

Chapter One

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.

She passed a pair of twenty-something men dressed in expensive name-brand running outfits and ignored their catcalls. Why men her age lacked the ability to keep rude comments about her ass to themselves, she might never know. She dialed up the music volume and pushed a loose earbud back into her ear canal to drown out their lewd shouts.

Approaching the pedestrian bridge over the river, she slowed to allow a mother pushing a stroller to exit going the other direction. The two men behind her gained enough ground to return within earshot, and one of them said something to the effect of thanks for reconsidering his offer. She sprinted onto the bridge without looking back. Reconsider this, butthead.

Halfway across, lightning flashed, followed a second later by loud thunder, and the skies opened up in a torrential downpour. The metal grates beneath her feet grew slick, and she debated slowing her pace, but the risk of lightning striking the steel structure outweighed the danger of a slip or a twisted ankle.

The high-pitched shrieks of dismay from the men behind her almost made her laugh. Such tough guys. Afraid of a little rain.

Lightning flashed again as she approached the end of the half-mile crossing, accompanied a few seconds later by a loud thunderclap, startling her. She stumbled and caught herself on the side rail, breathing hard. The last thing she needed was to fall into the frigid current of Berkshire snowmelt thirty feet down—or worse, the jumble of rocks that lined the embankment. Slowing her pace now seemed a much better idea.

Val took a few deep breaths and pushed herself away from the rail to resume her run, then stopped. Something caught her eye along the rocky shore of the river below. A pile of clothing—no, not a pile. A parka, backside-up, arms outstretched, with gloves protruding from them. Slacks extended from the bottom of the parka. And bare feet.

A body—from what Val could tell, a woman's body—appeared to have gotten snagged in the rocks on the shore, pushed there by the river's relentless current.

The two men caught up to her and slowed to a stop. One of them, a once-athletic white guy in matching Adidas shorts, shirt, and shoes, shared a sweaty grin and wiped his brow. "Hey, gorgeous," he said. "I knew you'd stop and wait for me sooner or later. How about we go back to my place and—"

"Call 9-1-1!" Val said. She ran ahead, veering off the running path onshore toward the riverbank.

"Something I said?" the guy asked. His buddy, a taller, skinnier black guy

in Nikes, laughed and slapped him on the back.

Val picked a path among the rocks, a steep, slippery, fifty-foot descent toward the water's edge. Before she could reach it, the current shook the body free, and it floated downstream, rocking in the river's wake toward the bridge. If she hesitated, the current would wash the body away from her, and it would be lost downstream.

Brushing rain from her face, she waded into the water. The river's icy cold shocked her skin, and her teeth chattered. She slipped on the slimy rocks on the riverbed, and the strong current threatened to knock her down. She paused to regain her footing, shivering, rubbing her arms for warmth. The body drifted further away, picking up momentum. She reached for it, missed the woman's arm by inches. Another step closer...her foot skidded out from under her and she fell onto her butt, the water splashing up to her armpits and onto her face. So. Fucking. *Cold!*

Above, Mr. Adidas shouted down to her, still holding a cell phone to his ear. Val couldn't make out what he said and didn't care. "Send an ambulance!" she shouted back.

She rolled forward onto her knees, reaching again for the body. Almost. She crawled toward the woman, scraping her knees on the rocky bottom, frigid waves soaking her hair and neck. But her face stayed above water, and now she could reach the body. She grabbed the parka's arm, stopping its journey into the center of the river. The current tugged back, nearly knocking Val over, but she held firm, and dragged the body back to the shore.

The other runner, whom Val had nicknamed Nike-man, met her on the rocks and helped her pull the body to the grass alongside the running path. Val thanked him and then checked the body for signs of life.

“Is she...do you think she’s dead?” Nike-man asked, wide-eyed.

“I don’t feel a pulse, and she’s not breathing,” Val said. “Do you have a phone? Mine just got soaked.”

The man nodded and unlocked an iPhone, then handed it to her. “I never touched a dead body before,” he said, then ran ten feet away and fell to his knees, retching.

