

AUBURN

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Chapter 4 - Driving A Big Truck

A convenience store sat a mile or so down the road from the bus stop after the ride from the pine thicket on the creek. I bought a coke and a toasted hoagie sub sandwich as an excuse to linger around outside.

A few hours later one of those twin axle trucks for a semi-trailer drove in with a muted deep throat exhaust. Except it didn't have a trailer. The man who came down out of the cab seemed older than most, and decidedly thinner. He didn't have the big belly and meaty hands of most of those big rig drivers. The name on the side of the cab was a man's name of Gary Gordon; not a corporate name.

When he moved to the diesel pump I walked over there as carefree as possible, which became a big fake as not so well done. "Can I catch a ride?"

He glared at me. "Girl hitchhikers are trouble."

"I'm not a girl. I don't have the chest or the hips of one."

His glare changed to a squint as his eyes focused on my non-existent bust and hips. "Why the dress?"

"I like it."

His face made a twitch loosely described as I could be a trouble maker. "You got guts doing that. Where are you headed?"

"Anywhere but here."

"You on the lam?"

"Not from the law. I'm traveling around the country. How far are you going?"

"Big truck stop has the trailer. I had to cut loose for a repair. A big expensive repair of the crankshaft cracked. Lucky the pistons didn't wreck themselves against the head. Going back for that trailer is a test for damage to the valves. Might break down again."

He had me with that explanation. "Would a hundred bucks help?"

"Why?"

"You were honest with me. Most people can't stand me in my dress."

"You can say that again. OK, you can ride. Where's that hundred?"

I had that much in my wallet without his seeing where I had more hidden away. My woman's shoulder bag tied to the top of the backpack looked more like a game bag after the strap had been replaced. After the woman's style strap had broken I used a worn leather belt from a thrift store. I counted off five twenties and handed them to him.

He eyed that knife on my hip. "You safe to be with?"

"You don't take my stuff, and I don't take yours. I'm all alone in a big world where the ruffians are mean to me."

He took the money. "Ain't that the truth. Hop in."

"Want a coke?"

"Sure. Got time. This tank holds a lot."

I returned with two cold cans of coke dripping sweat from the humidity.

"Thanks."

It became quite a climb in my skirt up into that cab where my backpack fit down between the bucket style seats. When had bought an awful lot of gas he climbed up into the cab.

I asked. "You own this rig?"

He nodded. "Beats working for a bad boss. Except when it breaks." He flexed his fingers one hand at a time from the wheel.

"What's different about driving a rig? How do you back up a trailer?"

"Aw. You learn. You got a driver's license?"

"Yes, sir."

He found a long gravelly shoulder along a straight stretch of the highway and brought that truck to a stop on it. "You want to know? Here, you drive."

"This big thing?"

"Sure. Let me see your license."

I dug out my driver's license."

He handed it back. "Just keep this side of the center line. Road lane is twelve to fourteen feet wide most of the time. Except for the mirrors this thing is only eight and a half feet wide same as a trailer." He got down from the cab and so did I. We switched sides.

He put a hand on a big knob. "This is for the trailer air brakes. You won't need that. Be gentle on the foot brake as they lock up easy being made to stop a heavy trailer. Go."

With my foot on the brake pedal to the sound of escaping air I released the handbrake which he had set hard. It had been set so hard he must have been one tough wiry guy as thin as he was. I watched in that huge outside rear-view-mirror as a string of cars zipped past.

He watched out the little rear window through the sleeper section. "OK; it's safe. Powerful engine. Take it easy."

I lifted my left foot. It had an automatic transmission which surprised me in a big truck. I didn't even need to push the accelerator pedal when that truck started moving. A little pedal and the speedometer said 25 as I pulled out onto the macadam. The cars in the rear view mirror were still a long way back as I settled in to keeping that thing in the lane.

"OK, son, see that long shoulder ahead. Time to learn that brake. Let off the gas and pull onto that shoulder before trying the brakes."

Which I did. My first try at braking locked up the wheels skidding on the gravel and scaring me to death.

"Not to worry. That's why we practice." He pointed to a gauge on the dash. "Don't pump the brakes as that depletes the air reservoir. These are powerful air brakes. Try again."

