

# **A Woman of Valor**

## **Chapter One**

Valorie Dawes approached her roommate Beth's bedroom door on tiptoe, taking each cautious step as quietly as possible. She could never be sure if Beth had company in there or not, or if she'd pulled an all-nighter to study for exams and wanted to sleep all day, or both. Usually Beth left some sort of signal in their tiny common living space if she didn't want Val to disturb her before 9:00 a.m., but during finals week, none of the usual rules applied. She crept to the door and listened. Nothing. Maybe Beth hadn't even come home the night before.

Val waited another moment, pressing her ear to the door. A soft buzzing sound seemed to emerge from within. Snoring, maybe, or perhaps her morning alarm. Maybe if she brought coffee—

The door swung open, and Val jerked back in a panic. The 5'8", pear-shaped figure of her lifelong friend glared out of the darkened doorway, her eyes bleary between long locks of brown hair hanging in front of her face.

"What are you doing there?" Beth asked, striding past her toward the kitchen in a pale yellow bathrobe. "And please tell me there's caffeine. I've still got to cram for my Business Ethics final today."

"Fresh, dark and strong," Val said, pausing for Beth's stock reply.

“Like my men,” Beth said.

Val grinned with relief. Good old Beth.

Beth poured coffee into a gigantic ceramic mug and made a pouty face. “I hate that you’re finishing a semester early. I’ll never find a roommate as good as you.” She searched the fridge for some creamer and poured what seemed like a quart into her mug. “Thanks for replenishing the food stocks, by the way. Otherwise we’d have starved today.”

“I’ll be out of here by dinner,” Val said, “once I drop my application in the mail. I was hoping you’d take a look at it for me...?” She pointed to a stapled set of printouts on the kitchen table. “Once you’ve had your coffee, of course.”

“Of course. But dammit, Val, this makes me sad. It’s the end of an era.” Beth poured Val a mug of black coffee and they sat opposite each other at the kitchen table.

“It’s just a few months,” Val said. “We’ll be roomies again once we’re both back in Clayton. That’s still the plan, right?”

Beth’s gaze floated upward, over Val’s shoulder. “Good morning, gorgeous,” she said.

Val furrowed her eyebrows. What a curious thing to say. She started to reply, but something moved in her peripheral vision. No, not some *thing*. Some *one*. She turned, and the bare, muscular chest of a large, dark-haired man filled her vision. Close to her face. Close enough to smell his cheap cologne.

*Cologne that brought her back to the worst day of her life—the day a man towered over her, dominated her, hurt her—*

She leaped out of her chair, pushing the dark-haired man to the floor in a heap. Val stepped past him and spun around to face him, crouched in a fighter's stance, fingers curled and ready to strike.

"Val! What the hell?" Beth shouted, jumping to her feet. Her coffee had spilled all over her bathrobe, drenching her and the floor. "Geez, Rick, are you all right?"

Rick, who Val now realized was Beth's latest conquest, picked his tall, muscular frame up off the floor and wiped coffee off of his face. He wore only a set of red boxer shorts and a goofy smile. "I'm fine," he said, laughing. He glanced at Beth, then nodded to Val. "That's quite the security team you've got there. You must be Valorie." He opened his arms, reaching out to hug her. Val backed away.

"Val doesn't hug, Rick," Beth said. "Why don't you go get some clothes on?"

Rick planted a long, wet kiss on Beth's lips, grinned at Val, and ambled back to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

"I've told you a thousand times, you need to warn me when you have guys over," Val said. "Where'd you find this one?"

"You need to chill," Beth said, "and never mind where I found him. He's temporary. Now, let me see this application." She picked up the stapled pages and read while refilling her coffee. Val busied herself with cleaning up the spill.

"It looks great," Beth said after a minute. "But Val, are you sure you want to do this? I mean, given all you've been through..."

“I’ve never wanted to do anything else,” she said. “You know that.”

“But why Clayton?” Beth said, sitting at the table again. “With what happened to your uncle there, and to you—”

“That’s why it *has* to be Clayton,” Val said, tossing her clean-up rag into the sink. “No place needs an infusion of justice more than our own hometown.”

“That’s what worries me.” Beth set the application down on the table, careful to avoid the wet spots, and rested her chin on her hands. “It feels like—and please, don’t take this the wrong way—maybe you’re not seeking justice so much as revenge, for what happened to your uncle and to you. The whole Milt thing.”

“Please don’t say his name,” Val said, clenching her eyes shut. “And I’m fine. I’ve put all that behind me.”

