

PROLOGUE

SHE WAS DEAD THE MINUTE SHE ANSWERED THE 'LINK. SHE didn't question the caller or the urgency of the request. In fact, pleasure and excitement rushed through her as she put aside her plans for an early night. Her movements both graceful and efficient, she dressed quickly, gathering what she needed.

She strode through her pretty apartment, ordering the lights to dim, and remembered to switch to sleep the little droid kitten her lover had given her as a companion.

She'd named it Sachmo.

It mewed, blinked its bright green eyes and curled into a ball. She gave its sleek white fur an affectionate stroke.

"Be back soon," she murmured, making a promise she couldn't know would be broken.

She glanced around the apartment as she opened the door, smiled at the bouquet of red roses in full and dramatic bloom on the table near the street window. And thought of Li.

She locked her door for the last time.

Following ingrained habit, she took the stairs. She was a slim, ath-

letically built woman with eyes of deep blue. Her blond hair swung past her shoulders, a parted curtain for a lovely face. She was thirty-three, happy in her life, flirting around the soft edges of love with a man who gave her kittens and roses.

She thought of New York, this life, this man as a new chapter, one she was content to walk through, page by page, and discover.

She tucked that away to turn her mind to where she needed to go, what she needed to do. Less than ten minutes after the call, she jogged down the second flight of steps, turned for the next.

She had an instant to register the movement when her killer stepped out. Another for surprise when she recognized the face. But not enough, not quite enough to speak before the stunner struck her mid-body and took her down.

She came to with a shocking jolt, a burn of skin and blood. A rush from dark to light. The stunner blast had left her body numb, useless, even as her mind flashed clear. Inside the paralyzed shell, she struggled, she strained. She looked up into the eyes of her killer. Into the eyes of a friend.

“Why?” The question was weak, but had to be asked. There had to be an answer. There was always an answer.

She had the answer when she died, in the basement five floors below her pretty apartment where roses bloomed red and a kitten purred in sleep.



I EVE STEPPED OUT OF THE SHOWER AND INTO the drying tube. While the warm air swirled around her, she shut her eyes and wallowed. She'd snagged a solid eight hours' sleep and had woken early enough to indulge in what she thought of as water therapy.

Thirty laps in the pool, a spin in the whirlpool, followed by a twenty-minute hot shower. It made a hell of a nice way to start the day.

She'd had a productive one the day before, closing a case within two hours. If a guy was going to kill his *best friend* and try to pass it off as a mugging, he really shouldn't get caught wearing the dead friend's inscribed wrist unit.

She'd testified in court on a previous case, and the defense counsel's posturing, posing, and pontificating hadn't so much as cracked a hair-line in her testimony.

Topping off the day, she'd had dinner at home with her husband, watched a vid. And had some very excellent sex before shutting down for that eight straight.

Life, at the moment, absolutely did not suck.

All but humming, she grabbed the robe on the back of the door—then paused, frowned, and studied it. It was short and silky and the color of black cherries.

She was dead certain she'd never seen it before.

With a shrug, she put it on, and walked into the bedroom.

There were ways for a good morning to get better, she thought, and here was top of the list. Roarke sipping coffee in the sitting area while he scanned the morning stock reports on-screen.

There were those hands that had worked their magic the night before, one holding a coffee mug, the other absently stroking their fat slug of a cat. Galahad's dual-colored eyes were slits of ecstasy—she could relate.

That beautifully sculpted mouth had turned her system inside out, twisted it into knots of screaming pleasure, then left it limp and satisfied.

Just shy of two years of marriage now, she mused, and the heat between them showed no signs of banking down. As if to prove it, her heart gave a leap and tumble in her chest when he turned his head, and his bold blue eyes met hers.

Did he feel that? she wondered. Could he possibly feel that every time? All the time?

He smiled, so both knowledge and pleasure spread over a face, she thought foolishly, must make the gods weep with joy over their work.

He rose, moved to her—all long and lean—to take her face in his hands. Just a flutter of those clever fingers over her skin before his mouth found hers and made a better morning brilliant.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“Yeah. Thanks.” She was a veteran cop, a homicide boss, a tough bitch by her own definition. And her knees were jelly. “I think we should take a few days.” He programmed the AutoChef for coffee and—if she knew her man—for the breakfast he intended her to eat. “I mean maybe in July. Like for our anniversary. If you can work it in between world domination and planetary acquisitions.”

