

Chapter Three

Dr. Christopher Cyrus, Ph.D., considered the young female cadet before him. Twenty minutes into the interview and she hadn't said anything that would indicate a lack of fitness for serving as a police officer for the Clayton police department.

But he knew something about this cadet. First off, he knew her uncle and near-namesake, Valentin Dawes. Who didn't? A local hero, a detective who'd cracked the most famous murder/kidnapping case in local history thirty years before. A man who'd taken three bullets over the course of his career, the last one fatal, each time sacrificing himself for citizens who walked away with barely a scratch. A man whose funeral drew the attendance of over a thousand people, including Cyrus.

The funeral's attendees had also included the thirteen-year-old version of the cadet currently sitting in Cyrus's office with her hands folded on her lap, the vision of calmness and restraint. He remembered her much-younger face from that day, wet with tears, yet far more innocent and more trusting of the

world than the woman who smiled at him now. He could sense the anger inside her, in her terse, barely restrained responses to his questions. Given her family's history, he could hardly blame her.

But anger, justified or not, was not a quality sought in police cadets in Clayton, or anywhere else, for that matter.

"I would like to explore your past a bit more," he said, smoothing his salt-and-pepper beard with his fingers. "Specifically, your childhood." He smiled at her and adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. Not that they needed adjusting. He coughed into his hand, waiting.

"My...childhood?" She uncrossed her legs and smoothed her wrinkle-free black slacks. "Specifically, what part of my childhood?"

He noted the slowing of her enunciation, the way people do when they're uncomfortable with a topic. "Yes," he said. "Say, the period from when you were, say, twelve to fifteen."

She tensed visibly, worry lines crowding her hazel, gold-specked eyes. "Oh, you mean, how have I dealt with the grief from my uncle's death." She exhaled, tossed her hands up. "What would you like to know?"

"How do you feel about what happened to your uncle?" He watched her face, her hands. "Do you feel justice was served in his case?"

"The murderers were caught, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison," she said. "I couldn't ask for anything more."

Still relaxed. Had he missed the boat here? "Yes, that's all factually true," he said, "but what I want to know is, how do you *feel* about it? Do you ever

wish, for example, that the people who shot him should have been punished more?”

She shrugged. “Sure. Lots more. But we’ve done away with the death penalty in Connecticut,” she said, her voice growing more animated, “and rarely used it even when we had it. If child molesters don’t get executed, why should Copskiillers?” She paused, took a breath. “I’m sorry. I do get a little emotional about this topic.”

He nodded. “Understandable. Ms. Dawes, we have a responsibility to ensure that our peace officers...how shall I say this? That they—”

“That they’re not vigilantes? No kidding. Look, doc, I had three years of grief counseling after my uncle’s death, and I’ve talked this issue to death. The truth is,” she said with a mischievous smile, “I know what sort of answers you want here, and I could give them to you all day. But here’s the reality. My uncle was my inspiration to become a cop—*before* a couple of hostage-takers gunned him down at the shopping mall that day. We were very close. I was pissed as hell that he died so young, and super-pissed that he died the way he did. But I’m not becoming a cop to avenge his death. Okay? Straight-up, that’s the God’s-honest-truth.”

He sat back in his chair, pushed there by the force of her words. She felt strongly about this, but he couldn’t say that her feelings or her reactions were in any way imbalanced or perversely motivated. Still, he felt he was missing something.

“Ms. Dawes, if you found yourself in a similar situation, do you feel you could keep your personal feelings under control?” He fought for words. “That you could restrain yourself from using unnecessary force, deadly force, unless absolutely necessary?”

“I do, doctor.” She grimaced. “I’ll never forget my uncle, and I think about him every day. But not because I’m out to exact justice on his killers or their successors currently roaming Clayton streets. I miss him. I loved him. I’ve tried my whole life to live by his example. And his example was to put people first, to exercise kindness, to communicate and strive for understanding. That’s the kind of cop he was, and it’s the kind of cop I want to be.” She’d leaned forward during her speech, and Cyrus had to admit, her passion was infectious.

He had no reason not to believe that Valorie Dawes, like her uncle, would make a great cop. Still, something about her left him unsettled. Apprehensive, even. Nothing he could put his finger on. Just a feeling.

He gazed at the form in front of him, one that, with his signature, would arm this woman with deadly force and release her to the streets. Could he make the highly unusual move of rejecting her admittance to the police force, based on a feeling?

No, he could not.

He located the signature box for “Approval,” and signed the form.

“You must be Dawes.”

