

CHARLIE DONLEA

TWENTY



YEARS

LATER

Books by Charlie Donlea

SUMMIT LAKE

THE GIRL WHO WAS TAKEN

DON'T BELIEVE IT

SOME CHOOSE DARKNESS

THE SUICIDE HOUSE

TWENTY YEARS LATER

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TWENTY YEARS LATER

CHARLIE DONLEA



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*From invention is born progress
From reinvention is born freedom
—Anonymous*

Catskill Mountains

July 15, 2001 Two Months Before 9/11

*D*EATH WAS IN THE AIR.

He smelled it as soon as he ducked under the crime scene tape and stepped onto the front lawn of the palatial estate. The Catskill Mountains rose above the roofline as the early morning sun stretched shadows of trees across the yard. The breeze rolled down from the foothills and carried the smell of decay, causing his upper lip to twitch when it reached his nostrils. The smell of death filled him with excitement. He hoped it was because this was his first case as a newly minted homicide detective, and not from some perverse fetish he had never known he possessed.

A uniformed police officer led him across the lawn and around to the back of the property. There, he found the source of the foul odor. The victim was hanging naked from a second-story balcony, his feet suspended at eye level, and the white rope around his neck angling his head like a broken-stemmed lollipop. The detective looked up to the terrace. The rope stretched over the railing, tight and challenged by the weight of the body. The twine disappeared through French doors that led, he presumed, into the bedroom.

The victim had likely twirled for much of the night, the detective imagined, and now had unfortunately come to rest facing the house. Unfortunate because, as the detective walked across the back lawn, the first thing he saw was the man's naked buttocks. When he reached the body he noticed welt marks covering the man's right butt cheek and upper thigh. The contusions flared a faint lilac against the livor mortis blue of the dead man's skin.

The detective reached into his breast pocket and removed a pair of latex gloves that he slipped onto his hands. Rigor mortis had bloated the man's body to the point of explosion. His limbs looked like they were stuffed with dough. A bundle of rope bound the victim's hands behind his back, preventing his swollen and stiffened arms from extending out from his torso. Cut this rope, the detective imagined, and this guy would unfold like a scarecrow.

He gestured for the crime scene photographer, who waited at the periphery of the lawn.

“Go ahead.”

“Yes, sir,” the photographer said.

The crime scene unit had already been through the property, taking photos and video to log everything at the crime scene as the *before* evidence. This second time through would be after the detective had his initial look. The photographer raised his camera and peered through the viewfinder.

“So what’s the initial thought here?” the photographer asked as the camera’s shutter clicked redundantly as he snapped a series of photos. “Someone tied this guy up and threw him over the balcony?”

The detective looked up to the second story. “Maybe. Or he tied himself up and jumped.”

The photographer stopped shooting and slowly took his face away from the camera.

“Happens more than you’d think,” the detective said. “That way, if they have second thoughts, they can’t save themselves.” The detective pointed at the dead man’s face. “Get some clicks of that gag in his mouth.”

The photographer squinted as he walked around to the front of the body and looked at the dead man’s mouth. “Is that a ball gag? Like, S and M stuff?”

“It would certainly go hand in hand with the whip marks on his ass. I’m heading upstairs to see what’s holding this guy in place.”

* * *

In addition to the latex gloves covering the detective’s hands, plastic wraps now enclosed his shoes as he walked into the bedroom. The balcony doors opened inward and allowed the same breeze that had earlier filled his nostrils with the smell of death to gust through the bedroom. The pungent odor was less noticeable here, one story higher than where death hung in the morning air. He stood in the door frame and moved his gaze around. This was clearly the master suite. Vaulted ceilings were twenty feet high. A king-sized four-poster bed stood in the middle of the room with a night table on either side. A dresser sat against the far wall, its mirror reflecting his image back at him. Through the open balcony doors, the white rope

curved up and over the railing to run at waist height across the room and into the closet.

