

Chapter One

Stafford Allen Ray squinted his right eye shut and peered through the scope with his left. At first, he could see only red brick and the reflection of the sun on tinted windows. He adjusted his aim downward and to the left, and the building's heavy metal front door came into view. He turned the magnification ring counterclockwise to broaden the view so he could read the inscription on the door: "Helen's Orchid—Family Planning." Perfect.

He lowered the rifle a moment. At this distance, about 500 feet, he could make out distinct figures and objects in front of the clinic: two wooden benches, five or six feet wide, one on each side of the door. Azaleas, long since out of bloom, lined the sidewalk in front. Four parking spaces, two currently empty, the other two occupied by SUVs. No people yet in sight.

The angle, the view, and the time of day all satisfied him. Assuming good weather, the afternoon sun behind him would shroud his face in shadow—assuming anyone looked his way—and cast his targets in a favorable light. His rooftop perch on the six-story building across the street from the clinic afforded a clear shot to any target of his choosing.

A third vehicle approached and pulled into one of the two vacant spaces. A new "customer" of the clinic. Like the others, a potential baby killer. Hate boiled inside him.

He peered back through the scope. All three of the cars bore Connecticut license plates. From the

third vehicle, a woman opened the driver's side door and stepped out. She didn't appear pregnant. But that could mean she was still in her first or even early in her second trimester. The fact that no man emerged from the car with her told him that she, like so many murderous would-be mothers, had excluded the father of the baby from her impending decision. She, and only she, would decide whether to kill the innocent child growing in her womb.

Correction. She, and her abortionist doctor, hiding safely inside the brick fortress.

He focused his aim on her, adjusting his magnification ring clockwise until she filled his view. She fussed with something in her purse, holding open the car door, and the breeze swept her long blonde hair in front of her face. He swept the scope downward, from head to toe, analyzing her body shape. Curvy and busty, in the way women get when their body responds to the responsibility of hosting another human being. Her loose blouse, ruffling in the slight breeze, could hide an early-stage baby bump with ease. Her jeans stretched tight over wide, baby-bearing hips. Low-heeled sandals revealed swollen feet and ankles.

Conclusion: Pregnant, three to four months along. Her body had expanded faster than her clothes-shopping habit could keep up. Definitely someone contemplating becoming a customer of the baby-killing factory down below.

She shut the car door and walked toward the door. He followed her in his scope, counting the seconds between her vehicle and the building. Eight, maybe nine seconds, with her brisk gait. A slower walker, someone further along in their pregnancy, might take twice as long. This one, probably still in the first trimester.

She paused at the door, her head down, as if praying. She remained still as he centered his aim on the middle of her back. He steadied his breathing, recalling his training. He inhaled, exhaled, readied his trigger finger. Inhaled another breath, then exhaled, then held it. Squeezed the trigger.

Click.

A perfect kill shot. A would-be murderer, denied.

Or would be, when the moment came, when he returned with ammunition loaded into rifle's

magazine.

He drew another deep breath and lowered the weapon. A good practice run. He hadn't flinched, his hands remained steady, his aim true. He'd found the right clinic, the right time of day, the right vantage point. He had a few things left to figure out: how to escape undetected topping the list. But those details would come, and soon. After that, he would review his plan with his mentor, get the green light, and push forward with God's work.

Today's work was done.

Officer Valorie Dawes waved her partner over to her workspace from his desk, whose front edge abutted hers in the bullpen of the Women's Anti-Violence Emergency Squad. The WAVE Squad, as everyone called it in the Clayton, Connecticut Police Department, specialized in investigating violent crimes against women. Today, eight days after Labor Day, was unusually slow in that particular area of illegal activity, enabling Val and her senior partner, Detective Robert "Bobby" Grimes, to begin catching up on some backlogged cases.

"This one looks interesting," Val said, pointing to her screen once Grimes sat next to her. "A string of harassing drive-bys at women-owned businesses downtown, complete with rock throwing and misogynistic graffiti."

"Oh, why do we get all the big cases?" Grimes moaned, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "I might need another cuppa Joe for this one."

Before he could get out of his chair, the door to WAVE Squad office opened. Val glanced up from her computer screen and stayed her partner with a hand on his arm. "Customer," she said in a low voice.