“I’m not so sure.” Beth stood and circled the table, placing her hand on Val’s shoulder. “I’m afraid, Val. Afraid that your anger over your uncle’s death, and for the horrible thing that happened to you, will be what drives you. That you’ll get into tough situations with some bad guys, and you won’t see clearly. That it won’t end well—for them, or for you.” She squeezed Val’s shoulders and knelt to put her face level with Val’s. “I’m afraid for what could happen to you.”

“I’ll be safe,” Val said in a voice more forceful than she intended. “And I’m not out to punish other men for what those scumbags did to my family. I just don’t want other scumbags doing it to other families, and to other thirteen-year-old girls. Or grown women. Or anyone.” She locked eyes with her friend, softening her tone. “I promise. I’ll be safe.”

Beth's face crumpled into a sad smile. "I know you will." She continued gazing into Val's eyes for another moment, then looked away.

Val sighed. She might never convince her friend of how she felt. What unsettled her was that she hadn't yet convinced herself, either.

\*\*\*

Valorie Dawes paused outside the open doorway of Hartford Police Lieutenant Laurence Gibson's cramped office, an all-shaded-glass enclosure trimmed with dark wood and beige government-issue metal chairs, desk, and filing cabinets. Gibson's bearlike figure seemed overly large for the room, and his dark black skin, broad nose, bulbous eyes, and untamed silver hair exaggerated the effect.

"Come in, Ms. Dawes." Val shut the door. The breeze of its motion caused papers to flutter, pinned to the walls or stuck to the filing cabinets with tape and refrigerator magnets. A quick perusal of the magnets told her where Gibson preferred to get his coffee, pizza, and sub sandwiches, and, like everyone else in town, rooted for the Boston Red Sox and New England Patriots.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Lieutenant." Val sat in his worn, thinly-padded metal framed guest chair. Gibson's desk towered in front of her, resting on cylindrical risers to accommodate his tall, massive frame. In her 5'6", 125-pound frame, she felt like a kid in the principal's office rather than a 22-year-old who graduated a semester early from the University of Connecticut.

And that simply wouldn't do.

She stood and extended her hand across his cluttered desk, raising it uncomfortably high to clear the edge of the massive structure and all of the coffee cups, pencil holders, and other miscellaneous items stacked along its edge. Gibson remained engrossed in a document pulled from a manila folder.

“Very impressive credentials.” Gibson peered over his pince-nez glasses. He finally noticed her still-outstretched hand and took it briefly in his.

“Criminology degree from UConn, graduated *cum laude*. Outstanding entry exam. Your essay on community policing was first-rate. And you’re a bit of an athlete, aren’t you?”

Val allowed a tiny smile. “I ran track in high school and college, and also played some soccer.”

“All-Metro midfielder in high school. Starter on the ACC championship team at UConn. More track ribbons than I could fit in this office. You’ve proved yourself a competitor, Ms. Dawes.” He glanced at her again. “You’re a little small for a cop, but you’ve stayed in good shape. You should have no trouble passing the physical.”

“Thank you, sir.” She blushed and held her breath. Maybe she should say more, but what? She had no idea. She kept her mouth shut.

He flipped through her application. “Ever shot a gun?”

She nodded. “My...uncle taught me.” Dammit. She hadn’t wanted his name to come up in this interview.

“I figured he might have.” Gibson set the application down on his desk and removed his glasses, and set her application down on his desk. “I’ll come

straight to the point, Ms. Dawes. The name Val Dawes carries a certain amount of, shall we say, *respect* around here.”

Val sat upright and rigid in her chair. “I’m not trading on my uncle’s repu—”

“You’d be crazy not to.” Gibson sat back in his chair. “Valentin Dawes a good man and a great cop. One of the best. Some of that must have rubbed off on you.”

Val darkened and stared down at her hands. “I want to be considered on my own merits, sir. On *my* credentials. Not his.”

“We wouldn’t have it any other way.” Gibson put his glasses on and picked up her application again. “Your exam was among the best I’ve ever seen. Clearly you’ve prepared for this for some time.”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, sir. Since I was a child.”

“Since your uncle—”

“Before that.”

Gibson gave her a closed-mouth smile and a curt nod. “As you may know, we’re on a push to hire more women and minority officers.”

She shifted in her chair, and it scraped the floor with a harsh, raspy noise. “I don’t want to be an affirmative-action hire. If I don’t out-compete the men—”

“You do. Don’t worry. That’s not the point.” He put his glasses back on. “Ms. Dawes, we have 435 sworn officers in the Clayton Police Department. Guess how many are female.”