I did better on that shoulder as the first car zipped past with a honk. Only at the very end did I skid again on the gravel. Another string of cars zipped past followed by a pickup with a fancy paint scheme.

"OK. Give 'er another try on the highway."

I checked the mirror and off we went. I was doing 55 on that two lane road when an interstate interchange came into view.

"Take 'er down to twenty for your first cloverleaf. She'll do better, but for a first try. Go west."

The power steering worked great.

At the top after the curve I pushed the pedal for coming up to speed before merging in. That truck acted like a pony at the starting gate.

Way up high in that cab made the interstate highway a whole new experience. Neither the cars nor the big tractor trailers were paying much attention to the speed limit. A fell length flat bed with a load of logs went by us like I had nothing so I fell in behind him. The speedometer said he was doing 80!

"You're good, kid. Just don't loose your head."

"Yes, sir."

That loaded truck ahead had its speed up to 85 when I fell back away to not be too close.

A Tahoe SUV went by us like he felt his oats. A few miles ahead a state trooper

had him pulled over as the load of logs went by at only 78 on a slight upgrade.

A big green interstate sign said 'Weigh Station'.

"Pull into that, son."

"Yes, sir." This time I was nearly perfect with that brake.

A state trooper waved us to where to stop. A man in a technician's coveralls walked up to the driver's side as I pushed the button to lower the window. This truck cab seemed to have everything including electric windows. "Log."

The owner popped open a compartment and handed me a black book which I handed to the technician. He flipped through it. "Why Grealey's?"

The owner leaned over me talking through the driver's side window. "Cracked crankshaft."

"Driver's licenses."

Gary handed me his and I handed both of ours down.

"You're under age."

The owner called out. "Just a sec." He opened the right hand door, went down, and walked around. "Student driver."

"Still underage."

"Not in Oklahoma." The owner pointed to a sticker on the cab door.

The tech waved a hand for a state police trooper. Our driver's licenses went to the trooper who repeated what the tech had said almost to the word. The owner repeated what he had said almost to the word.

The trooper walked off with our driver's licenses and returned in a few minutes. "You're the kid in the dress in that fight."

"Yes, sir." There was no point in denying that.

"Get down."

I came down. My skirt made that a little difficult. I think the tech might have seen my diaper bulge.

"The photo no longer matches your hair. Much less that skirt. Why the disguise?"

"No disguise, sir. I want to wear a dress because I want to. That's why those thugs were picking on me."

"You hitchhiking?"

The owner interrupted. "He don't know what you are asking. He paid me a hundred bucks to learn driving a rig. That makes him a student."

“Not here. Have to attend a school for that.”

“Oklahoma allows private students because it doesn’t ban them. Reciprocity.”

The trooper scowled.

Gary stood straighter. “I’m concerned Grealey’s shortcut the repairs. We’re on a light run breaking in the crankshaft and checking for any damage to the valves. You may want to check the exhaust and the brakes just as a precaution.”

“Grealey’s got a good reputation.”

“Not with me they don’t. Something don’t feel right under that hood.”

The trooper handed us back our driver’s licenses. “Put her on the rack.”

The owner pointed a finger at me. “You drive. I gotta watch from the ground.”

My stomach tightened all over again as I climbed up into that cab. My skirt was as difficult as ever on those few tall steps.

The tech gave me hand signals.

I checked the rear view mirrors, released the hand brake, and used just a touch of the pedal. It seemed almost too much.

He brought me into one of three very tall bays. The owner stood in the middle and coached me for those big 22" front tires up the ramp. He held up a hand for a halt, which I did. He bent way over watching underneath. “OK; rear is aligned. Bring it up gently.”

He scared me to death with that last word. Together we made it so.

The tech signaled for exactly where he wanted me to stop, which I did.

I leaned out the cab window. “Turn it off?”

“No.”

He went to the side. I could feel that heavy truck being lifted a little up off of the ramp.

“Release all your brakes.”

I thought I knew how to do that. Nobody yelled at me.

He stuffed a tube down the exhaust that came out overhead and had me running that engine at various speeds.

The trooper came to the truck and stood on the lower foot rest outside. “You wear diapers?”