The woman who pushed open the door, a tall, well-dressed Black woman in her forties, glanced around the room, clutching her camel-toned Coach purse. Diamond earrings and a matching necklace dazzled against her smooth, dark brown skin. "I'm looking for Detective Robert Grimes," she announced in a commanding tone. Her intense gaze settled on Val's balding partner. "Is that you?"

“Guilty as charged,” Grimes said. “How can I help you?”

“I’m here to report a crime,” the woman said. “My name is Veronica Carlton. I own the VeroniCare family of companies. Perhaps you’ve heard of it.”

Grimes shot Val a blank look, her cue to chime in.

“Of course we have,” Val said, standing and extending a handshake. “Welcome, Ms. Carlton. I’m Officer Valorie Dawes. What is the nature of the crime—”

“*The* Valorie Dawes?” Carlton said, eyebrows raised. She straightened and accepted Val’s handshake, then strutted over to a chair opposite Val’s desk. “The daughter of Detective Valentin Dawes?”

“Valentin was my uncle,” Val said. “You knew him?”

“He saved my life ten years ago,” Carlton said. “On the day he...I’m sorry, this must be a difficult topic for you.”

Val’s breath caught by the surprise reference to the day a shopping mall mass shooter ended her beloved uncle’s life, and she struggled to find words to respond. She blinked at her partner, hopeful.

“He saved many lives that day,” Grimes said, picking up on Val’s silent cue. “Please, sit down, and tell us what brought you in here today.”

“Thank you.” Carlton sat and smoothed her knee-length navy skirt and unbuttoned its matching jacket. “My business is under attack. Cyberattack, to be precise.”

Val and Grimes exchanged glances. Grimes continued to take the lead. “I’m sorry, but that’s a little outside of our mandate,” Grimes said. “I’m happy to take a report from you, but it’s almost certainly going to be referred to our cyber crimes unit downstairs.”

“Isn’t this the Women’s Anti-Crime Unit?” Carlton said, her voice rising.

“Women’s Anti-Violence Emergency Squad, to be precise,” Grimes said. “Our focus is on violent crimes against women.”

“Well, I believe I’m being targeted because I’m a woman,” Carlton said with triumph in her voice. “And I do believe the attacks will soon become violent.”

“What is the nature of the attack right now?” Val said, jumping in before Grimes could discourage her further. “Please give us as much detail as you can.” She opened an incident report form on her computer and began typing.

“They’ve shut down my website multiple times,” Carlton said. “And they’ve issued threats of physical harm against myself and my employees.”

“Such as?” Val said, typing as fast as she could to keep up.

“The most recent attack replaced the entire contents of our website with threats to ‘terminate’ me, my employees, and my business, if we don’t, quote, ‘change our evil ways,’ unquote.” Carlton sneered at Grimes. “Is that violent enough for you?”

“What ‘evil ways’ might they be referring to?” Grimes asked, unruffled.

Carlton sniffed, holding her chin high. “My company is proud of its support of women’s health and their right to choose,” she said. “Reproductive health care has long been a benefit offered to all of our employees, and we donate a portion of our profits every year to non-profit agencies that protect women’s health.”

“Ah,” Grimes said. “Did you get that, Dawes?”

Val nodded, still typing as fast as she could. “How many times has this happened, and when?”

“The latest attack happened yesterday,” Carlton said. “My IT staff has restored our site from backups, but I fear they’ll attack again in the next few days. This is the fourth or fifth time, all within the last month, and the number of days between attacks gets fewer with each instance.”

“Have your IT staff traced any of these attacks back to their source?” Grimes asked.

Carlton shook her head. “I’m afraid their specialty is simply to make it run again so we can book clients,” she said. “Not investigative work. Which is why I came to you, Detective.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Grimes said, “how is it that you chose me out of all the detectives in the department?”

Carlton sniffed again. “Aren’t you the one that cracked that cyber currency fraud case last year?” she said.

“Yes, but I had a lot of help, and anyway, cyber currency is a very different animal—”

“Nonsense,” she said. “Cyber is cyber. Besides, I asked around. I have a few friends in the department. Lieutenant Gibson and Captain Feeley both spoke very highly of you. And, again. It’s a crime against women. Now, here’s my card, and the info for the head of my IT department is on the back. He’s free all afternoon, and he’s expecting your call.”