He stepped into the room and followed the rope. The closet had no door, just an arched entryway. When he reached it, he saw a spacious walk-in filled with neatly organized clothes hanging from scores of identical hangers. Shoes filled the thick pine cubbyholes that covered the back wall. Amid the cubbies was a black safe about five feet tall, likely weighing close to a ton. With an ornate knot, the end of the rope was tied to one of the legs of the safe. The other end, the detective knew, was attached to the man's neck, and whether he jumped off the balcony or was pushed, the safe had done its job. The four legs indented the carpeting with no adjacent depression marks to suggest the weight of the man's body had moved it even an inch.

A large kitchen knife lay on the floor next to the safe. Morning sunlight spilled through the balcony doors and into the walk-in closet, painting his shadow across the floor and up the far wall. He pulled a flashlight from his pocket and shined it at the carpeting, highlighting the small fibers next to the knife. He crouched down and examined them in the bright glow of his flashlight. They appeared to be bits of frayed nylon from when the rope had been cut. Within the carpet fibers was a small puddle of blood. A couple of droplets had also landed on the handle of the knife. He placed a triangle-shaped yellow evidence placard over the blood and fibers, and another next to the knife.

He turned and walked out of the closet, noticing a nearly empty wineglass on the night table. He was careful not to disturb it as he placed another yellow evidence marker next to it. Lipstick smeared the rim. High-stepping over the taut rope, he walked past the mirrored dresser and into the bathroom. He slowly looked around and saw nothing out of place. Soon, the forensics team would be in here with luminol and black lights. At the moment, the detective was interested in his first impression of the place. The toilet lid was open but the seat was down and dry. The toilet water held a yellow color, and the pungent smell of urine registered now as his nose caught up with his eyes. Someone had used the toilet but failed to flush. A lone segment of toilet paper floated in the bowl. Another evidence placard found the toilet.

He walked from the bathroom and into the main area, once again surveying the room. He followed the rope out to the balcony and looked

down at the dead man hanging from the other end. In the distance, the Catskill Mountains were cloaked by early morning fog. This was the house of a very wealthy man, and the detective had been handpicked to figure out what happened to him. In just a few minutes he had identified blood evidence, fingerprints on a wineglass, and a urine sample that likely belonged to the killer.

He had no idea at the time that all of it would be matched to a woman named Victoria Ford. And the detective could not have predicted that in two short months, just as he had every bit of evidence organized and a conviction all but certain, commercial airliners—American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175—would fly into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. On a sun-filled, blue-sky morning, three thousand men and women would die, and the detective's case would go up in smoke.

Lower Manhattan

September 11, 2001

*I*T WAS A BRIGHT, CLOUDLESS MORNING WITH BLUE SKY AS FAR AS THE eye could see. On any other day, Victoria Ford would have considered it beautiful. But today, the cool morning air and fresh, clean sky went unnoticed. Things had gone terribly wrong and today she was fighting for her life. She had been for the last few weeks. She took the subway in from Brooklyn and climbed the subterranean stairs into the brilliant morning. It was still early, and the streets were not as crowded as normal. It was the first day of school and many parents were absent from their normal morning commute, dropping their kids off and snapping first-day photos. Victoria took advantage of the open sidewalks and power-walked through the financial district toward her attorney's office. She pushed through the lobby doors and entered the elevator, which took forty-five seconds to shoot her to the seventy-eighth floor. There, she rode an escalator up two more levels and pushed through the office doors. A moment later she was sitting in front of her attorney's desk.

"Straight talk," Roman Manchester said as soon as Victoria sat down. "That's the only way I deliver news."

Victoria nodded. Roman Manchester was one of the best-known defense attorneys in the country. He was also one of the most expensive. But Victoria had decided, now that things had gone to hell, that Manchester was her best option. Tall, with a thick head of dark hair, Victoria had a surreal moment as she stared at the man now and remembered the many times she'd seen him on television, either answering questions from reporters or staging a press conference to proclaim his client's innocence. Her name would soon be in the same category as the other men and women Roman Manchester had defended. But if it meant that she would avoid conviction and prison, Victoria was okay with that. She knew from the start that it would be that way.

"The DA reached out to me yesterday to let me know they've convened a grand jury."

“What does that mean?” Victoria asked.

