

Chapter One

The moon ducked behind the clouds seconds after the power grid failed, plunging the small Berkshires town of Greenville, Connecticut into unexpected darkness. No home lights pierced the gloom. The seasoned veterans of year-round rural living, many of whom had already gone to bed, hadn't yet switched over to their generators. The few still awake knew that these outages, so common in the mountains in winter, rarely lasted longer than a few minutes. Fewer still drove anywhere that late, so the winding roads like Torrington River Highway and Valley Park Drive remained unlit by glaring headlights.

It was the perfect time and place to dump a body.

The corpse splashed into the Torrington River's swift current almost exactly midway between sunset and sunrise on the last Monday of February, in the year 2020. Stirred up by stiff winds and threatening rain, the river swallowed the body into its black depths within seconds, each crash of whitecaps against the surface an exclamation point to its haughty declaration: You are mine. Nothing but food for the fishes, more bones to litter its cluttered floor.

So it happened, anyway, in the imagination of The Redeemer, who dumped the body down the rocky embankment into the frothy cascades below. No time to wait around to see the fish devour the victim's flesh. Unfortunate. To have seen the muscle and skin torn from bone would have crowned the evening's achievement. Ridding the planet of another sex offender who'd escaped justice, freed on some bullshit technicality argued by unethical lawyers, was a sight to be witnessed. Savored, even. Hell, the lawyers responsible for the perv's freedom should join the fray.

Perhaps someday they would. In a perfect world, the event would be televised.

But not tonight. Tonight the world became a better place, with one less sicko to prey upon the

innocent. One fewer person—or perhaps several—would risk the painful, humiliating experience of that almost unimaginable violation of their body.

Almost unimaginable. To the unlucky few, they were all too imaginable.

Unforgettable, even.

Chapter Two

Five minutes before noon, on the first Tuesday of March, 2020, the phone rang on the desk of second-year Clayton police officer Valorie Dawes. The jangling noise echoed off the pale walls and government-issue metal desks of the Women’s Anti-Violence Emergency Squad office, a long, rectangular room shared by four other officers and detectives. The ringing phone shattered Val’s concentration on the case file open on her computer screen: Isaiah Dinker, a suspected sex offender trafficking in child pornography. With reported cases of violent crime against women on the decline—a temporary phenomenon, Val believed—the Clayton police chief had sent some so-called “crossover” cases. Cases like prostitution rings, illegal gambling shops, and indecent exposure, of all things.

Val hated the “crossovers.” They diverted resources and effort away from the critical need of protecting women from rapists and domestic abusers. The department had plenty of people better suited to chasing down so-called “victimless” perverts. A misnomer, in her mind—anything that contributed to the culture of lawlessness or exploited women and children had “victims.” However, those crimes often proved impossible to solve and almost never resulted in a conviction. Worse, it wasn’t even her case—fellow WAVE Squad Detective and mentor, Shannon O’Reilly, had asked her to help. Which she did, because her own cases were even more boring.

So, anything that distracted Val from her current task was a welcome diversion.

The phone rang again, and this time she noticed it was the main WAVE Squad line, and it also rang on all the other desks in the office. Desks that, for the lunch hour, remained unoccupied.

“Dawes, WAVE Squad,” she said, answering on the third ring.

“Hey Val, it’s Gil.” Her boyfriend, Gil Kryzinski, headed the Dispatch unit, two floors down in the Clayton Police Department Headquarters building. “We’ve got something for you.”

Val sat up at attention, a broad smile creasing her face. “Hello to you, too, Sergeant—I mean, *darling*,” she said in a teasing tone. Almost without thinking, she brushed a stray lock of her jaw-length,

light brown hair away from her face, a gesture that Gil would find attractive—if he were there to see it.

“Sorry,” he said, his tone warmer. “I expected Petroni or Grimes to pick up. How’s your day going?”