Grimes rolled his eyes and cleared his throat. “All due respect, Mrs. Carlton—”

“Ms. Carlton, thank you.”

Grimes took a breath, nodded. “Ms. Carlton. It’s after three o’clock, and my plate is rather full right now. How about if I have my associate, Ms. Dawes, round up our best IT folks and give your guy a call in the morning—”

“Excuse me, Detective.” Carlton leaned forward and grabbed Grimes by the forearm. “Time is rather of the essence, given the nature of these threats. And with all due respect, Officer Dawes is, I’m sure, a fine officer, like her uncle. But I won’t have my case shunted off to a rookie when I specifically requested the best detective on the force for my case.”

“Respectfully, Ms. Carlton,” Grimes said, “but Officer Dawes is no rookie. She celebrated a full year on the force last week and has broken a number of high-profile cases for us in a very short time—”

“I see,” Carlton said, standing. “I’m sorry for wasting your time.” She strode to the door.

“Ms. Carlton,” Grimes said, following her. “Please understand. Even if I wanted to take your case—and I don’t mean to suggest—”

“Excuse me,” Carlton said with a raised hand. “I need to take this call.” She retrieved her cell phone and smiled. “Why, hello, Kevin,” she said into the receiver. “What a coincidence. I was just coming to see you. No, I’m not far. I’m up in your Women’s Crime Department office upstairs. Yes, the WAVE Squad. No, I’m afraid not. That’s why I—well, of course. Hold on.” She handed Grimes the receiver. “Your boss would like a word.”

Val sat back in her seat. “Sergeant Petroni called? I thought you said—”

“This matter concerns the *Detective* on the case,” Carlton said, glaring down her nose at Val.

Val seethed, but said nothing. Maybe Carlton was doing her a favor here, keeping her out of it.

Grimes held the receiver to his ear. “Grimes here. Oh, yes, hello, Captain Feeley. Yes, we’ve had quite the conversation about her case. Yes. Uh-huh. Well, as I explained, it’s really a matter for the cyber—Yes, sir. I understand, but Sergeant Petroni—oh. Right. Okay, then.” He hung up and handed the phone back to Carlton.

“When should I expect you over at VeroniCare’s offices?” Carlton said.

Grimes sighed. “How does 9:00 a.m. sound?”

Carlton sniffed, stood, and grabbed her purse off the table. “I have an appointment already at nine. I’ll expect you at eight. Good day, Detective.”

Val pulled Grimes aside when they reached the Clayton Police Headquarters lobby. “Bobby,” she said, “we should bring Shelby Harrison with us, from IT. She’s the best when it comes to network security.”

“Good thinking,” Grimes said. “You get the car. I’ll go talk to her boss.”

Val retrieved their police cruiser from the secure parking lot and waited for Grimes in a waiting zone out front. The cruiser soon fell into shadow as the sun sank low over the high-rises, and the cool winds from the Torrington River cooled the afternoon air. She lowered the windows halfway and let the occasional radio chatter between Dispatch and field units entertain her. A slow September day, crime-wise, in Clayton.

Her personal cell chimed while she waited, a text from her long-time friend and former roommate Beth. The two hadn’t spoken much since Val moved out of their shared apartment a little over two months before, so the text surprised Val a bit. She read the message: *Miss you. Do you have time to catch up soon?*

Val responded: *Drinks at the Clay Pigeon after work?*

After a long pause, Beth replied: *Dinner at the Pigeon sounds divine. How’s 6:00?*

Val noticed the shift from drinks to dinner. With Beth, drinks meant catching up and hanging out for fun girl talk. Dinner signaled to her that Beth had something specific in mind to discuss. Something

serious, like a new job or, God forbid, another engagement ring. Beth fell in and out of love faster than Val changed underwear, it seemed.

Perfect, she responded. *See you then*.

Moments later, Grimes emerged from the building, accompanied by a stocky, thirty-ish woman with spiky black hair, dressed in black jeans and a form-fitting shirt that accentuated her busty but slender figure. Shelby grinned when Val waved to them and hustled to beat Grimes to the car. “Shotgun!” she called back to him over her shoulder. She jumped into the passenger seat and head-hugged Val. “So good to see you, girl!”

“You, too,” Val said, shaking off Shelby’s rough embrace. “I’m glad your boss is cool with this.”