“Shortly, likely this week, they will present to a jury of twenty-three private citizens all the evidence they have against you. I’m not allowed to be present, and the proceedings are not open to the public. The district attorney is not attempting to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The DA’s goal is to show the jury the evidence she has to this point in order to determine if an indictment is warranted.”

Victoria nodded.

“You and I have covered this before, but I’ll give you a quick overview of the case against you. The physical evidence is substantial. Your fingerprints, DNA via blood evidence, and urine were found at the scene. All of this appears to be unchallengeable because they crossed their t’s and dotted their i’s with search warrants. The rope around the victim’s neck matched rope the investigators recovered from your car. There is other, more minor, physical evidence, in addition to a great deal of circumstantial evidence that will be presented to the grand jury.”

“Can’t you challenge it? That’s part of defending me.”

“I’ll defend you, but not at the grand jury. Our time to shine is when the case goes to trial. And there will be a lot of work to do to get to that point. I’ll be able to challenge a lot of the circumstantial, but the physical evidence, quite frankly, is a tough obstacle to overcome.”

“I already told you,” Victoria said. “I wasn’t at that house the night Cameron died. I can’t explain how my blood and urine got there. That’s your job. Isn’t that what I’m paying you for?”

“At some point I’ll get to see all the evidence and sink my teeth into how strong it is. But we’re not at that point yet. For now, I expect the grand jury will rule in favor of indictment.”

“When?”

“This week.”

Victoria shook her head. “What should I do?”

“The very first thing is to figure out how much money you have on hand, and how much more you can get from friends and family. You’ll need it for bail.”

“How much?”

“Hard to give you an exact amount. I’ll argue that you have no prior record and are not a flight risk. But the DA is pushing for first-degree

murder, and on that charge alone there is precedent on bail. Minimum, a million. Likely more. Plus the remainder of my retainer.”

Victoria stared out the window of her attorney’s office and looked at the buildings of New York. She made a mental list of her assets. She had just over \$10,000 in a joint savings account with her husband. Her investments would wring out another eighty thousand, although she’d likely have to fight her husband tooth and nail for every penny since the account was in both their names. They hadn’t spoken since the details of her affair came out during the investigation, which she knew was inevitable. The media had salivated over every dirty detail, spreading them far and wide. Her husband had moved out soon after.

She could borrow against her 401k, where another hundred thousand resided. The equity in their home might yield five figures. Even with all that, she’d still be well short. She could ask her parents and sister, but Victoria knew that wouldn’t get her far. Victoria’s best friend had all the money in the world, and a million dollars would not be a stretch for Natalie Ratcliff. It was Victoria’s only option. The weight of the situation drooped her shoulders and brought tears to her eyes. Things were not meant to play out like this. Just a short couple of months ago, she and Cameron were happy. They were planning a future together. But then everything changed. The pregnancy and the abortion and everything that followed. The jealousy and the hate. It had all come so quickly that Victoria barely had time to digest it. And now she was in the middle of a nightmare with no way out. She pulled her gaze from the window and looked at her attorney.

“What happens if I can’t come up with the money?”

Roman Manchester pursed his lips, picked up his coffee mug, and took a slow sip before carefully placing it back on his desk. “I think you should find a way to secure the money; let’s leave it at that. It will be much easier to mount a viable defense if you are not in jail prior to trial. Not impossible, just easier.”

Victoria’s mind buzzed. An actual, audible vibration. She imagined it was the neurons of her brain attempting to grasp the gravity of the moment, until she realized it was something else. The vibration was real, a growing flutter that rattled her chair and shook the desk. The sound that accompanied it changed from a far-off buzz to a screaming whine. Suddenly, an object streaked through her peripheral vision but was gone before she could bring her gaze to the window. Then, her attorney’s office rocked and swayed.

Pictures fell from the wall and glass shattered just as the concussion of an explosion filled her ears. The lights flickered and the ceiling tiles rained down on her. Outside the windows, the blue sky that had been visible just a moment before was gone. In its place was a wall of black smoke that erased the brilliant morning sun. That same dark smolder spiraled through the vents as an ominous odor filled her nostrils. She recognized the scent but couldn't immediately place it. It wasn't exactly the same, but the closest she came was that it smelled like gasoline.