“Tedious,” she said. “The suspect I’m investigating has no priors, no friends or family, and is a self-employed bike mechanic. In short, nothing even remotely interesting—and my other cases are even more dull.”

“Glad to break up the monotony, then. Got a pen?”

“Please tell me you have something good,” she said. “Dinner reservations, perhaps. Or, you know, a fresh case. Something in our actual mandate.”

Gil laughed. “You *want* me to tell you there’s been another horrible act of violence against a woman in Clayton? My sweet Valorie, I dare say you’re getting jaded.”

“Did you not hear the part about dinner reservations?”

“Touché. Unfortunately, this might prevent you from getting dinner at all this evening.” Gil’s voice lowered an octave. “Greenville PD found a body in the river. They think it’s one of ours.”

“One of our what? Female residents?”

“Suspects,” he said. “A cold case you guys worked a few months ago. Guy by the name of Jason Larkin. Ring any bells?”

“Sure,” Val said. “Grimes led on that case, and I helped him with it. Teen predator, got picked up soliciting high school girls with drugs and alcohol. I thought he was in jail.”

“Larkin’s case went to trial a week or two ago, and he walked on a technicality,” Gil said. “Some irregularity about his confession, I think.”

“Bobby never mentioned that.” Val groaned. Grimes, her partner, enjoyed a stellar reputation as a master interrogator, getting confessions from suspects no one else could break. But he could get too aggressive at times. Especially lately. Doctors had been treating his nine-year-old son with radiation for a brain tumor for the past six months. The ordeal left him short on sleep and shorter on patience.

“Anyway,” Gil said, “Greenville wants to meet with you guys, compare notes, see if you can

share any leads on who might've offed him. Today, if possible."

"That's over an hour away," Val said. "And upriver from us. How would one of our bodies float up to them?"

"It wouldn't," Gil said. "Which is why they're keeping jurisdiction. Anyway, they need our help. I promised someone would call this afternoon."

"I guess that means me," Val said. "Crap. This is what I get for volunteering to answer phones while everyone else gets Chinese food."

"I'll make it up to you. Meet me at one out front? I'll make reservations at Girardo's."

"Ah, wishes *do* come true," she said with a grin. "I can taste the cioppino already."

Val's smile persisted long after she'd hung up the phone and dug into the Larkin file. She and Gil hadn't gone out for lunch together in months. She'd blamed the tough winter weather and the alarming news about this so-called COVID-19 outbreak that closed so many restaurants out of panic and short staffing.

She also wondered if some of the spark between them had faded. An impromptu lunch might provide just the right antidote to their relationship doldrums.

Val got up to speed on the Larkin case and briefed Grimes on the news when he returned. She sloughed the task of calling Greenville onto him, though. "I have a lunch date, and anyway, it's your case," she said.

"I can't drive out there today," he complained, rubbing his balding pate and slumping in his chair. "Bobby Junior's got a follow-up appointment at the doctor's, and I promised Audrey I wouldn't miss this one."

"Try to handle it by phone, then." Val's stomach growled. She paused at the door, noting the worry on his face. The ordeal had aged and exhausted her partner. "If there's no other way, I'll go, okay?"

"Thanks, Dawes. You're the best." Grimes stared at his hands, folded on his desk, and appeared on the verge of tears.

Val exited to the hallway, pulling the office door shut behind her. Poor Grimes. She crossed her fingers, hoping the doctor's news later that day would bring him fresh hope.

The news at the restaurant, though, brought only distress.

"Closed due to COVID," read the hand-written sign on the front entrance of Girardo's.

"I take it you didn't make reservations," Val said, turning toward Gil.

Gil's dark brown eyes showed disappointment, and his muscular, six-two frame shrank into a dispirited slump. "They didn't answer. I assumed it was because they were too busy," he said. "Crap. Well, what else is open?"

They found an open hoagie shop nearby, but a sign on the door informed them they could only enter if they wore masks. "I left mine back in the office," Gil said. "Since when do restaurants require masks? I thought that was only hospitals and doctors' offices."

