

Chapter Two

The sun sank low over the Torrington River, peeking below the angry storm clouds threatening to ruin the last mile of Valorie's evening run. Dressed in running shorts and a gray cotton sweatshirt with "Property of Clayton PD" stenciled across the chest, she'd keep warm enough if the rain held off. But late March storms in western Connecticut often turned brutal. She picked up the pace and considered the bright side. Maybe she'd even beat her best six-mile time.

Ahead of her on the trail, two men jogged side by side, both in their 40s or 50s, judging by their gray hair, apple-shaped bodies, and achingly-slow pace. One of the men glanced back at her every fifteen or twenty seconds, revealing a tired, wrinkled face, red and sweaty. He looked familiar, but she couldn't bring his face into clear focus. Still, he made her nervous.

Val passed the two men at the point where the path split, one side veering off to continue upriver, the other leading to the pedestrian bridge over the swift, swirling current below. She took the path over the bridge, hoping the two men would choose the riverside path. Running alone beat running with creepy old men, any day.

A quick glance back at them revealed she'd earned half her wish: one of the men had gone on upriver, but the other followed her over the bridge. Weird. Maybe they weren't running together after all.

Having one man following her seemed even creepier than two, so she picked up the pace. She reached the end of the bridge and peeked back again.

She didn't see him. Maybe she'd been mistaken—

Val collided with someone in front of her, a man who hadn't been there moments before. She tumbled to the ground, landing on the rocky riverbank atop a large, overweight man with gray hair and a red, sweaty face. So close she could smell his sweat, a musky aroma, not pleasant.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you," she said, scrambling to climb off him. But she couldn't seem to stand up, or roll to the side, or move at all. His arms gripped her back, holding her down—when had he grabbed her? He rolled on top of her, pinning her arms under his knees, undid his belt—weird, who wears a belt and trousers while running? He gazed down at her, and his face came into focus: Uncle Milt, the man who had raped her a few weeks before her thirteenth birthday. Milt was shushing her screams, ordering her not to tell anyone, or else. "You know what they say about girls who do this," he said.

Milt groped at her, breathing hard, almost grunting in sick pleasure. Val bucked under him, trying to push him off. He slapped her face, then punched her, and blood trickled down her face. She tried to free her arms, but he was too heavy, and wriggling made it hurt more. He laughed at her. "I bet you have a pretty little pussy, don't you?" he said.

And then his face changed. No longer Uncle Milt, it was Richard Harkins, and he had a gun pointed at her, and his finger tightened on the trigger—

Val sat up in her bed, cold sweat drenching her body, her heart pounding. She sucked in deep, calming breaths, her arms wrapped around

herself to stop herself from shaking. The gloom of the dark room amplified her fear, so she flicked on the light, then the television, hoping the noisy screen would take her mind off of the nightmare. But the program on-screen, a thriller about a creepy rapist-murderer, only magnified her grim mood, and she turned it back off.

It was just a dream, she repeated to herself. Milt left town ten years before, and never contacted the family again. Harkins was in jail, and castrated by a well-aimed shot from Val's gun. Neither man could hurt her. She was safe.

Unlike Susan Lambert. Someone an awful lot like Milt and Harkins had gotten to her. Violated her, and either killed her or led her to take her own life. The M.E.'s report hadn't proven it, but Val was convinced that Susan Lambert's death was a direct result of what she'd suffered at the hands of a rapist. One who remained free to hurt other women.

That had to change.

That afternoon, bright sunshine took the edge off the cold, early spring air. The streets Val and Rico Lopez walked teemed with shopkeepers, youths shooting hoops on school playgrounds, and young parents pushing strollers and lugging shopping totes laden with recent purchases. The clear weather and bustling street activity put Val in a chipper mood.

"I love days like this," she said to Rico when they stopped for a coffee break. "Everyone's in such a good mood out there, I sometimes forget how many of these guys rob stores and deal drugs when I'm not looking."

“Huh.” He frowned into his coffee and glanced away from her.

“What?” She waited for him but got no further explanation. “Something on your mind?”

He shrugged, still not meeting her eyes. “I just thought, now that you’re a big shot adviser to the mayor, maybe you’d be trading in your uniform for one of those tailored suits she likes so much. A desk job with a big fancy office in City Hall—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I hate that life.” She pushed her coffee away from her. It tasted bitter all of a sudden. “What makes you think that? Just because I got yanked in for one meeting? I shouldn’t even have been included in that one.”

“Doesn’t it piss you off that they’ve taken the case from you?” he asked.

She grimaced. “We both know that’s just how it goes.” Gibson had transferred the case to the detectives squad, Homicide Division, minutes after they’d arrived back at the precinct. Still, she had to admit, Rico was right: she’d thought of little else besides Susan Lambert since discovering her body in the river.

“You gonna ask for a special assignment?” he asked. “You could, you know. Sometimes they allow it.”

She shook her head. “I’m a rookie. No way they’d go along. Technically, I’m still in training.” Her mood soured. Her first partner, Sergeant Gil Kryzinski, took a bullet for her in a shootout two months into her probationary period. Alex “Pops” Papadopoulos, her second partner, got reassigned to Rico

after he harassed her, emotionally and sexually, and took medical retirement weeks later in a massive shootout with the same perp that shot Gil. It took weeks to find another experienced cop willing to work with her.

“Doesn’t hurt to ask, right?” He sipped his coffee and faced her. “I mean, it’s no secret you’re unhappy being partnered with me.”