Val sympathized. She’d never forget the first dead body she’d ever touched. Then again, it was only five months ago. It was also the first person she’d ever killed, a gang member who’d shot at her first, whom she’d stopped from raping a teen-age girl. A day she’d never forget—but not one she could dwell on now.

She dialed her boss’s number from memory. “Clayton Police, Blake here,” her sergeant answered. “How can I help you?”

“Travis, it’s Val Dawes,” she said. “I just pulled a body from the Torrington River, on the east side of the ped crossing. A young woman, possibly a teenager. White, about five-five, one thirty, dark hair. Dressed for winter, other than being barefoot. I’m guessing she fell or jumped off the bridge.”

“Or got pushed,” Blake said. “But no shoes, huh? Any signs of foul play?”

“Some bruises on her face, but that could be from the fall. Is anyone missing that meets her description?” Val’s teeth chattered. As the excitement of the moment abated, bitter cold crept deeper into her bones.

“I’ll check missing person reports,” he said. “Dawes, are you okay?”

“I got a little wet,” she said. “The sooner you get someone out here, the sooner I can change into dry clothes.”

“On it,” he said. “Actually, it looks like someone else called it in, too.” Sirens sounded, as if on cue. “Shouldn’t be more than a minute. I’ll send fresh clothes out to you ASAP.”

Val waved thanks to the white guy, still leaning over the rail on the bridge overhead and talking on his cell phone. She strolled over to his buddy, still puking on the riverbank. “You going to be okay?” she asked him.

He rolled over to a sitting position on the wet grass, rain splashing his face. Lightning lit up the sky again, and thunder rumbled in the distance. “I guess I need to get used to this,” he said with a sheepish grin. “I’m going to UConn Med School in the fall.”

“It gets easier, I’m told,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Diego Collier.” He took a deep breath. “Up there, that’s my friend Kent Mercer. Sorry about what he said to you earlier. He can be kind of a jerk sometimes.”

Val waved it off. “Thanks for your help tonight, Diego. Can you stick around for a few minutes? Detectives will want to ask you a few questions.”

“Sure,” Diego said. He pointed to the logo on her sweatshirt. “But aren’t *you* a cop?”

Val sighed. “Believe it or not, this is my day off.” As if there ever were such a thing.

Rico Lopez, Val's patrol partner since the first of the year, met her in the break room a few minutes before the start of their 5:00 shift the next evening. "I heard you had a fun day yesterday," he said, pouring them both a mug of coffee. He handed her one and leaned his compact, muscular frame against the counter, facing her. He rubbed the white scar that ran across the light brown skin of his forehead, a souvenir of a domestic violence case six months before that put his partner, Brian Samuels, on long-term disability with a gunshot wound.

Val toasted him with her mug and took a sip. "Any word from the medical examiner on the victim's identity or how she died?" she asked.

"Drowning," intoned a rumbling baritone from the break room door. Sergeant Travis Blake, a 6'5", barrel-chested white man in his early 40s, took up the entire doorway, and his voice occupied any space his body didn't. "No opinion yet as to how or why."

The room fell silent, each officer paying their own private tribute to the woman. After suffering rape at the hands of a so-called family friend at the age of twelve, Val had struggled with occasional thoughts of suicide, temptations she resisted with therapy and the unflagging support of her older brother, Chad. She stuffed the unbidden memories and brought her thoughts back to the present.

"What else do we know about her?" Val asked. "She had no ID on her when she washed up on the riverbank, no phone, nothing."

“Her name was Susan Lambert,” Blake said, waving Rico aside so he could access the coffee pot. “We matched the body to a missing persons report this morning, and the family ID’d her a few hours ago. Seventeen years old, a junior at Liberty High School. Varsity volleyball, honor roll, student body treasurer. Volunteered on weekends with the mayor’s reading-to-poor-kids program. Oldest of three girls, parents still together.”

“Why would a girl like that kill herself?” Rico mused aloud. “She had the world by the ass on a downhill pull.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Val said. “You never know what a teenager’s going through. Sometimes the people you think are the absolute happiest suffer from depression.”

“But something has to trigger it, right?” Rico said. “Break-up with a boyfriend, maybe? Or trouble at school?”