"It's getting more common, according to CNN." Val searched her coat pockets and found a spare—a used one. "I'll pop into Rite-Aid and buy a box of them."

Gil stopped her and took the used mask from her. "We're fine reusing each other's masks," he said. "Hell, we're swapping spit and God-knows-what-else on a regular basis. If we haven't infected each other, we ain't got it."

"If you say so," Val said, dubious.

They ordered—turkey club for Val, meatball sub for Gil—and took a booth in the corner, away from other patrons.

"I can't wait for this COVID thing to pass," Val said. She tasted her sandwich. Bland. She should have asked for extra mayo. The sacrifices she made to stay slender.

"Some people say it'll be over by Easter," Gil said around a mouthful of meatball sub. "Let's hope so." He swallowed and took another bite of his delicious-looking sub, the aromas of tomato and garlic wafting over them. He never, ever worried about his weight. Somehow he stayed fit anyway.

"Nobody who knows what they're talking about says that," Val said. "Have you seen the news reports? Hospital emergency rooms are getting overwhelmed, and doctors have no idea of how to treat it.

It's pretty scary."

Gil shrugged. "I keep hearing it's like a bad case of the flu."

"People die of the flu every year," Val said. "Besides, Mr. I-Never-Get-Sick, when's the last time you've gotten a flu shot?"

He waved her off. "In sixth grade. Which is also the last year I got the flu. So there's that."

Val started to argue, then held off. He could be so damned stubborn, and, besides, she didn't know any more about it than he did.

They nibbled at their lunch in silence for a while, their appetites dulled by the tension rippling through their conversation. After several minutes, Gil sipped his lemonade and asked, "So, are you heading to Greenville this afternoon?"

She shrugged. "Grimes is calling them to see what's up. He can't go, though, so I told him I would."

"So you won't be home for dinner?" His tone seemed... agitated.

"I...don't know. Why? You made plans?"

Gil rolled half of his sandwich up in its wrapper and closed his bag of chips. "I guess I'm having leftovers."

"Gil, come on. What's eating you? Something seems... wrong."

He looked away. "I'm fine."

She rested a hand on his arm and spoke in a soft voice. "Did I do something wrong? What did I say?"

"Nothing. You've done nothing wrong, Val. I told you, I'm fine."

She waited. Nothing more came. "You seem upset. If I—"

"I'm *not* upset, okay?" He glanced at his watch. "Are you almost done? I gotta get back soon."

She glanced at her sandwich, half-eaten on her tray. "I'll finish it at my desk."

"Let's go, then."

They held hands while walking back, but left their masks on until they returned to headquarters,

neither one talking until they reached the door.

“Let me know about Greenville,” he said, giving her a perfunctory hug.

“Are you sure nothing’s—”

“I’m sure. Val, I’m sorry, I just...” He frowned. “There’s something on my mind, and I need time to work through it.”

“Let me help you.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry, okay?”

She waited until his eyes met hers. “And we’re okay? You and me?”

Gil smiled, pulled off his mask, and kissed her. “We’re better than okay. We’re amazing.”

Val held him for a long moment.

She worried.

The desk officer at Greenville Police Headquarters showed Val to a meeting room, and a pair of detectives joined her moments later.

A tall, lanky African American man with short-cropped hair graying at the temples offered a handshake. “Phil Gramercy, Homicide,” he said, shaking Val’s hand with a firm grip. “This is my partner, Martina Torres.”

Val shook the younger partner’s hand, a petite Latina with large, dark eyes, olive skin, and black hair tied up in a bun.

“We appreciate you making the trip,” Torres said. She slid Val a disposable cup full of black coffee. “Your partner couldn’t make it?”

“Family issues. He sends his apologies.” Val sipped the coffee. Acrid and lukewarm. Typical police-issue. “So, one of our suspects floated in unannounced last night?”

Gramercy chuckled. “I appreciate your humor, Detective.”