She shook her head. “Twenty percent?”

“Ha! I wish.” He exhaled, the wind whistling through his teeth. “Less than thirty. Not percent. *Total*. That’s even worse than the national average, which is pitiful.” He sighed. “People say that police work is a man’s game, Dawes. It attracts people who are a little more aggressive, a little more controlling, a little more confident in their physical abilities. More often than not, that’s men. And a lot of men around here want to keep it that way.”

“Do you?” The words escaped her before she could stop them. “Um, I mean, do you, *sir*?”

“If I did, you wouldn’t be here.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Unfortunately, the Neanderthals outnumber the ones who agree with me. And they can make life tough on a young woman, even one with your qualifications. But given your uncle’s legacy—well, let’s just say I’m hoping that slows them down a little.”

“So, are you saying...?”

“We’d like you to start at the academy on the first of next month. Can you do that?”

Val’s heart pounded and she could not suppress a grin. “Yes, sir!”

“Very well.” He stood and offered his hand. “Welcome to the Clayton, Connecticut Police Department, Officer Cadet Dawes.”



## Chapter Two

Val jogged to a stop ten feet from police academy trainer Sergeant Matt McKenzie, a side of beef with a razor-sharp salt-and-pepper crew cut and a jaw like a concrete block. First to finish their three-mile “warm-up run,” she wasted no time getting ready for whatever drill he wanted to push the cadets through next. Sgt. Mack, as he preferred to be called, barked out orders like an army drill sergeant, and had about as much patience. The last thing she wanted was for him to single her out for causing any delays.

“Line up, lunkheads,” Mack yelled, clapping his hands above his head. He glared at the twenty-six male cadets from around the state as they trickled in from the running track. “Come on, come on, double time!” He pushed the last few cadets into position with a rough shove around their shoulders. “You guys ought to be ashamed of yourselves, getting beaten that bad by a damned *girl!*” With that he cast a wicked grin at Val, and not a friendly one. Her face burned, but she’d learned by hard experience not to object aloud to Mack.

A tall, lanky cadet with short brown hair pushed into line next to Val. She sighed. Benjamin Peterson always seemed to be around whenever things were about to go bad for her.

“Way to go, Dawes,” Ben said in a low sneer. “Showing us all up again.

Can't you cut us some slack now and again?"

"If that's yet another awkward request for a date, the answer, for the hundredth time, is still no," she murmured.

Mack glared and pointed a thick, gnarly finger at her. "You got something to share with the group, Dawes?"

Val snapped to attention. "No, sir!"

"Then shut your trap." Mack paced in front of the group. "Gentlemen and ladies—*lady*— we have a special treat for you today. A guest instructor, here to school you on some of the finer points of hand-to-hand combat. Sergeant Brenda Petroni of Clayton P.D. Sergeant?"

Val's breath caught in her throat. After six weeks of men giving her nothing but grief and hostility, seeing a female sergeant as an instructor at the academy—from her own department, no less—seemed too good to be true. She glanced at the woman, who, like Mack, wore a loose workout uniform and running shoes, despite the chilly morning air. About 5'8", with curly, dark brown hair, and a build Val could only describe as sturdy, the forty-something woman smiled at the cadets. Compared to Mack, she seemed relaxed, even downright friendly.

"Thanks, Mack. Cadets, I know you've been taught the basics of self-defense, but the rules of engagement out there are changing." She scanned the group and locked eyes for a moment with Val. Her eyes sparkled and her smile seemed to sharpen—or did Val imagine that? Petroni gave her a slight nod, then continued. "To demonstrate, may I have a volunteer?"

For a long second, no hands rose. Long experience with Mack had ingrained in every cadet a grave fear of volunteering for anything at the academy. Usually it involved pain, humiliation, or at the very least, extra work. But with Petroni, things could be different. For a woman, anyway. Val's hand went up. Two or three male hands followed.

"You, and you." She pointed at Val and Ben. Val gazed up at him in shock.

Ben grinned. "I can't let you have all the glory."

They stepped forward, one on either side of Petroni. Behind them, Mack emitted a low chuckle. Damn. If he expected to be entertained by this, then volunteering was definitely a mistake.

"Mr. Peterson? Please demonstrate the proper method for restraining this perp, here." She indicated Val with an open palm and instructed them to face each other in front of the line of cadets. "Dawes, try to escape your hypothetical crime scene by getting past Officer Peterson."