“I didn’t ask my boss,” Shelby said, laughing. “She’s in a meeting I didn’t dare interrupt. Anyway, what she doesn’t know, won’t hurt her.”

“Get the hell out of that front seat,” Grimes said, huffing up to the car. “Staff rides in the back.”

Shelby laughed. “That’s a bullshit rule,” she said. “But hey, if you’d rather we follow stupid rules, I can always go back inside and wait for my boss’s meeting to end so I can ask permission—”

“Fine,” Grimes said with a growl. He slid into the back seat and buckled in. “You know where we’re going, Dawes?”

“I do,” Shelby said. “VeroniCare’s awesome. I get all my work done there.” She smoothed the thin, dark hairs on her upper lip and examined her reflection in the side mirror. “I might just stay on after for a little laser action when we’re done.”

Grimes rolled his eyes and waved at Val with impatience. “Let’s get going, then,” he said.

Light mid-afternoon traffic made for an easy drive to the shopping district, and she parked right in front of the posh salon in a metered spot—free, of course, for police on official business. The salon’s all-glass front wall revealed an all-white lobby with shelves lined with lotions, creams, and hair treatments, any one of which would cost more than Val spent in a month on such products.

They entered the salon, Val in the lead, and the shop’s frigid air raised goosebumps on Val’s skin. Even her bulky uniform couldn’t compete with the salon’s excessive air conditioning, set way too high

for a 75-degree September day.

“Welcome to VeroniCare Spa,” said a slender, twenty-something receptionist, seated behind a glass counter. Her jet-black hair and lipstick contrasted with her alabaster skin, even lighter in color than the laminate shelves. “Are you here for an appointment, or can I advise you on some purchases?”

“Detective Robert Grimes, with Officer Valorie Dawes and Ms. Shelby Harrison. Veronica Carlton is expecting us,” Grimes said. “And your IT director...I’m sorry, I didn’t catch his name.”

“Just a moment.” The receptionist clicked a few keys on her keyboard and swung a computer screen, mounted on a swivel arm, into her field of vision. She spoke in a low voice into her headset. “Ms. Koval, will see you now.” She pushed a button, and a door that Val hadn’t even noticed until that moment swung open from the small lobby into a dark hallway.

Val and Grimes exchanged glances for a moment, but Shelby strode through the doorway like she owned the place. “Come on, the door’s about to close,” she said.

Shelby continued down the dim corridor, with Val and Grimes hustling to catch up. They passed several doorways, also white, set into white walls on each side. At the end of the thirty-foot passage stood a bell-shaped white woman in wire-rim glasses, a dark skirt, and pink blouse, with collar-length layers of salt-and-pepper gray hair. Her business-like facial expression yielded a humorless smile when she greeted them.

“I’m Tasha Koval,” she said with a hint of a Slavic accent, “head of Information Technology at VeroniCare. Come in, please.” She spun on her heel and, without waiting, led them into a small meeting room.

“Oh, look,” Shelby said, gazing at the framed department-store quality prints hanging on the ivory-colored walls. “Actual color.”

A young man in a blue suit, white shirt, and no tie stood up from the table and extended a hand. His perfect white teeth seemed to shine in contrast to his dark brown skin and black, wavy hair. “I am Sanjit,” he said. “Website content manager.”

Grimes introduced the team, and Koval invited Val and Grimes to sit. “Where should we begin?”

Koval asked.

“Let’s start with the basics,” Grimes said. “Most attacks of this kind either originate from or are aided by someone from within an organization. Can you think of any employees who might hold a grudge of some kind against the company, Ms. Carlton, or other senior management?”

Koval shook her head. “None. We treat our employees with dignity and respect, and our wage and benefit packages are well above industry average.”

Sanjit’s eyes widened and his gaze fell, but he said nothing.

“Any recent hires?” Grimes asked.

“Sales associates come and go, but none have access to our servers,” Koval said. “Sanjit is our most recent hire with any sort of security clearance, which was, what, ten months ago?”

“Thirteen,” Sanjit said.

“And these attacks began in the last two or three months,” Koval said. “So an internal source seems unlikely.”

Grimes furrowed his brow and cleared his throat, jotting down a few notes. Val picked up the thread. “Has anything else changed that could significantly affect staff morale in recent months? Changes to working conditions, benefits, anything?”