“Officer.”

“Beg pardon?” Gramercy hesitated.

“I haven’t made detective yet. So it’s just Officer Dawes.”

“Huh.” Gramercy and Torres exchanged knowing glances. “You’re authorized to share case information on behalf of your department, though, right?”

“I am.” Val hadn’t checked on that with her boss, Sergeant Brenda Petroni, but she didn’t see any reason why not.

“Right, then. Down to business.” Gramercy slid a folder toward her and continued talking while Val perused its contents. “Larkin floated in, as you put it, around 4:00 a.m. this morning. Prints matched your suspect. Autopsy’s not done, but there was evidence of narcotics in the system. He didn’t die of natural causes.”

“Massive bruising on the head and neck area, no bloating, no water in the lungs...he didn’t drown, either.” Val scanned the photos of the body, a pudgy white man with black hair and a two-day beard. “Looks like strangulation, and the strangler was in no hurry.”

“That’s our guess.” Torres pointed to a thick red line around the man’s throat. “We’re thinking a rope or cable of some kind, a few hours or more before he hit the water.” To Val’s questioning look, she added, “Most recent call on his cell phone was early evening March first—last Sunday. The ME’s initial guess is he’s been dead at least a few days, maybe a week.”

Val scanned the rest of the file, which wasn’t much. She glanced at the two detectives, who both seemed nervous. Wanting to speak, but holding back. “What else should I know?”

“Victim was weighed down...we’re guessing rope or twine tied to a heavy object.” Gramercy cleared his throat. “We’re, ah, scanning the river to see if we can find any cement blocks.”

“Okay.” From his hesitance, Val sensed he still had more to tell. “And?”

Torres shot Gramercy a pleading look, her eyes widening. She cleared her throat, glaring at Gramercy.

“Detective?” Val said to him.

Gramercy expelled a noisy breath, drummed his fingers on the table. “There is something else.”

“I’m all ears.” Val closed the file.

Gramercy glanced at Torres again, made up his mind. “The body was found naked...” His voice trailed off, as if searching for words.

“Not uncommon in these cases,” Val said. To his quizzical look, she went on, “I’ve pulled a body or two from the river in Clayton.”

“Huh.” He regarded her a moment. “Well...because of that, we discovered some unusual...markings, I guess you’d call it.”

Val waited, recalling the markings on the body she’d found. “Like, tattoos, or stab wounds, or something?”

“Markings may not be the right word here.” Torres’s impatience with Gramercy showed in her exasperated voice.

“So, what is?” Val glanced from one detective to the other, wondering which one would ever get to the point. If any.

“Hairlessness.” Torres cleared her throat again. “The body’s chest and pubic regions were shaved clean. With some fresh cuts and scrapes, so we’re thinking it was hurried, and...not done by the victim.”

“By the perp, then?”

“Or a very sadistic lover,” Gramercy said with a smirk.

“And...there’s one more thing,” Torres added, nudging Gramercy’s arm.

Gramercy sighed and lowered his voice. “The body was castrated. Also recently.”

“His testicles were cut off?” Val said.

“The entire scrotum,” Gramercy said. “But not the penis.”

“Not the *entire* penis,” Torres corrected him. “Just the tip.”

“Also fresh?” Val’s stomach got a little queasy.

Gramercy and Torres nodded.

“And not just the foreskin,” Gramercy said. “This was no circumcision.”

“Brutal.” Val chewed on her upper lip for a moment. “Well, those are some interesting clues.”

“There’s something else.” Torres lowered her eyes and pushed a plastic evidence bag toward Val,

containing an off-brand cell phone.

“The victim possessed a burner?” Val shook her head. “How, if you found him naked?”

Torres coughed. “It was inserted in the, ah, rectal cavity. Don’t worry, forensics cleaned it after analyzing it.” She slid it closer to Val. “There’s a video on there you should see. We can’t let it out of the building, which is why you needed to come here.”