“Nope and uh-uh.” Blake stirred four scoops of sugar into his coffee. “Her parents said she wasn’t dating, and her sister confirmed it. Apparently she was too busy with all of her extracurricular activities. And the girl had a 3.8 grade point average.”

“Sergeant Blake?” An African-American woman with gray-specked curls and oversized red-framed glasses poked her head in the door. Val recognized her as Yvonne Conrad, executive assistant to precinct commander Laurence Gibson. “Oh, and Dawes. Good, you’re both here. The Medical Examiner’s report on that drowned girl came in, and there’s an emergency meeting at City Hall to brief the mayor on it. Lieutenant Gibson wants you both there.” She

handed Blake a sealed manila envelope with his name scrawled across it.

“The mayor?” Blake frowned. “Why would Megan Iverson give a rat’s ass about this case?”

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” Yvonne said. “Meeting’s in twenty minutes. You’d better get a move-on. Traffic’s a mess out there.” She scooted out of the room, humming an old-time blues tune Val couldn’t quite identify.

Lopez rolled his eyes. “Iverson’s considering a run in next year’s governor’s race, running on a law-and-order platform. She’s looking for a headline to ride into the primaries.”

“Whatever the reason, we’d better get on the road,” Blake said. “Rico can drive us over while we read this report.”

“Beats desk duty,” Rico said. “I’ll get the car.”

Val and Blake scanned copies of the report while Lopez fought Clayton’s clogged city streets at rush hour. He blipped the sirens a few times to scoot past some of the uglier backups, but they remained stuck in traffic at 5:30 when the meeting was supposed to begin.

Val didn’t mind. She appreciated the opportunity to dive deeper into the report’s details. The M.E. had declared drowning as the cause of death, but hadn’t ruled out suicide, homicide, or accidental death. But a possible explanation for why the girl might have taken her own life emerged deep in the report’s background pages—an explanation that left Val numb and silent for several moments.

“Look at this,” she said when she could speak again. “Bruising on the

thighs in various stages of healing—some fresh. Scar tissue and traces of semen in the vaginal canal.”

Blake stared at her, recognition dawning. “And our all-American girl allegedly has no boyfriend.”

Val nodded, a lump rising in her throat. “No boyfriend,” she said, exhaling a long, uneasy breath, “but she does have a history of violent sexual abuse.” Her throat grew tight, and she turned her gaze out the window, unable to focus again on the report’s details.

Blake let out a long, low whistle and dove back into the report. For the rest of the ride, only Rico’s muttered curses at Clayton’s idiot drivers broke the somber silence.

Val followed Gibson and Blake into the meeting room, already occupied by enough people in suits to staff a small bank. At the head of the table stood a woman in her late 40s with chestnut hair and a light bronze tan on her almost wrinkle-free face. Val had never met the mayor before, but she recognized her from news reports. Tall—at least 5’9”, Val guessed—and runway-model - slender, Mayor Megan Iverson wore a conservative blue skirt suit, flat heels, and a little too much makeup, as if she expected to go on camera any second. She sported a politician’s insincere smile and a ring whose diamond—if real—would make Elizabeth Taylor proud. Only the woman’s shoulder-length, chestnut-colored hair seemed authentic.

“Welcome, officers,” she said, extending her hand. Gibson shook it and

introduced Blake, Val, and himself.

“It’s a real pleasure meeting you, Officers. Especially you, Ms. Dawes.” Iverson held onto Val’s hand for several seconds, shaking it with a firm grip. “I’m so grateful for all the work you’ve done to rid the streets of violent thugs like Richard Harkins.”

“The whole team contributed,” Val said, stammering. “But thank you, Madam Mayor.”

A tall man wearing a tailored blue suit stood to offer his hand next. “Curtis Iverson,” he said. His athletic build, bronze tan, and black hair, graying at the temples, reminded Val of a TV sports celebrity. “I help Meg out at home.”

“My most trusted advisor for over twenty years,” the mayor said, beaming. “And we can all see right through that false modesty, Curt.”