Koval pursed her lips, then shook her head. “Nothing comes to mind.”

Sanjit coughed into his fist, making eye contact with Val. He seemed to cower each time his boss spoke.

“Can you think of anything, Sanjit?” Val asked him.

“In terms of benefits or working conditions? No,” Sanjit said.

“Anything else?” Val asked, keeping her tone conversational.

He glanced left and right, again cowering when Koval glared at him. “I would say that some employees were displeased when Ms. Carlton created the Community First program,” Sanjit said.

“Tell me more about that,” Val said.

“Community First,” Koval interjected before Sanjit could continue, “is a voluntary service

program here at VeroniCare. Our objective is to better connect our company to the community through acts of service or, for those who prefer it, donations to worthy causes.”

“Causes,” Grimes said. “Such as?”

“Education, homelessness, public health, hunger—employees choose among many options,” Koval said.

“How are employees ‘encouraged’ to participate?” Val asked. She recalled a campaign organized by her dormitory’s community action committee at UConn where the leaders of the initiative shamed non-contributors publicly until they achieved 100% participation.

“We make it very easy for them,” Koval said. “Employees can apply for paid time off to volunteer for our approved list of organizations, and can elect to donate to those same groups through payroll deductions.”

“There is also a competition among departments,” Sanjit added, his eyes still downcast. “The department with the highest rate of participation gets an extra week of paid leave per year.”

“I see,” Grimes said. “By any chance, are abortion rights groups among those on the list?”

Koval shifted in her seat. “We do not include political advocacy groups in our campaign,” she said. “However, we do offer the option of contributing to family planning and women’s health groups.”

“Which ones?” Grimes said.

Koval licked her lips. “I would be happy to email you with a list of all participating organizations.”

“Thank you,” Grimes said, sliding his card across the table.

“Really, though, I believe this is a waste of time,” Koval said, picking up his card. “Morale at VeroniCare is very high. We maintain an open-door management policy and we’re very pro-active in advocating for, what is that phrase? Work-life balance.”

“Is that your experience, Sanjit?” Shelby asked. “Is everybody here happy?”

Sanjit’s helpless expression spoke volumes, despite his cautious words and tone. “The employees with whom I interact are satisfied with working conditions,” he said. “I cannot speak for those who have

left the company.”

“Left the company?” Grimes cocked his head and focused his gaze on Koval. “Have you lost many employees lately, particularly those with secure computer system access?”

“Not at all,” Koval said. “Our turnover rates are among the lowest in the industry.”

Val noted the cautious phrasing in Koval’s response. “Could you include a list of employees who have recently left the company in your email to Detective Grimes?” she asked.

“And new employees, in any department. Any in the last year,” Grimes added.

“Of course,” Koval said. “I’m sorry, but I have another meeting to attend. But perhaps now is a good time for Sanjit to show Ms. Harrison our security systems?”

Grimes narrowed his eyes, but nodded. “We may have some follow-up questions for you, Ms. Koval,” he said. “Do you have a card, or—”

“I’ll include my contact information in my email to you later today,” Koval said, standing. “I’ll see you and Officer Dawes out.”

Grimes blinked, then stood. “We all drove over together,” he said. “Perhaps there’s someone else we should interview while we wait?”

“I’ll be fine,” Shelby said, making eye contact with Val. Her lips curled into a brief, sly smile. “You two go on ahead. Sanjit and I will geek out in the server room.”

Out on the sidewalk a few minutes later, Val paused in the sun and rubbed her arms to help warm them. “Did Koval strike you as a forthcoming woman, or am I crazy to think she’s holding something back from us?” she asked Grimes.

“I think the Russian FSB has fewer secrets than that woman,” Grimes said. “I have a feeling those lists of employees and community groups will turn up a lot of interesting tidbits.”

“I have a feeling that Shelby’s time with Sanjit will, too,” Val said. “That guy looked ready to burst. He didn’t strike me as an employee with high morale.”

Grimes laughed. “Are you kidding me? He’s the only man in a building crawling with gorgeous women. I’d trade jobs with him any day, no matter what the pay.”

Val rolled her eyes and got in the cruiser. Grimes was her senior partner and a mentor of sorts, with tons of valuable experience for her to learn from. But he could be a real dinosaur at times. She hoped that wouldn't become an obstacle to them working together—especially on this case.