Val turned to find the man with the baritone voice that had spoken to her. “*G. Kryzinski*” read the nameplate pinned to his chest, just below eye level for her, on his dark blue uniform. Taller than average—probably about 6'2"—with a build just to the husky side of athletic, he had ten or fifteen years on her. Not that it showed in his wavy, jet-black hair—not a gray speck there, nor in the five o'clock shadow darkening his high cheekbones and rugged jawline. Three chevrons adorned his sleeves. A sergeant.

“That’s right. I’m Val.” She extended her hand, grateful to have company in the briefing room. She felt like a complete geek showing up over an hour early for her 5:00 p.m. shift on her first day.

“I’m Gil. Welcome to Hartford P.D.” He shook her hand, nodded, and smiled. “Partner.”

Val blinked. “You drew the short straw, eh?”

Gil’s smile broadened. “I’d say not.” He turned and walked toward the coffee urns at the side of the room. “Actually, I requested you. Can I buy you a drink?” A boyish smile revealed tiny laugh lines around his dark brown eyes.

“Sure, thanks. Black, one sugar. Um...why did you request me?” Please, she begged the universe. Not another Ben Peterson.

Gil poured the coffees and stirred sugar into one of them. “Your reputation. Outstanding cadet, family legacy, great athlete, big into community policing. I heard you even aced the marksmanship test.”

Val nodded. “Fair enough. But you have me at a disadvantage. I know nothing about you.” She sipped the coffee—piping hot, weak, and bitter.

“Eight years on the Clayton force. Just made sergeant. Refused a desk job. I want to stay on the streets, so I was made swing shift supervisor here at Liberty Heights. Essentially, the straw boss for the beat cops in that neighborhood—*our* neighborhood. Had to transfer in to get that, from South End.”

“That’s why you needed a partner?”

“Smart girl.”

“*Woman.*” She set her awful coffee down on the counter and met his gaze.

He nodded and surrendered another boyish grin. “I stand corrected.”

“But why me?” she asked. “You could have chosen almost anyone, with your rank. Someone with experience.”

Gil shook his head. “Nope. I wanted someone with a fresh perspective. And I wanted to train you—the right way.”

Val nodded. “You had several newbies to choose from. Why the only woman?”

Gil sipped his coffee again and grimaced. “This stuff’s awful, isn’t it? First thing I’m gonna do is change the coffee service.”

“Second,” she said. “The first thing is, you’ll level with your partner when she asks you a direct question.” She met his surprised look with a steady stare.

“Once again, I stand corrected,” he said. “And that fearlessness you just showed me fits your rep. *That’s* why I chose you as my partner.” He stepped away to toss his coffee into the sink.

She gave her own cup a disapproving stare, then focused back on him. “I hope I can live up to your expectations.”

Gil nodded and a smile curled at the corners of his lips. “You will, Dawes. Just do me one favor.”

She cocked her head and gave him a look of mock suspicion. “What’s that?”

His smile fell into a line across his lips. “Be honest with me,” he said. “Always. As I will be to you.”

“I will.”

He sat in the hard wooden chair next to her, putting their eyes on an even level. “This is very important, Dawes. By being honest I don’t mean just being truthful when asked. You need to feel like you can talk to me. Anytime, about anything at all. Even if it means correcting my latent sexism.” He smiled again in a self-deprecating way.

She gave him a solemn nod and turned away. His words provoked memories she’d much rather suppress. She’d never shied away from stating her opinion or calling out bias. But she’d never excelled at opening up, not about herself.

“Dawes?”

His suspicious tone startled her back into the moment. “Uh, sorry. What’s first on our agenda?”

“Getting you to stay present, first off.” He cocked his head. “Where’d your mind go just now?”

She hesitated and regretted it. Recognition lit up his eyes. He knew she was hiding something, dammit. She shrugged and took a solemn breath. “I was remembering something from my childhood. Someone said something similar, and—well, it just triggered a memory.” She smiled. “Not in a bad way.”

He cocked his head. “Your uncle?”

Before she could stop herself, she shook her head. “No. My father. He had a way of always getting into my business, you know? Until he began to ignore me completely.” She clamped her mouth shut. She hadn’t intended on revealing so much.

After a moment, his lips eased into another smile back at her. “Fathers can be that way, can’t they? So, did you ever tell him?”

“Tell who, what?” For some reason, her face felt warm.

“Your dad. Whatever he was asking about. Did you ever tell him?”

“Hell, no,” she said with a short laugh. “We, uh, didn’t have the closest relationship. Still don’t.”

