

Chapter One

One year after becoming the youngest-ever detective in the Clayton, Connecticut Police Department, Valorie Dawes reached a dismal conclusion.

She hated night shift.

For so many reasons, too. The boredom. The chained-to-her-desk monotony. The crank calls, which tripled after most normal people's bedtime. The disruption to her sleep patterns—and to having any sort of home or social life.

And the bodies. Why, oh why, did so many dead bodies turn up at night?

"We've got another one," her partner said. Wesley Tate, a twenty-year veteran of the Clayton PD hung up his phone and slid a yellow-lined notepad across his desk onto Val's. The convenience of having their desks pushed together, facing each other, was for ease of communication, according to her boss, Sergeant Brenda Petroni. A woman who, at that moment, was probably snug in her bed, spooning her husband and watching late-night TV. With her phone turned off. So much for easy communication.

Val picked up the notepad and, as expected, couldn't read a word of Tate's illegible scrawls. She held it up facing him and said, "Interpret for me, please?"

Tate sniffed—he did that a lot—and ran a pudgy hand through his U-shaped crown of dark, curly hair. He grimaced, parting his lips so that his caterpillar of a mustache hid half of his coffee-stained, crooked upper teeth. For a man who complained so often about the cost of his kids' braces, he didn't seem to believe in them for himself. "Eastside," he said. "Alphabet Soup District. Asian female, late twenties to early thirties, wearing no jewelry, no purse or ID. Dressed for work, if you catch my drift."

Work, for a woman in the Alphabet Soup District,

meant prostitution. At least when Tate said it. Though only in his late forties, he was old school in ways men twenty years his senior had outgrown. He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, either. But he followed orders, didn't mind grunt work, and was honest to a fault. Qualities Val could work with.

"Let's go," Val said. "You drive." One thing he excelled at. She grabbed her jacket. Late March nights got cold in western Connecticut. She also pocketed a mask. The entire office had received COVID-19 vaccinations, part of the early experimental group for first responders. However, most folks out in the world had not. Even with the steep decline in the disease's spread over the past few months, the pandemic had not yet ended altogether.

"What about the phones?" Tate frowned. "Maybe you should go without me and I'll hang here."

Val sighed in exasperation. Tate had walked patrol for two decades and made no bones about his desire to ease into early retirement—at a desk. With a promotion, if possible.

"Dispatch will cover them," she said. "Come on, the body's getting cold."

Val preceded Tate out the door, hustling toward the elevator. She preferred the stairs, but the office for WAVE—the Women's Anti-Violence Emergency Squad—sat in the middle of a long corridor on the fourth floor. Close to the elevator, far from the steps. Tate would never keep up with her and she'd end up waiting for him anyway. She pressed the elevator's "Down" button and speed-dialed her favorite person.

"Dispatch," Sergeant Gil Kryzinski answered in a teasing tone. Her boyfriend of two years, the man she lived with, ran the Dispatch Unit and set his own hours. So, he reasoned, why not match her schedule? "Want to catch some dinner? I know it's early, but I'm starved."

"Can't," Val said. "Got a case on the Eastside. Can you guys cover our calls?"

"On one condition," Gil said, his tone still light. "Bring

back some Daisy's Hot Chicken."

"It'll be a while," Val said. "You might starve half to death waiting."

"It's worth the risk," he said. "Especially if I get to see you."

"Deal." The elevator door dinged open and she held it for Tate, ambling down the hallway and pulling on his jacket. "Gotta go."

"Can't we send a patrol unit?" Tate shuffled to the back of the elevator, arms crossed. "It's raining out, you know."

"They have. We're a detective squad, remember? Focused on crimes against women?" Val pushed the button for the basement garage. "Besides, didn't you tell me last week you needed a big case to boost your career? Or have you changed your mind about going for Sergeant after all?"

Tate shrugged. "I've taken the exam a dozen times and I never get the call. Not even an interview. System's friggin' rigged. I ain't the right color or gender, I guess."

Val rolled her eyes at the familiar whine, repeated whenever a woman or person of color earned their next step up the ladder. "Don't give up, Wes. They're bound to recognize your talent sooner or later." Left unsaid: Their superiors *had* recognized the limits of his abilities...which is why he'd retire a patrol officer. But discouraging him wouldn't help, either.

