

#1 NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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POSSESSION IN DEATH



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Synopsis

Lieutenant Eve Dallas has always sought justice for the dead, but now, a victim will seek her own vengeance-through Eve.

Love is strong as death.

Whence and what art thou, execrable shape?

SONG OF SOLOMON

JOHN MILTON

One

She spent the morning with a murderer.

He'd been under guard in a hospital bed recovering from a near-fatal wound—courtesy of a misstep by his partner in crime—but she'd had no sympathy.

She was glad he'd lived, wished him a long, long life—in an off-planet concrete cage. She believed the case she and her team had built to be solid—as did the nearly gleeful prosecuting attorney. The sprinkles on the icing of this particular cupcake was the confession she'd finessed out of him as he'd sneered at her.

Given that he'd tried to kill her less than twenty-four hours before, the sneer was small change.

Sylvester Moriarity would receive the best medical care New York could provide, then he'd join his friend Winston Dudley behind bars until what promised to be a sensational, media-soaked trial, given their family fortunes and names.

Case closed, she told herself as she pushed her way through the heat-soaked Saturday afternoon traffic toward home. The dead now had the only justice she could offer, and their families and friends the comfort—if comfort it was—that those responsible would pay.

But it haunted her: the waste, the cruelty, the utter selfishness of two men who were so puffed up by their own importance, their *station*, that they'd considered murder a form of entertainment, a twisted sort of indulgence. She maneuvered through New York traffic, barely hearing the blasts of horns, the annoyingly cheerful hype of the ad blimps heralding midsummer sales at the Sky Mall. Tourists swarmed the city—and likely the Sky Mall as well—chowing down on soy dogs from the smoking glide-carts, looking for souvies and bargains among the shops and street vendors.

A boiling stew, she thought, in the heat and humidity of summer 2060.

She caught the lightning move of a nimble-fingered street thief, bumping through a couple of tourists more intent on gawking at the buildings and their ringing people glides than their own security. He had the wallet in the goody slit of his baggy cargos in half a finger snap and slithered like a snake through the forest of people lumbering across the crosswalk.

If she'd been on foot, or at least headed in the same direction, she'd have pursued—and the chase might've lifted her mood. But he and his booty

smoked away, and he'd no doubt continue to score well on today's target shoot.

Life went on.

When Lieutenant Eve Dallas finally drove through the stately gates of home, she reminded herself of that again. Life went on—and in her case, today, that included a cookout, a horde of cops, and her odd assortment of friends. A couple years before, it would've been the last way she'd have spent a Saturday, but things had changed.

Her living arrangements certainly had, from a sparsely furnished apartment to the palace-fortress Roarke had built. Her husband—and *that* was a change, even if they'd just celebrated their second year of marriage—had the vision, the need, and, God knew, the means to create the gorgeous home with its myriad rooms filled with style and function. Here the grass was rich summer green, the trees and flowers plentiful.

Here was peace and warmth and welcome. And she needed them, maybe just a little desperately at the moment.

She left her vehicle at the front entrance, knowing Summerset, Roarke's majordomo, would send it to its place in the garage. And hoped, just this once, he wasn't looming like a scarecrow in the foyer.

She wanted the cool and quiet of the bedroom she shared with Roarke, a few minutes of solitude. Time, she thought as she strode toward the doors, to shake off this mood before the invasion.

Halfway to the doors, she stopped. The front wasn't the only way in, for Christ's sake—and why hadn't she ever thought of that before? On impulse, she jogged around—long legs eating up ground—crossed one of the patios, turned through a small, walled garden, and went in through a side door. Into a parlor or sitting room or morning room—who knew? she thought with a roll of tired brown eyes—and made her way as sneakily as the street thief across the hallway, down and into the more familiar territory of the game room, where she knew the lay of the land.

She called the elevator and considered it a small, personal victory when the doors shut her in. "Master bedroom," she ordered, then just leaned back against the wall, shut her eyes, while the unit navigated its way.