“You couldn’t email it?”

Torres shook her head.

Gramercy cleared his throat. “We haven’t figured out how to download it off the phone. There’s some weird copy protection software on there... anyway, take a look.”

Val donned a pair of latex gloves Gramercy provided and removed the phone from the bag. It powered on without a password and a single icon appeared on the home screen. Val tapped it and the video played, displaying the victim’s naked and un mutilated body laying on a table. She squirmed a bit. Naked bodies, even her own, made her uncomfortable sometimes. Something she had to get over.

“How do I turn on the sound?” Val asked.

Gramercy shrugged. “There doesn’t seem to be any. Just watch.”

The video showed a gloved hand placing a piece of paper over the dead man’s groin. The page contained Larkin’s name, then the word “Pervert!” in large letters and a date: January 14, 2020. About two months ago. The date, Val recalled, of Larkin’s alleged crime.

“Interesting,” Val said.

“We’ve only just begun,” Torres said.

The video continued. The page disappeared and a new one appeared: “He will pay.” Same large font.

“How prescient,” Val said.

The gloved hand reappeared, this time with a straight razor, which the gloved hand used to shave the victim’s pubic area. More squirming on Val’s part. Then the hand appeared again with a surgeon’s scalpel.

“Is this going to show—”

The cutting began before Val could finish.

“Oh my God.” Val held her stomach. “This is sick. Holy cow, the bleeding! Wait...doesn’t that mean...the victim’s...”

“Still alive,” Torres finished for her.

Val stopped the video. “I don’t need to see more. Um, you really could’ve told me that on the phone.”

“It carries a lot more impact if you see it, don’t you think?” Torres said.

Val sipped her water, eager for her stomach to settle. They sat in silence for a minute or two.

“So, we were hoping you might enlighten us on the victim’s past, his case, anything that connects those clues to a perp,” Gramercy said. “Larkin was an accused sex offender, correct?”

Val nodded, still taking shallow breaths through her mouth. “Picked up for soliciting sex with underage girls, plying them with drugs and alcohol. His confession got tossed on procedural grounds.” No need to elaborate that the mistake had been Grimes’s.

“Since that evidence got tossed, we can’t access it in the system,” Gramercy said. “So we were hoping you’d provide some names.”

“Not the victims,” Torres said, “since they’re underage and protected. Maybe their family or boyfriends, say. People with possible motive.”

“And who might be mad enough to chop his balls and dick off,” Gramercy said.

“Well, just the tip,” Torres said, grinning.

Val hesitated. “I...don’t know the legalities of that.” Her gut grew even more queasy. “I might need to check with our lawyers.”

“I thought you said you can help us,” Gramercy said, his voice growing tense. “That you had the authority.”

“I do,” Val said. “Still, even the lead detective would need a lawyer’s sign-off. Victims’ rights and confidentiality and all that.”

“We’re not going to arrest them,” Torres said. “We only want to talk to them.”

“If you do, they’ll ask how you found them, and it’d pretty obviously be me.” Val shook her head. “I want to help—really I do. But we need to go by the book. For so many reasons.”

“How long will that take?” Gramercy asked, his voice calmer.

“I’ll get on it as soon as I get back. Sooner, even.” She picked up her cell phone and speed-dialed. “Hey, Gil. Can you text me the number for Legal?”

“You in trouble?” Gil asked. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. I need some advice on evidence-sharing with Greenville. It’s a little delicate.”

“So, you did go?”

Shit. She’d forgotten to email him she’d gotten stuck with this duty. “Yep. Heading back soon. Probably not by dinnertime, though, as you suspected.”

“Right. Okay. I’ll send you that number.” His voice, clipped and tense. Upset that she hadn’t done as she’d promised.

“Thanks. And Gil? I’m sorry I forgot to tell you. I just—”

“Not a problem. This job sucks sometimes. I’ll see you when you get home.”

He hung up without saying goodbye.