With Tate's skillful navigation around Clayton's busy Friday night entertainment districts, Val and her partner reached the scene minutes later. Patrol units had taped off the area and kept their blue-and-whites flashing, making the spot easy to find. After pulling on her mask, Val jumped out of the cruiser. She grinned when she spotted the guy in charge, a bear of a man with blond-gray curls which he refused to spoil by wearing a hat, even in the cool, steady rain.

"Travis!" Val high-fived her former precinct squad boss, Sergeant Travis Blake, who pulled her in for a rib-crushing hug.

"I know hugs are unprofessional, but damn, it's good

to see you, girl,” Travis said. “Congrats on making detective, by the way. Glad you’re here. They’re sending out the A-Team, eh?”

Val waved off the compliment. “Why are you on the Eastside? Did you move on from Liberty Heights?”

“I’m helping out the East Precinct for a bit,” Blake said. “They’re understaffed as usual. What the hell are *you* doing out here at this hour?”

“Gil said he wanted some hot chicken, so I figured I’d stop by the local crime scene on my way,” Val said with a grin.

“Did you bring me any?”

“I’ll hit you on the way back,” she said, her grin widening.

“Good thinking.” Then his smile faded. “This is a grisly one, though. It might spoil your appetite.”

“Oh? What ya got here?”

Travis jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Young Asian woman, sliced up pretty good. Could be a hate crime.”

Val’s senses went on high alert. Travis didn’t often jump to that sort of conclusion. “Why do you say that?”

“Because,” he said, frowning, “the killer left a message.”

“You mean, like a note or a racial slur?”

Travis’s frown deepened. “Look and see.”

Val ducked under the yellow tape, and Tate followed her over to the body, lying in the concrete drainage gutter on the side of the road. Twice Val stumbled when she stepped in deep, rainwater-filled potholes along the way, soaking both shoes. She pulled her jacket hood back, letting the gentle rain darken her chin-length light brown hair, and knelt by the body.

The woman lay on her side, facing the street. Val put her at about five-foot-two without her spike heels, a hundred forty pounds. Her dress, a shimmery blue wisp of a thing that might have covered her underwear, if she’d worn any, was sliced open from her waist up. Gashes up her abdomen reached her chest, and the knife had sliced clean through her bra between the lacy black cups. Her arms, legs, and face were also slashed, though Val didn’t notice much blood on her. Washed away by the rain,

perhaps?

“Jeez, he butchered her,” Tate said over Val’s shoulder.

Val nodded and looked for the message Travis had mentioned. It didn’t jump out at her, so she peered closer. The woman’s skin seemed so red, so raw...

She realized why, and bile pummeled up into her throat.

“What do you see?” Tate asked.

“It’s what we don’t see that matters.” Val pointed to her abdomen first. “What’s unusual about this?”

Tate gazed at her bloody stomach area, sniffed once, and shook his head. “The cuts don’t seem deep. Like, not enough to kill.”

“Right. Because they’re not.” Val waved her hand over the entire area. “Look at the periphery of the cuts. What’s there?”

Tate stared, hard. “Nothing. Other than, she’s not wearing a mask, but do these girls ever?”

Val sighed. “Look again.”

He did, his face curled into a puzzled frown. “A little hair, is all.”

“Exactly. And her face?”

Tate’s eyes widened. “I can’t tell. Her upper lip is gone.”

“Why, do you suppose?”

Tate shook his head, wordless.

“My guess? Because she had a mustache,” Val said. “Her arms? Black hair all over where he didn’t scrape her damned skin off.”

Something occurred to her. She felt creepy looking at the woman’s privates, but sliding her dress up a few inches confirmed her suspicion.

Tate’s shallow breathing threw Val off for a moment. He seemed unnerved—traumatized, even. “Did he...was she...?”

“Waxed,” Val said. “And undamaged.”

Tate sighed as if in relief. Weird dude. “You think he killed her for being too hairy?” he said, shock evident in his voice.