When she stepped into the bedroom, she raked a hand through her messy cap of brown hair, stripped the jacket off her lanky frame, and tossed it at the handiest chair. She stepped onto the platform and sat on the side of the

lake-sized bed. If she'd believed she could escape into sleep, she'd have stretched out, but there was too much in her head, in her belly, for rest. So she simply sat, veteran cop, Homicide lieutenant who'd walked through blood and death more times than she could count, and mourned a little. Roarke found her there.

He could gauge her state of mind by the slump of her shoulders, by the way she sat, staring out the window. He walked to her, sat beside her, took her hand.

"I should've gone with you."

She shook her head but leaned against him. "No place for civilians in Interview, and nothing you could've done anyway if I'd stretched it and brought you in as expert consultant. I had him cold and cut through his battalion of expensive lawyers like a fucking machete. I thought the PA was going to kiss me on the mouth."

He brought the hand he held to his lips. "And still you're sad."

She closed her eyes, comforted a little by the solidity of him beside her, by that whisper of Ireland in his voice, even by the scent so uniquely him. "Not sad, or... I don't know what the hell I am. I should be buzzed. I did the job; I slammed it shut—and I got to look them both in the face and let them know it."

She shoved up, paced to the window, away again, and realized it wasn't peace and comfort she wanted after all. Not quite yet. It was a place to let it go, let it out, spew the rage.

"He was pissed. Moriarity. Lying there with that hole in his chest his pal put into him with his freaking antique Italian foil."

"The one meant for you," Roarke reminded her.

"Yeah. And he's pissed, seriously pissed, Dudley missed and it wasn't me on a slab at the morgue."

"I expect he was," Roarke said coolly. "But that's not what's got you going."

She paused a minute, just looked at him. Stunning blue eyes in a stunning face, the mane of thick black hair, that poet's mouth set firm now because she'd made him think of her on that slab at the morgue.

"You know they never had a chance to take me. You were there."

"And still he drew blood, didn't he?" Roarke nodded at the healing wound on her arm.

She tapped it. “And this helped sew them up. Attempted murder of a police officer just trowels on the icing. They didn’t make their next score. Now they have to end their competition with a tie, which oddly enough is what I think they always wanted. They just planned for the contest to go on a lot longer. And you know what the prize was at the end? Do you know what the purse for this goddamn tournament was?”

“I don’t, no, but I see you got it out of Moriarity today.”

“Yeah, I wound him up so tight he had to let it spring out. A dollar. A fucking dollar, Roarke—just one big joke between them. And it makes me sick.”

It shocked, even appalled her a little, that her eyes stung, that she felt tears pressing hard. “It makes me sick,” she repeated. “All those people dead, all those lives broken and shattered, and *this* makes me sick? I don’t know why, I just don’t know why it churns my stomach. I’ve seen worse. God, we’ve both seen worse.”

“But rarely more futile.” He stood, took her arms, gently rubbing. “No reason, no mad vendetta or fevered dream, no vengeance or greed or fury. Just a cruel game. Why shouldn’t it make you sick? It does me as well.”

“I contacted the next of kin,” she began. “Even the ones we found from before they started this matchup in New York. That’s why I’m late getting back. I thought I needed to, and thought if I closed it all the way, I’d feel better. I got gratitude. I got anger and tears, everything you expect. And every one of them asked me why. Why had these men killed their daughter, their husband, their mother?”

“And what did you tell them?”

“Sometimes there’s no why, or not one we can understand.” She squeezed her eyes tight. “I want to be pissed.”

“You are, under it. And under that, you know you did good work. And you’re alive, darling Eve.” He drew her in to kiss her brow. “Which, to take this to their level, makes them losers.”

“I guess it does. I guess that’s going to have to be enough.”

She took his face in her hands, smiled a little. “And there’s the added bonus that they hate us both. Really hate us. That adds a boost.”

“I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be hated by, or anyone I’d rather be hated with.”

Now the smile moved into her eyes. “Me either. If I keep that front and center, I could be in the mood to party. I guess we should go down and do

whatever we're supposed to do before everybody gets here."

"Change first. You'll feel more in the party mode without your boots and weapon."

By the time she'd changed trousers for cotton pants, boots for skids, and made it downstairs, she heard voices in the foyer. She spotted her partner, Peabody, her short, dark ponytail bouncing, summery dress swirling.