Peterson grinned, then crouched. Val feinted left, then lunged right. Ben hooked his elbow and spun behind her, twisted her arm behind her back and forced Val to the ground. A sharp pain streaked up to her shoulder, and she howled in pain. He dug his knee into her side and forced his arm around her neck, choking her.

"All right, let her up," Petroni said, disgust in her voice. "Now, what did the rest of you observe about this take-down? Anyone?"

Ben started to let her up, then, when Petroni's gaze turned away, shoved

her by the neck back onto the ground. His knee slid onto her upper thigh, pressing all two hundred pounds of his weight onto her. She grunted in pain again.

“You ladies done over there?” Mack said with a growl. Peterson scrambled off her, his face reddening. Val got up and dusted herself off. The line of cadets stared at their feet.

Petroni shook her head at the two of them, then turned to face the group. “Come on, speak up,” she said. “What’d he do right? What’d he do wrong, according to your training?”

“Well,” drawled a blond-haired cadet off to one side, “he could’ve broken her arm.”

“And choked her to death,” someone else said.

“Good, good,” Petroni said. “Would you say he used excessive force?”

“For a girl that size? Sure,” the blond said.

“But he doesn’t know if she’s got a gun, or knife, or what,” said another cadet, a muscular man with a dark crew cut.

Petroni nodded. “Good observations, everyone. Now, let’s do it again,” she said. “Reverse roles. Dawes, use appropriate levels of force.” Their eyes locked, and Val detected a hint of a smile on the older woman’s face.

Peterson faced her, arms in front, as if to grab her. Val got into a defensive crouch, hands close in, her fingers curled, karate-style. Peterson lunged straight at her, grabbing her, pushing her to his left. She grabbed his upper arm and dropped into a tight roll, pulling Peterson along, using his own

momentum against him. He landed on his back with an audible *whump*, followed by a groan. Val scrambled onto him, pinning both arms with her knees, her forearm pressed hard against his windpipe.

“Whoa!” “Holy cow!” “Did you see that?” Mumbling from the male cadets filled Val’s ears.

“And what did Ms. Dawes just demonstrate?” Petroni said, her eyes gleaming.

“That Peterson’s a pussy,” said someone off to the far end of the line. A roar of laughter from the cadets followed.

Val stood and extended a hand to Peterson. Ben shook it off, rolling off to one side, eventually lifting himself to his hands and knees on the turf. “Where’d you learn that?” he asked between gasps.

“From my sensei, of course,” she said. “Black belt, jiu jitsu. Perhaps I should have warned you.”

“That would have been nice.” Ben got to his feet and shuffled back into the line of cadets.

“What we’re going to learn today—those of use who don’t know already,” Petroni said with a wink at Val, “is how to restrain a suspect with minimally necessary force, and the guidelines for doing so. Partner up. Try to find someone about your own size. Dawes? You stay here with me.” She said to Val, “I don’t dare sic you loose on those guys. You could kill one of them.”

“There have been moments that I wanted to,” Val said. “I’m sorry for ruining your demonstration, though. I should have taken it easy on him.”

Petroni stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Have they ever taken it easy on you?” she asked.

Val shook her head. “Unless you consider constant belittling and having your ass grabbed twice a day ‘taking it easy’.”

“Then don’t you ever take it easy on them,” Petroni said. “They’ll never respect you if you do. And no need to apologize to me. I knew your martial arts abilities going into this drill. That little demo had a purpose. With luck, none of them will ever forget it.”

“I hope we get to work together in Clayton,” Val said, dumbstruck.

Petroni smiled. “We will, Dawes. And if you ever need anything, you look me up.” Petroni blew into a whistle hanging from a leather string around her neck. “All right, listen up, cadets! It’s time to learn how to defend yourselves out there!”

\*\*\*

Two months later, Val stepped off a city bus in downtown Clayton, exchanging the bus’s pungent stale aromas of sweat and diesel exhaust for the muggy heat of a late New England summer afternoon. She hustled across the street and climbed the wide, shallow steps leading to Central Police Headquarters, a six-story block of brick, glass, and concrete built in the architectural style of Stalinist Russia. Given its advanced age and state of decay, she wondered if the city had imported the building directly from Siberia.