“That’s the first time she’s ever called me modest,” Curtis said, grinning. “Even while we were dating, she—”

“Let’s get down to business,” the mayor said. She waited until the officers took their seats at the far end of the table. “The media are going crazy over this Susan Lambert murder,” she went on. “A high school girl, evidence of rape—”

“Excuse me, Madam Mayor,” Gibson said. “We haven’t yet reached a conclusion as to whether this is a murder, a suicide, or accidental death. All we know is the cause of death, which is drowning. As for the rape, I’m a little concerned. The details about her molestation weren’t shared with the press, so how did—”

“Well, somebody told them,” the mayor said with an edge to her voice.

“Regardless, the press is making this out to be the latest occurrence of a crime wave targeted at young women, and to be honest, I’m inclined to agree. Mike?”

Val shot a questioning glance at Blake. “Michael Kim. Mayor’s liaison to the department,” he whispered, pointing to a twenty-something Asian man with shaggy black hair, dressed in a blue blazer and khakis.

Kim stood, pulled some papers out of a manila folder, and cleared his throat. “Preliminary statistics for last year show a twenty percent rise in violent crimes against women in the city over the prior year, and twelve percent the year before that. Calls to the nonprofit Women’s Crisis Center have spiked in recent weeks, according to my, uh, colleague that works there.”

“His girlfriend,” Blake whispered again to Val.

“We need to take action immediately to make women feel safer in this community,” the mayor said. “As of right now, that’s my number one priority. I want to know what action your department plans to take in the coming days to help make that happen.”

Gibson stared open-mouthed at her a moment. “I, uh, well, of course we’re doing everything we can to resolve the Susan Lambert case as quickly as possible,” he said. “As for women’s safety, of course that’s always been a priority—”

“Bullshit,” Mayor Iverson said. Her husband smirked, and her staffers ducked their heads, but the mayor seemed not to notice. “Mike just gave you the official numbers, and as we all know, most crimes go unreported. Women are under attack in this city, and that’s unacceptable.”

Val shot a glance at Gibson, wondering if he'd challenge the mayor's information again. According to her criminology professors at UConn, experts debated the extent to which different types of crimes went unreported, particularly rape, attempted rape, and domestic violence against women, but her own experience caused her to agree more with the mayor. Regardless, it seemed unfair to pin the blame for that on Gibson.

The lieutenant cleared his throat and nodded. "We agree that it's unacceptable," he said. "But I'm a little confused, to be honest, madam Mayor. I thought we were here to brief you on the Lambert case, which we're happy to do. As for the department's overall strategy on women's safety, I'd have to refer you to Chief MacMahon. He'd have a better sense of—"

"With all due respect, Lieutenant, if the mayor wanted bureaucratic stonewalling, she *would* have invited the chief to the meeting," Curtis Iverson said. "What we'd like to hear is what you officers on the front lines are seeing and hearing. Because if it doesn't happen at your level, well, that means it isn't happening." He finished with a reassuring smile at Gibson and Blake, and not so much as a glance at Val.

The veins on Gibson's temples pulsed and his breathing grew tense. Seeing that, Val held her breath. Gibson didn't suffer fools gladly, and Curtis Iverson had "fool" written all over him.

"Mr. Iverson," Gibson said, his voice even, "my officers put themselves in harm's way day, night, and overtime to keep our citizens safe. Two of Sergeant Blake's officers are recovering from gunshot wounds as we speak, resulting

from domestic violence calls. Officer Dawes was nearly killed by the same rapist a few months ago. To insinuate that nothing is happening is, frankly, ridiculous.” He set his mouth on a line and glared at the gray-haired man sitting across from him. For a moment, the room went silent.

A thirty-ish mousy brunette, whom Val recognized as Alison Fournette, the mayor’s chief of staff, drew a deep breath. “I think what Mr. Iverson means—”

“I’ll speak for myself, thank you,” Iverson said, holding up his hand.

“Lieutenant, of course that’s not what I meant. What I’m saying is, strategies and speeches don’t matter if they don’t turn into action on the street.”