“That’s my working theory.” Val pulled out her phone and took some photos. She stepped over the body to get a

view of the woman's back—and found the message Travis mentioned. She zoomed in and snapped a few more.

“What is it?” Tate asked.

Val showed him a photo of the inscription, block letters scraped into her skin with what she guessed was the tip of a sharp knife.

“H-R,” he said. “What does that mean? Someone's initials? Human Resources? What?”

“There's more,” Val said. “Check out the next photo.”

“Slash-M-I-T,” Tate read aloud. He thought for a second. “Hermit?”

Val shrugged. “If that's what he meant, why not just spell it out? No, he's trying to tell us something.”

Tate handed back her phone. “Those cuts aren't deep, either. Her back looks kind of scraped up, too. You think he shaved her back?”

Val grimaced and nodded. “Someone really doesn't like body hair on women.”

“Shaving her wouldn't have killed her, though,” Tate said. “Nor those cuts on her gut. What do you think is the COD?” Cop shorthand for Cause of Death.

Val pointed to her neck. “Notice the bruising? The bulging, bloodshot eyes? We'll find out when the coroner does his thing, but my guess is, he strangled her.”

“The Hermit Strangler,” Tate said. “I can envision the headlines how.”

Val cursed under her breath. That was exactly the type of headline the killer might want. And therefore, the exact headline she wanted to avoid.

Beverly Leota's eyes fluttered open, the morning sun's bright rays alerting her to two important facts.

One, she'd slept late—much later than usual. Even on Saturdays, she always rose before dawn. Except, apparently, on those unusual weekends which began with an extended happy hour with her workmates. Too many drinks...her head felt heavy. As heavy as her body—and she didn't want to dwell on that unfortunate circumstance first thing in the morning.

The second fact was, she wasn't alone.

Next to her on the queen-sized bed lay a man, sleeping on his back. A big man—bigger than her, even. His dark, hairless chest rose and fell in a slow rhythm, exposed to the elements, with the top sheet horizontal across his belly. She rose up on one elbow and snuck a peek at his round, bearded face. Not a bad-looking guy. Better than she usually got, anyway.

Bev thought hard. Tried to place him...

No. Blame the drinks, or the hangover, whatever. She didn't recognize him.

Fear gripped her. Who was he? How had he gotten here? Why—?

Oh, wait. She remembered. Sort of.

They'd met at the bar. Not the first bar, where the office girls always went on Fridays, most of the time without Bev. She usually avoided that scene, the whole drunk-girls-getting-rowdy thing. Too many of her friends got into trouble that way. Like them, Bev struggled to control her drinking. She loved the sugary, colorful cocktails that tasted like sweet punch. Trouble is, one led to two, and she'd lose count of how many...and she always paid for it the next morning.

Like now.

They'd flitted from bar to bar, the group's membership flexing with each stop. A friend of Frita's joined at the second bar. Two of the girls never made it to the third—got lost or something—and at the fourth, the men joined in, buying drinks and asking them to dance. One even asked Bev, and she said yes, and...ten hours later, his heavy breaths warmed her bedroom air.

Had she—had they—?

Bev couldn't remember.

She blacked out at some point—the thing that happened whenever she drank too much. She remembered dancing with him, real close because they'd played a slow song, and he'd bought her a few drinks. He kissed her a few times, then buried his face in her neck in *that spot she loved*, and placed his big, powerful hands on her ass, and that was it. That's all she could remember.

She still had her camisole on that she'd worn under her blouse, and her panties. Which *proved* nothing, but it gave her a clue.

Bev glanced around the room. No condoms or wrappers in sight. No men's undies, either, for that matter.

She checked herself, rubbing a few fingers inside her underwear. Nothing wet or sticky. No pain, which her sister had told her she'd experience the first time. And no blood.

Bev breathed a sigh of relief. Still a virgin at twenty-five. She hadn't missed it. That would be the worst—having sex for the first time, with a Tall-Dark-and-Sorta-Handsome, and not remembering anything.

That made her giggle a little, though she wasn't sure why. It struck her as silly—

“What's so funny?”