“Funny you should bring it up.” He set her coffee on the table, then two plates. It seemed bacon and eggs was on the menu this morning. On the sofa Galahad twitched and opened his eyes.

Roarke merely pointed a finger, said, firmly, “No.” And the cat flopped the pudge of himself over. “I was thinking a few weeks.”

“What? Us? Away? Weeks? I can’t—”

“Yes, yes, crime would overtake the city in July 2060, raze it to smoldering ash if Lieutenant Dallas wasn’t here to serve and protect.” Ireland wove misty magic through his voice as he picked up the inert cat and set him on the floor to make room on the couch for Eve.

“Maybe,” she muttered. “Besides, I don’t see how you can take off for weeks when you’ve got ninety percent of the businesses in the known universe to run.”

“It’s no more than fifty.” He picked up his coffee again, waiting for her to join him. “In any case, what would be the point of having all that, and you, darling Eve, if I can’t have time with you, away from your work and mine?”

“I could probably take a week.”

“I was thinking four.”

“*Four?* Four weeks? That’s a month.”

His eyes laughed over the rim of his cup. “Is it now? I believe you’re right.”

“I can’t take a month off. A month is like . . . a month.”

“As opposed to what? A chicken?”

“Ha. Look, maybe I could stretch it to ten days, but—”

“Three weeks.”

Her forehead furrowed.

“We had to cancel plans for a quick weekend away twice this year. Once for your work, once for mine. Three weeks.”

“I couldn’t take more than two, even—”

“Two and a half. We split the difference.” He handed her a fork.

She frowned at it. “You were always going for the two and a half.”

He took her hand, kissed it. “Don’t let your eggs get cold.”

She’d squeezed confessions out of stone killers, browbeaten information out of slimy weasels, but she would never come out a hundred percent on top with Roarke in a negotiation. “Where would we go during this famous two and a half weeks?”

“Where would you like to go?”

Now she smiled. Who needed a hundred percent? “I’ll think about it.”

She ate, dressed, happy that she’d left herself enough time to *take* her time. As she strapped on her weapon harness, she considered indulging in one more cup of coffee before she headed downtown to Cop Central.

Her communicator signaled. She drew it out of her pocket, and seeing “Dispatch” on the readout, went straight to full cop mode.

He watched it happen. It always fascinated him how those whiskey-colored eyes could go from easy, even laughing, to flat and empty. She stood straight now, her tall, lanky body braced, long legs spread, boots planted. Her face, all those delightful angles of it, showed no expression. The generous mouth that had been curved moments before, set.

“Dallas.”

Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. See the officers, 525 West Twenty-third Street. Basement of residential apartment building. Possible homicide, female.

“Acknowledged. On my way. Contact Peabody, Detective Delia. I’ll meet her on scene.”

“Well, you had breakfast first,” Roarke commented when she pocketed the communicator. He traced a finger, lightly, down the shallow dent in her chin.

“Yeah. I won’t be getting that last cup of coffee. Then again, the female on West Twenty-third won’t be getting any either.”

Traffic clogged the streets. Spring, Eve thought, as she bullied her way through it, time for daffodils and fresh tourists. She carved her way over to Seventh, where she caught a break for a solid ten blocks.

With her windows down she let the city-scented air blow over her and send her short, chopped-up brown hair flying.

Egg pockets and sludge coffee emanated from the glide-carts, stone dust kicked up from the crew that attacked a wide chunk of sidewalk with airjacks. The sound of them, the symphony of horns as she hit another snarl, the clatter of feet on pavement as pedestrians surged over a crosswalk, created the urban music she understood.

She watched street vendors, who may or may not hold licenses, pop their tables up in hopes of catching the early commuters or tourists up and about for breakfast. Ball caps and T-shirts replaced the winter's heavy scarves and gloves. Markets, open for business, displayed crates of fruit or flowers, colorful arrays to feed body and soul.