“Closer to your mom, then?” His tone seemed innocent enough, but his eyes bore into her with savage intensity. Nothing innocent or casual about any of this conversation.

She shook her head. “Mom left when I was thirteen. Haven’t seen her since. Things...weren’t good at home.”

“Ah. Well.” His expression softened. Whatever he’d been looking for from her, he’d found it. “I’m sorry to hear that. Well, let’s get going. We’ll never catch any bad guys in here.” He stood and gestured toward the door with his cap.

With a sigh of relief, Val stood and strode toward the door. That conversation had veered close to troubled waters—dangerously close. She'd trusted him right away, more than any man since Uncle Val. He had a way of putting her at ease while at the same time challenging her protective shell. Depending on the type of guy Gil was, that could spell trouble. She made a mental note of it.

"Where do you live, Val?" Gil guided their cruiser east on Albany Avenue. He had taken her out on patrol immediately after her new-employee orientation session ended—forty minutes of pep talks and Powerpoint presentations by desk jockeys. Probably the same people that made the coffee.

"Not far from here." She pointed out her passenger-side window. "About three blocks from that coffee shop, toward the cemetery. About a fifteen-minute walk from the precinct."

"Really?" He gave her an appreciative nod. "Me too. We're practically neighbors."

"No kidding?" She turned toward him. "I thought you lived in South End."

He scoffed. "Hell no. On a cop's salary? I wish." He slowed and peered through the windshield at the group of African-American youths loitering outside a boarded-up pawn shop. "This spot's usually trouble," he said. "These kids have no job, nothing to do, no parents—or none paying attention, anyway. We have to keep our eye on them."

“What are their names?”

He gave her a quizzical, sideways stare. “Names?”

“Yeah. Like Gil, Valorie, John Doe. You know. *Names.*”

“Don’t be such a smartass.” He almost suppressed a grin. “I know what the word means. I don’t know their real names. I just know nicknames. Well, for most of ’em.” They passed the gang at low speed. “The tall one, he’s called Pope. Don’t know where the nickname came from, but it fits. He’s the leader. Whatever he says is Gospel to the Disciples.”

“Disciples?”

“That’s what they call themselves. The gang.” He pointed to another member of the gang. “That one there, the little guy? Seems to be one of Pope’s favorites. They call him Dog.”

She laughed. “I don’t recall any of the original twelve disciples being called ‘Dog’.”

“Historical accuracy ain’t their thing. Ruling the streets, on the other hand...”

Val craned her neck to watch the group stare back at her as they passed. “Let’s swing back around. I want to talk to them.”

“Later,” Gil said. “If we go back now, they’ll scatter, thinking we’re gonna bust their asses for something. Not that we shouldn’t. They’re always up to something.”

“You have quite the outlook on life.” She shook her head. “So did you move to Liberty Heights when you transferred, or have you always lived here?”

“When I transferred. I lived in the Barry Square area before, east of Maple. Another lovely spot.” He shook his head and snorted. “Hell, I got robbed twice down there myself. Those bastards are nervy.” He stopped at a light and checked something in the rear-view mirror.

“I’ll say. Robbing a cop? Off-duty, I take it.”

“Well, burgled, technically. Ripped off my TV, stereo, and a couple hundred in cash. Even a gun, the first time.”

“Service revolver?” Her eyes widened.

“No. Little .22 pistol I kept around. I’ve always had my own guns.” The light changed. He put the car back in motion. “In this line of work, it pays to be familiar with a variety of weapons.” He turned right on a side street and drove slowly through the neighborhood.

“What do you mean?” She frowned. “The .38's they give us pack plenty of pop, they’re reliable, and accurate as pistols go. Why would you need a .22?”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes, then shrugged. “I see Uncle Val didn’t teach you all the inside dope on policing.”

“N—no,” she said. “Hey, take a right here.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Okay. Why?” He slowed for the turn.

“I want to get back to Albany Avenue and do a little walking. Maybe meet the Pope and all his Disciples.”

“*Aye carumba*, you are persistent,” he said. “All right, but I’ll warn you. They’re gonna have fun with you.”

“Because I’m a woman?”

“A woman with a gun. I can smell their pheromones from here.”

Val sighed. “And you’re one of the progressive men on the force?”

Gil grinned as he took another right, heading north back to Albany Avenue. “You just wait. You’re going to meet some guys that make me look like Hillary Clinton.”

“Ew,” she said.

Gil laughed. “I rest my case.” He pulled the squad car over and parked. “Okay, Officer Dawes. Time to meet and greet. Your first hour of live community policing has begun.”