DeWayne—suddenly his name came back to her—rolled over onto one elbow, their faces mere inches apart, an easy smile creasing his adorable face. The aroma of sour whiskey competed with man-sweat and musky cologne. He rested a hand on her hip, his brown eyes bright and bloodshot. “You have a crazy dream or something?”

“Good morning to you, too, handsome,” she said in a voice she almost didn't recognize. She'd wanted to sound husky, but it came out raspy and weak. Bev cleared her throat. “Sorry to wake you.”

“S'awright, I kinda need to use the bathroom anyway,” he said. “Remind me where to find it? Things are a bit...foggy from last night.” His smile gave way to a sheepish grin.

That reassured her. Shared mind-blur. “Yeah, things are a little foggy for me too. Like, did we...?” Bev ducked her gaze from his. “I mean, we didn't do...*it*, did we?”

DeWayne could have answered any number of ways. Yes or no, for example. A gentle reassurance, or an embarrassed confession. A little hemming and hawing, even.

He didn't have to laugh.

“Girl!” He guffawed, then rolled onto his back, holding his belly. That big ball of jelly around his midsection, shaking out of control, laughter escaping his mouth like

hissing steam. “Do it? You mean, me and you? Last night? Come on!” He slapped his thigh and laughed some more.

“Don’t laugh at me,” she said, heat rising. “It ain’t *that* far-fetched.” She rolled away from him, pushed the covers aside and plopped her pale, bare feet on the floor. She needed to pee, too, and the hell with letting this rude asshole go first.

“Bevvie, no,” he said, resting a hand on her shoulder. She shook it off. His fingertips brushed her arm. “I didn’t mean it like that. I promise. It’s just...we were so damned *drunk*, I’m amazed we even made it up the stairs here.”

“Oh. Well, yeah.” Relief and embarrassment flooded over her. DeWayne wasn’t laughing at her, *per se*. Perhaps at her inability to remember, but not at *her*.

Bev was *done* with men laughing at her.

“I mean, I coulda, but not, you know...” He caressed her arm. “I would never take advantage of a girl like that.”

“Of course. I know that.” She turned to face him...and didn’t like what she saw. He was still laughing. Or, at least, trying hard not to, with that stupid grin plastered all over his face.

What did he see in her in that moment? Her long, dark hair? Her almost perfect olive-brown skin? Oh shit, did that pimple on her forehead poke through her foundation—

“Sorry,” he said. “I *really* got to pee, and if I don’t go right now, I’ll wet your damn bed.”

“Go then,” she said, growing impatient. “First door on the left. Do what you gotta do.”

DeWayne’s face fell. Crap. Bev *had* misread him—and hurt his feelings. She smiled to soften the moment and lay down on the bed. Maybe there was still hope. She slid the covers down below her breasts, her dark nipples easy to make out through the sheer fabric of her camisole. “I’ll be right here waiting when you’re done.”

“Uh...yeah, okay.” Still wearing his boxers, he slipped out of bed and padded over to the rest of his clothes piled by her dresser. He pulled on his trousers and carried his shirt with him down the hall. Moments later, a door closed, and the bathroom fan hummed to life.

Bev took a deep breath, letting it out over several

seconds, her heart pounding. What the *hell* had she just said? What had gotten into her, inviting him back into her bed like that? She'd never done that before. Never came anywhere close to doing what she'd just proposed, either...other than last night, of course. She didn't even know if she had a condom anywhere in the house.

She'd always imagined her first time to be special. A romantic evening of dinner and quiet conversation, lots of smiles as she and her man grew more comfortable and desirous of one another. A warm kiss at the door. Inviting him in for coffee or a nightcap. Sitting on the couch, close, touching, their drinks forgotten as her lips found his, their tongues tasting of sweet wine. The coy invitation to her bedroom—

The bathroom door creaked open, and footsteps padded down the hall. She closed her eyes, feigning sleep, wanting to present to him the image of an angel in her bed, ready, waiting to be romanced, loved, wanted—

The front door to her apartment slammed shut.

“DeWayne?” she called.

No answer.

“Are you there?” she said.

Silence.

She waited until the sound of a car engine rumbled through the parking lot two floors down, and the car's tires crunched across the blacktop and into traffic.

Then she let the tears flow.

Gary Corbin