“Which is why we invited Sergeant Blake and Officer Dawes,” Michael Kim said. “We want to hear whether or not they feel they’re getting the support they need to solve cases like Susan Lambert’s. Sergeant Blake?”

Blake darkened. Val could almost feel his discomfort with being asked to dish on his superiors. “Lieutenant Gibson bends over backwards to give me the resources I need,” he said, “within budgetary limits. It’s been my understanding that departmental requests for additional funding in this area have been ignored by City Council.” He wiped away a momentary smirk before continuing. “As far as solving the Lambert case, right now that’s up to the detective squad. If we suspect it’s a murder, it’ll go to their Homicide unit.”

“More bureaucratic buck-passing,” Curtis Iverson muttered.

“My impolitic husband has a point,” the mayor said. “You’re not answering the question. Do you feel supported by your superiors, or not?”

“I do,” Blake said, reddening, but his eyes fell to his hands.

Several seconds passed. The mayor's staff exchanged wary glances, but said nothing. Curtis Iverson turned toward his wife and rolled his eyes, then shook his head.

"Very well," the mayor said. "Officer Dawes, I'll put the question to you. When you're walking your beat in Liberty Heights, do you feel that the city is doing everything it can to help you keep our citizens—particularly the women in our community—safe from predators like Richard Harkins?"

All eyes turned to Val. Her face grew warm, her breathing shallow. Gibson's expression turned sour, as if he disapproved of the question, or having it directed at her. Blake's face took on an air of amusement, like he enjoyed seeing Val being put on the spot. The mayor, her staff, and her husband all wore skeptical expressions.

Val swallowed and licked her lips. She hadn't prepared for questions like this, nor for being thrust in the middle of a political tug-of-war between the mayor and her bosses. Worse, while she hated to make Gibson and Chief MacMahon look bad, she tended to agree with the mayor that much more could and should be done to protect the most vulnerable, particularly young women.

"Officer Dawes?" Alison Fournette frowned at her. "The mayor asked you a question."

"Lieutenant Gibson has made community policing a priority in our precinct, which I believe makes our city safer by establishing closer relationships between officers and our residents," Val said. "But the city could do more."

"Namely?" Fournette said in a sharp tone.

Val drew a deep breath. “Our ratio of citizens to police is almost 700 to one, far below the national average of one officer per 600 residents,” she said, her words coming out in a rush. “The city could also support Lieutenant Gibson’s desire to hire more women and minority officers, which studies show raises the level of public trust and can help sensitize officers to community concerns.”

Mayor Iverson turned to Fournette. “Is that true?”

Val blinked. So much for the mayor’s claims of this being her top priority. She should have known this before calling the meeting.

Fournette drew in a deep breath and smiled. “All police departments claim to be underfunded and understaffed.”

Michael Kim cleared his throat. “But in our case,” he said, “Officer Dawes is correct. Our ratio is lower and our diversity profile is also well below average. As I’ve been trying to tell Alison for the past year, we’d need an additional forty officers to reach parity. But she—”

“That’s over four million dollars!” Fournette said, raising her voice to drown out Kim’s. “Our finance office says we need to cut the budget, not raise it. Tax receipts are lower than expected, and—”

“We’ll find the money,” Mayor Iverson said, quieting both staffers. She faced Val again. “What else can we do?”

“Once we reach those staffing levels,” Val said, gaining confidence, “we could allocate more officers to the Domestic Violence Unit, the Rape Unit, and the like. Studies show—”

“I don’t need studies. Those are good ideas,” the mayor said. “Curt, work

with Mike, Alison, and Chief MacMahon to draft a proposal. Lieutenant, can you make Officer Dawes available to review what they come up with?”

Gibson gestured to Travis Blake. “Sergeant?”

Travis locked eyes with Val for a moment. Her heart raced. Please say yes! she wanted to shout. Instead she allowed a quick nod. Blake gave Gibson a thumbs-up.

“Looks like we have a plan,” Gibson said.

“Great!” Megan Iverson stood and wrote “Women’s Safety Initiative” on the whiteboard lining the wall on her end of the room. “Now,” she said, “tell me everything you know about Susan Lambert.”