A transvestite, who easily topped six and a half feet, toddled along on skinny blue heels. She shook back her golden waterfall of hair as she delicately tested a melon for ripeness. As she waited out the light, Eve watched a tiny woman, well past her century mark, bump up in her seated scooter. The tranny and centurian seemed to chat amiably while they selected fruit.

You had to love New York, Eve thought when the light changed. Or stay the hell out of it.

She shoved her way into Chelsea, absolutely in tune with her city.

At 525, she double-parked and, flipping on her On Duty light, ignored the bitter curses and rude gestures tossed at her by her fellow New Yorkers. Life and death in the city, she thought, was rarely a smooth ride.

She hooked her badge on her jacket, grabbed her field kit out of the trunk, then approached the uniform at the main door.

“What’ve we got?”

“DB in the basement, female, round about thirty. No ID, no jewelry, no purse or nothing. Still dressed, so it doesn’t look like a sex crime.” He led her in as he spoke. “Tenant and his kid found her when they

came down to get the kid's bike outta the storage locker. Kid's been grounded or something. Anyway, they called it in. Guy thinks maybe she lives here, or around. Maybe he's seen her before, but he ain't sure. He got the kid out pretty quick and didn't take a good look."

They headed down a stairway, boots and cop shoes clanging on metal. "Didn't see a weapon, but she's got burns here." He tapped fingers on his carotid. "Looks like she got zapped."

"I want two officers knocking on doors. Who saw what when. See the tenant and his boy are secured. Names?"

"Burnbaum, Terrance. Kid's Jay. We're sitting on them in six-oh-two."

She nodded at the two officers securing the scene, engaged her recorder. "Dallas, Lieutenant Eve, on scene at five twenty-five West Twenty-third. My partner's on her way. Find out if the building's got a super or manager on-site. If so, I want to see him."

She scanned the area first. Concrete floor, caged lockers, pipes, spiderwebs. No windows, no doors. No security cameras.

"I'm going to want any security discs from the entrances, and from the stairwells. Find the super."

Lured her down here, Eve thought as she opened her kit for her can of Seal-It. Or forced her down. Maybe she came down for something and got jumped. No way out.

She studied the body from where she stood, coating her hands and boots with sealant. Slim build, but didn't look soft. The head was turned away, with long blond hair curtaining the face. The hair had a shine to it, and the clothes were good quality.

Not from the streets, she thought. Not with that hair, those clothes, the nicely manicured fingers on the hand she could see.

"The victim is lying on her left side, back to the stairs. No visible prints on the concrete floor. It looks clean. Did Burnbaum move the body?"

"He says no. Says he went over, took her wrist. Said it was cold, got no pulse, and he knew. He just got his kid out."

Eve circled the body, crouched. Something set off a low alarm in her brain, a kind of sick dread in her gut. She lifted the curtain of hair.

For an instant, one sharp instant, everything in her went cold. “Goddamn it. Goddamn it. She’s one of us.”

The cop who’d stayed with her stepped forward. “She’s a cop?”

“Yeah. Coltraine, Amaryllis. Run it, run it now. Get me an address. Detective Coltraine. Son of a bitch.”

Morris, she thought. Oh, fucking hell.

“This is her place, Lieutenant. She’s got four-oh-five, this building.”

She ran the prints because it had to be done, had to be official. The sick dread rose to a cold rage. “Victim is identified as Coltraine, Detective Amaryllis. NYPSP. This address, apartment four-oh-five.”

She flipped back the light jacket. “Where’s your piece, Coltraine? Where’s your goddamn piece? Did they use it on you? Do you with your own weapon? No visible defensive wounds, clothes appear undisturbed. No signs of violence on the body but for the stunner burns on the throat. He held your own piece to your throat, didn’t he? On full.”

She heard the clang on the stairs, looked up as her partner came down.

Peabody looked spring fresh. Her hair flipped at her neck, dark sass around her square face. She wore a pink blazer and pink skids—a color choice Eve would have made numerous pithy comments on under any other circumstances.

“Nice of them to wait until we were almost officially on shift,” Peabody said cheerfully. “What’ve we got?”

“It’s Coltraine, Peabody.”

