't tell him. He doesn't understand that we can't let people fuck us over. He is soft and weak."