Val pushed through the building’s wide glass entry doors to the public lobby. Twin rows of pink granite pillars, three feet in diameter at the base, rose

a good thirty feet from the white marble floors to the vaulted ceilings adorned with bronze chandeliers holding dimly lit bulbs too high off the ground to provide any useful level of illumination. The air, a good ten or fifteen degrees cooler than outside, gave her goosebumps, or “chicken skin” as her uncle Val used to say.

She'd arrived a half-hour early for her entry interview, actually a series of administrative meetings with Human Resources staff and payroll clerks, followed by what she expected to be a pro-forma intake evaluation by the department's staff psychiatrist. She hoped to finish it all by five so that she could meet Beth, her best friend since fifth grade, for drinks to celebrate the start of the new job, as well as their moving into an apartment together over the weekend. But the HR receptionist delivered bad news: her first appointment would start about twenty minutes late.

Too nervous to sit on the uncomfortable benches lining the wall of the HR office, she gave herself a visitor's tour of the building's impressive lobby, absorbing the department's public relations efforts on public display. Photos of the members of City Council, the police commission, and the top departmental brass took up most of one wall. Another summarized highlights of the city's and department's history since its founding in the early 1800s, most of which she'd learned in grade school. A third exhibit, however, brought her browsing to an abrupt, emotional halt.

The Wall of Fallen Heroes consisted of a series of photos and news stories commemorating the two dozen or so men—all of them, men—who'd given their

lives in service to the city of Clayton. The first such incident dated back to 1831, taking the life of an officer who'd barely reached Val's own age of 22, in his fourth year of service, attempting to halt a bank robbery. Almost half of the fatal events occurred during the Civil War in efforts to aid the Underground Railroad. A handful had occurred since World War II.

The most recent, though, hit home to Val. Not only because it had occurred just under ten years before, but because of the rugged, clean-shaven face of the man depicted in the photograph. A man with short brown hair, who resembled her older brother in appearance except for his sparkling hazel eyes speckled with gold, like hers. A man she'd loved like a father, and the only man to whom she had trusted her darkest, most horrible secret.

### **Detective Valentin Dawes, 1973-2018**

She ran her fingers over the nameplate under the photo, fighting tears, a lump rising in her throat. She didn't need to spend time gazing at the photo, because she'd kept a copy of it on her dresser since her tenth birthday, but she couldn't help but read headlines from the many newspaper clippings framing the giant photo.

### **Shopping Mall Shooter Kills Officer, 4 Others**

### **Officer Slain at Mall Saved 'Dozens,' Witnesses Say**

### **Families, Fellow Officers Remember Val Dawes as Hero**

Val's attempts to read the remaining news articles had to wait, as tears blurred her vision and forced her eyes closed.



\*\*\*

**Ten Years Earlier**

*Valorie approached the casket, her heart aching. 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 frame. Above the casket in the cradle of a tall easel, a photograph of Uncle Val gazed down at her, his friendly hazel eyes betraying the stern look he'd adopted for his official departmental head shot.*

*She had 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 thirteen—she could choose her own clothes. Besides, Uncle Val would have wanted her to be comfortable and “ready for anything.” Who could be ready for anything in a dress?*

*Besides, dresses only attracted the unwelcome attention of creepy old men like “Uncle” Milt, who preyed on innocent young girls—something that, as of a few weeks before, she would never again be.*

*She shuddered, pushing the awful memory out of her mind. Or tried to. Something that horrific, she could never forget. But next time, if there ever was a next time, she'd be ready.*

*Uncle Val had always been ready for anything and everything, until four days before, when he'd been cut down in the line of duty at 45 by a criminal's bullet. Detective Valentin Dawes died a hero not only to her adoring eyes, but to the entire city of Clayton, as evidenced by the long line of strangers that lined up*

*behind her to view her uncle's open casket.*

*She walked on toward the dais. Taking heavy breaths, she pressed her foot on the bottom stair, lifted herself up, then the next, her eyes cast downward. Valorie wanted to see him all at once, at a moment of her choosing, not accidentally on the way.*

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

*She looked at his still figure, only visible from the shoulders up, but still pale and lifeless in the casket. Her first thought—Thank God they hadn't shot him in the head—made her angry at herself. Then, hot tears flowed down her face. This isn't Uncle Val, her heart raged. He was always so vivacious, so very much alive. This is someone else. It's not real!*

*She dried her tears with a tissue her father had pressed into her hand at the start of her walk and stood tall in front of him. Uncle Val would not want her tears. He would want her strong, remembering their special moments together, rather than mourning the ones they would never have. Thinking of the future, not the past. Of what she could become.*

*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.*