“Who?” Peabody walked over, looked down, and all the rosy color drained out of her cheeks. “Oh my God. Oh God. It’s Morris’s . . . Oh. No.”

“She isn’t wearing her weapon. It may be the murder weapon. If it’s here, we have to find it.”

“Dallas.”

Tears swam in Peabody’s eyes. Eve understood them, felt them in her own throat. But shook her head. “Later for that. Later. Officer, I want you to take a man and check her apartment, make sure it’s clear. I want to know either way. Now.”

“Yes, sir.” She heard it in his voice—not the tears, but the simmering rage. The same that rolled in her gut.

“Dallas. Dallas, how are we going to tell him?”

“Work the scene. This is now. That’s later.” And she didn’t have the answer. “Look for her weapon, her holster, anything else that might be hers. Work the scene, Peabody. I’ll take the body.”

Her hands were steady as she got out her gauges, went to work. And she froze the question out of her mind. The question of how she would tell the chief medical examiner, tell her friend, that the woman who’d put stars in his eyes was dead.

“Time of death twenty-three forty.”

When she’d done all she could do, Eve straightened. “Any luck?” she said to Peabody.

“No. All these lockers. If the killer wanted to leave the weapon and hide it, there are a lot of places.”

“We’ll put Crime Scene on it.” Eve rubbed the space between her eyes. “We have to talk to the guy who called it in, and his son, and take her apartment. We can’t have her taken in until Morris knows. He can’t find out that way.”

“No. God, no.”

“Let me think.” Eve stared hard at the wall. “Find out what shift he’s on. We don’t let the morgue unit have her until . . .”

“The uniforms know a cop went down, Dallas. It’s going to start spreading. Cop. Female. This address, or just this area. If Morris gets wind—”

“Shit. You’re right. You’re right. You take over here. The uniforms

are sitting on Terrance Burnbaum and his boy in six-oh-two. Talk to them first. Don't let them take her off scene, Peabody."

"I won't." Peabody scanned the text on her PPC. "One thing good, Morris is working a noon to eight. He wouldn't be at the morgue this early."

"I'll go to his place. I'll do it."

"Jesus, Dallas." The words trembled. "Jesus."

"If you finish in six-oh-two before I get back, start on her apartment. Fine-tooth, Peabody." Steps, Eve reminded herself. Take all the steps. Think about the misery later. "Contact EDD, but give me a head start. All her communications, all her data. Uniforms are finding the super, so confiscate the security discs. Don't—"

"Dallas." Peabody spoke gently. "I know what to do. You taught me what to do. I'll take care of her. You can trust me."

"I know. I know." Eve struggled to let out a breath that wanted to stick in her throat. "I don't know what I'm going to say to him. How to say it."

"There's no easy way."

Couldn't be, Eve thought. Shouldn't be.

"I'll tag you when I . . . when it's done."

"Dallas." Peabody reached out, clasped Eve's hand. "Tell him—if it seems right—tell him I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

With a nod, Eve started up. The killer had gone this way, she thought. Only way out. Up these same stairs, through this same door. She reopened her kit, unsure if she was stalling or just doing her job. But she took out the minigoggles, studied the lock, the jamb, and found no sign of force.

Could've used Coltraine's key card, Eve thought. Unless he was in first, jumped her when she came down.

Damn it, damn it, she couldn't *see* it. Couldn't clear her mind to see. She went up to the next level, repeated the process on the back door of the building with the same results.

A tenant, someone let in by a tenant—including the victim—someone with a master or superior skills at picking locks.

She studied the security cam over the rear door. Then shut the door, secured it as one of the uniforms jogged down to her.

“Apartment’s clear, Lieutenant. Bed’s made, no dishes around. It’s neat and tidy. Lights were on dim. She, ah, had this droid pet—little cat. It was set to sleep mode.”

“Did you see her weapon, her badge?”

His jaw tightened. “No, sir. We found a lockbox in her bedroom closet. Space for her sidearm and a clutch piece, holsters for both. None of them were there. Box wasn’t locked. I didn’t see her badge, Lieutenant. We didn’t search, but—”

“What do you do with your badge when you’re off duty for the night, Officer . . . Jonas?”

“Put it on my dresser.”