Peabody's cohab, e-detective and premier geek McNab, stood beside her in a skin tank crisscrossed with more colors than an atomic rainbow paired with baggy, hot pink knee shorts and gel flips.

He turned, the forest of silver rings on his left earlobe shimmering, and shot Eve a wide grin. "Hey, Dallas. We brought you something."

"My granny's homemade wine." Peabody held up the bottle. "I know you've got a wine cellar the size of California, but we thought you'd get a charge. It's good stuff."

"Let's go out and open it up. I'm ready for some good stuff."

Peabody kept eye contact, quirked her brows. "All okay?"

"The PA's probably still doing his happy dance. Case closed," she said, and left out the rest. No point in adding the details now that would leave her partner as troubled as she'd been.

"We'll have the first drink with a toast to the NYPSD's Homicide—and Electronic Detectives divisions," Roarke said with a wink for McNab.

The wide stone terrace held tables already loaded with food and shaded by umbrellas, and the gardens exploded with color and scent. The monster grill Roarke had conquered—mostly—looked formidable, and the wine was indeed good stuff.

Within thirty minutes, the scent of grilling meat mixed with the perfume of summer flowers. The terrace, the chairs around the tables, the gardens filled with people. It still amazed her she'd somehow collected so many.

Her cops—everyone who'd worked the Dudley-Moriarity case—along with Cher Reo, the ADA, newlyweds Dr. Louise DiMatto and retired licensed companion Charles Monroe stood, sat, lounged, or stuffed their faces.

Morris, the ME who'd inspired the impulse for her to arrange this shindig to help with his lingering grief over his murdered love, shared a brew with Father Lopez, who'd become his friend and counselor.

Sort of weird having a priest at a party—even one she liked and respected—but at least he wasn't wearing the getup.

Nadine Furst, bestselling author and ace reporter, chatted happily with Dr. Mira, department shrink, and Mira's adorable husband, Dennis.

It was good, she decided, to blow off steam this way, to gather together to do it, even if gathering together wasn't as natural for her as for some. It was good to watch Feeney kibitz Roarke's grill technique, and watch Trueheart show off his pretty, shy-eyed girlfriend.

Hell, she might just have another glass of Granny Peabody's wine and—
The thought winged away when she heard the bright laugh.

Mavis Freestone rushed out on silver sandals that laced past the hem of her flippy, thigh-baring lavender skirt. Her hair, perched in a crowning tail, matched the skirt. In her arms she carried baby Bella. Leonardo, beaming at his girls, followed.

"Dallas!"

"I thought you were in London," Eve said when she was enveloped in color and scent and joy.

"We couldn't miss a party! We'll go back tomorrow. Trina stopped off to talk to Summerset.

Eve felt her skin chill. "Trina..."

"Don't worry, she's here to party, not to give you a treatment. She did Bella's hair—isn't it mag?"

A half a zillion sunny curls surrounded the baby's happy face. Every single one bounced with tiny pink bows.

"Yeah, it's—"

"Oh, everybody who counts is here! I've got to give out squeezes. Here, hold Bellamisa a minute."

"I'll get us a drink." Leonardo patted Eve's head with his huge hand, then glided away in his calf-baring red crops.

"I—" As Eve's arms were immediately loaded with bouncing, gooing baby, the protest ended on a strangled gulp.

"Got some weight to you these days," Eve managed, then scanned the crowd for a sucker to pass the load to. Bella squealed, sending Eve's heart rate soaring, then grabbed a fistful of Eve's hair, tugged with surprising force.

And planted a wet, openmouthed kiss on Eve's cheek. "Slooch!" said Bella. "What does that mean? Oh God."

"Smooch," Mavis called out, gesturing with a frothy pink drink. "She wants you to kiss her back."

“Man. Okay, fine.” Gingerly, Eve pecked her lips at Bella’s cheek. Obviously pleased, Bella let out a laugh so like Mavis’s, Eve grinned. “Okay, kid, let’s go find someone else for you to slooch.”