Shock silenced Val’s intended reply. Her mouth gaped open and she shook her head, but no words came forward.

“Look, I get it,” Rico said. “I’m no Valentin Dawes. Nobody measures up to him. Not even Gil.”

“Rico,” she said. “I don’t compare you to my uncle, or anyone else. And I’m fine being partnered with you. You’re a good cop and a good guy.”

“You’re ‘fine’ with it,” he said, nodding. “As in, ‘he’ll do. At least he’s not Pops.’ Right?”

Air rushed out from Val’s lips and she sank into her seat. She needed no reminders of her short but insufferable assignment as junior partner to Pops. If the dictionary used illustrations, Alex’s face would appear by the term “old-school chauvinist pig.” His inappropriate behavior toward her helped get him reassigned to Lopez in his final weeks of service before a gunshot wound forced him into medical retirement.

“Rico,” she said, “what I meant to say was, I’m proud to serve alongside you. Where’s all of this coming from, anyway? Did I do something to upset you?”

“Never mind,” he said. “Forget I said anything. I’m ‘fine’ with being your

partner, too. Speaking of which, let's get back out there. It's too nice a day to waste inside." He slid out of the booth without waiting and strode to the exit.

They walked in tense silence for a few blocks. Maybe he'd explain his strange attitude once the fresh air improved his mood. They stopped at a busy intersection, waiting for the light, when a white woman in her 20s or early 30s screamed at them from the second floor window of a building across the street. "Police! Help me, I'm being att—" A shadowy figure appeared behind the woman, covered her mouth, and pulled her out of view.

"Up there!" Val said to Rico, pointing, and dashed into the street. Car horns blared and tires screeched, one vehicle stopping less than a foot from Val's hip.

"Christ, Dawes, be careful!" Rico's footsteps pounded behind her on the pavement. "Where do you think you're going? We need to call for backup."

She reached the entryway to the building, a multi-story mixed-use building with a shoe store on the first level and apartments above, and pressed the call buttons for each apartment in quick succession. "She could be dead by the time backup arrives," she said. "Come on, come on, somebody answer!"

"Protocol says—"

"Screw protocol! Now you *are* acting like Pops!" She regretted saying that as soon as the words popped out, and Rico's darkening expression made clear she'd pay for it later. He turned away from her and spoke into his mic.

"Possible 10-16 at MLK and Maplewood. Unit 27 requesting backup."

"Roger that, Unit 27," the male dispatcher replied. "All units in the area

of MLK and Maplewood...”

“Who’s there?” an elderly woman’s voice said over the scratchy speaker on the building’s wall.

“Police, responding to a call for help on the second floor,” Val said. “Buzz me in, please?”

“I’m not on the second floor,” the woman said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Val said, her voice rising. “Just let me in!”

“Backup will be here in five minutes,” Rico said. “I say we wait.”

“You’re crazy!” Val shouted at him. “We need to—”

“No, you’re crazy,” the old woman said in a scolding tone, “if you think I’m allowing a stranger into my building. How do I know you’re really a cop?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Val said, fuming. “I’m Officer Valorie Dawes, Clayton PD. My badge number is—”

“Just a minute, let me get a pen,” the woman said.

“Don’t leave, just—oh, screw it!” Val pressed the buttons for the other apartments again, waited a half-minute. No replies. She turned back to Rico. “I’m going around to secure the back entrance. Let me know if anything changes here.” She dashed down the street and turned into an alley that separated the building from its neighbor and found a rear exit. She tried the handle. Locked. Before she removed her hand, the heavy metal door burst open, and a man stood in the opening, holding a white plastic trash bag in one hand, and a gun in the other. He pointed it at her.

Val ducked and slammed the door shut. A moment before the door hit

the jamb, a loud *pop* sound reached her ears—the sound of low-caliber pistol fire. The bullet ricocheted off the door into a nearby trash can, and the booming echo of the slamming door resounded in the alley around her. Footsteps behind the door faded away at a fast pace.

“Rico,” she radioed her partner, “suspect attempted to flee from the rear entrance, and has now re-entered the building. May be heading your way. I’ll check for more exits!” She ran further into the alley toward daylight at the opposite end.

“Backups expected in two minutes,” Rico said. “What’s your 20?”

“I just told you where I was,” Val said under her breath. She reached the corner and followed the building’s perimeter back toward the main drag. Another secure building entrance appeared halfway up the block, also with call buttons. She pressed them all as she had before, and the same old woman answered.

“Stop harassing me or I’ll call the police!” the old woman yelled at her.

“I *am* the police,” Val said. “Would you please just open the damned door?”

“Not if you’re going to be rude,” the woman said. “Now go away!”

Val groaned in disgust and banged on the door. “Police! Can someone please open the door?” She banged again. A few moments later, the speaker buzzed and the lock clicked. She yanked open the door and ran up the stairs to the second floor. She guessed at which apartment the woman had been in and rapped on the door. “Clayton PD! Open up!”

She listened with her ear to the door. No movement.

A moment later, the door to the adjacent apartment opened. A woman peered out, her face wet with tears. The same woman, though she looked younger up close, perhaps not even twenty. Purple bruises surrounded a red welt above her left eyebrow, and her lid had swollen shut. More bruises showed through rips in her torn blouse and on her bare legs. “Thank you for coming,” she said, “but I think you’re too late.”