“Yeah. Lock up the weapon, leave the badge on the dresser. Maybe on top of the lockbox, but easy access. Detective Peabody’s in charge here now. I don’t want her name out, do you hear me? I don’t want a leak on this. You keep it contained here until I clear it. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s one of us down there. She’ll have that respect.”

“Yes, sir.”

She strode out, then stood on the sidewalk and breathed. Just let herself breathe. She looked up, watched clouds crawl over the sky. Gray over blue. It was only right, she thought. It was only right.

She walked to her vehicle, keyed it open. Trapped behind it, a driver leaned his head out of his car window, shook his fist at her.

“Fucking cops!” he shouted. “Think you own the streets, or what?”

She imagined herself going up to the window, plowing her fist into

his face. Because one of the cops he cursed was lying dead on a concrete floor in a windowless basement.

Some of it may have showed on her face, in the cold hard stare. He pulled his head back in, brought up his window, hit the locks.

Eve stared another moment, watched him shrink behind the wheel. Then she got in her car, flipped off her light, and pulled away.

She had to look up Morris's address, and used the in-dash computer. Strange, she thought. She'd never been to his place. She considered him a friend, a good one—not just a work acquaintance or connection. But they rarely socialized outside the job. Why was that?

Maybe because she resisted socializing like she would a tooth extraction? Could be it.

She knew he liked music, and was especially fond of jazz and blues. He played the saxophone, dressed like an uptown rock star, had a mind full of interesting, often incomprehensible trivia.

He had humor and depth. And great respect for the dead. Great compassion for those left behind by death.

Now it was a woman he'd . . . had he loved her? Eve wondered. Maybe, maybe. He'd certainly cared deeply for the woman, the cop, who was dead. And now it was he who was left behind.

The clouds brought a thin spring rain, the kind that spat rather than plopped on the windshield. If it lasted or increased, vendors would poof up with stands of umbrellas. The magic of New York commerce. Vehicle traffic would slow; pedestrian traffic would speed up. And for a while, the streets would gleam, shining like black mirrors. Illegals dealers would pull up their hoods and get on with business or huddle in doorways until the storm passed. More than an hour of rain? You could find a diamond on the sidewalk easier than finding an unoccupied cab.

God bless New York, she thought, until it ate you alive.

Morris lived in Soho. She should've guessed it. There was some-

thing bohemian, exotic, artistic about the man who'd chosen to doctor the dead.

He had a Grim Reaper tattoo, she remembered, which she'd seen inadvertently when she'd called him in the middle of the night, and he hadn't bothered to block video. Though he'd been in bed and barely covered by the sheet.

The man was hot. No wonder Coltraine had . . .

Oh God. Oh God.

She stalled, couldn't help herself, by searching out a parking spot along the street. Artists tented their wares or grabbed them from the little stalls to dash with them out of the rain. Those too iced to settle for trendy shops lived here, among the lofts and varied restaurants, the in-groove clubs and nightspots.

She found a spot, three blocks from Morris's place. And she walked through the rain while others dashed and darted around her, seeking shelter from the wet.

She climbed to the main door, started to push his buzzer. Couldn't. He'd see her through his screen, and it would give him too much time to think, or he'd ask, and she couldn't answer. Instead, she violated his privacy and used her master to gain entrance to the tiny lobby shared by the other lofts.

She took the stairs, gained herself a little more time, and circled around to his door. What would she say?

It couldn't be the standard here. It couldn't be the standby: *I regret to inform you . . . I'm sorry for your loss*. Not here, not with Morris. Praying it would come to her, it would somehow be the right way, she pressed the bell.

In the time that passed, her skin chilled. Her heart thudded. She heard the locks give, watched his lock light go from red to green.

He opened the door and smiled at her.

His hair was loose. She'd never seen it loose, raining down his back rather than braided. He wore black pants, a black tee. His exotic al-

mond eyes looked a little sleepy. She heard the sleep in his voice when he greeted her.

“Dallas. The unexpected on my doorstep on a rainy morning.”

She saw curiosity. No alarm, no worry. She knew her face showed him nothing. Not yet. Another second or two, she thought. Just another few seconds before she broke his heart.

“Can I come in?”