Two

Nobody ate like cops. Priests didn't do half bad, Eve observed, and doctors held their own, she decided as Louise, Morris, and Mira chowed down on burgers. But against a horde of cops, a ravaging pack of hyenas would fall short.

Maybe it was all the missed meals, the clichéd donut grabbed on the fly. But when cops sat down to free food, they did so with single-minded focus.

"This is nice." Nadine stepped over, tapped her wineglass to Eve's beer bottle. "A nice day, a nice group, a nice chance to just relax and hang. Which is why I'm waiting until Monday to nag you into coming on *Now* to discuss the Dudley-Moriarity murders."

"It's wrapped."

"I know it's wrapped—I have my sources. If I hadn't been out of town doing publicity for the book, I'd have been in your face before this."

Nadine smiled. She wore her sun-streaked hair longer and looser and had chosen a sleeveless, floating tank over pants cropped short to show off an ankle chain—but the camera-ready reporter was still in there.

"But I'll stay out of it today," Nadine added, and took another sip of wine.

"You know what I like when you have one of these gatherings, Dallas?"

"The food and alcohol?"

"It's always first-rate, but beyond that. It's always such an interesting mix of people. I know I can sit down next to anyone here and not be bored. You've got a talent for collecting the diverse and the interesting. I was just talking with Crack," she added, referring to the six and a half foot, tattooed sex club owner. "Now I think I'm going to sit down next to the shy and strapping Officer Trueheart and the pretty young thing he's with."

"Cassie from Records."

"Cassie from Records," Nadine repeated. "I think I'd like to find out just what's going on between those two."

Eve wandered toward the grill, where Roarke had passed the torch to Feeney, under the supervision of Dennis Mira. They were sort of an odd pair—diverse, as Nadine had said—the lanky, dreamy-eyed professor and the rumpled cop with his explosion of ginger hair.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Got another couple orders for cow burgers, and these kabob deals." Feeney flipped a patty.

“I don’t know where they put it.” Dennis shook his head.

“Cop stomachs.” Feeney winked at Eve. “We eat what’s in front of us, and plenty of it when we get the chance.”

“Somebody ought to save room for lemon meringue pie and strawberry shortcake.”

Feeney stopped with a burger on his flipper. “We got lemon meringue pie and strawberry shortcake?”

“That’s the word on the street.”

“Where’s it at?”

“I don’t know. Ask Summerset.”

“Don’t think I won’t.” He flipped the burger then shoved the spatula at Dennis. “Take over. I’m getting my share before these vultures get wind.” As Feeney rushed off, Dennis’s eyes went even softer. “Is there whipped cream?”

“Probably.”

“Ah.” He handed her the spatula. “Would you mind?” he asked, adding a fatherly pat on the head. “I have a weakness for shortcake and whipped cream.”

“Um—” But he was already strolling off.

Eve looked down at the sizzling patties, the skewered vegetables. It wasn’t quite as terrifying as having a drooling baby dumped in her arms, but...

How the hell did you know when they were done? Did something signal?

Should she poke at them or leave them alone?

Everything sizzled and smoked, and there were countless dials and gauges. When she cautiously lifted another shiny lid, she found fat dogs—probably actual pig meat—cooking away like hot, engorged penises.

She closed the lid again, then let out a huff of relief when Roarke joined her.

“They deserted the field, seduced by rumors of cake and pie. You handle this.” She surrendered the spatula. “I might do something that puts Louise and her doctor’s bag to work.”

He looked at the sizzle and smoke as she’d often seen him look at some thorny computer code. With the light of challenge in his eyes.

“It’s actually satisfying, the grilling business.” He offered the spatula. “I could teach you.”

“No thanks. Eating it’s satisfying, and I’ve already done that.”

He slid the burgers from grill to platter, then used some sort of tongs to transfer the kabobs.

“If I’d known they were done, I could’ve done that.”

“You have other talents.” He leaned down, the platter of food between them, and kissed her.

A good moment, she thought—the scents, the voices, the hot summer sun. Eve started to smile, then saw Lopez crossing in their direction. He walked like the boxer he’d been, she thought, the compact body light on the feet.

“Ready for another round, Chale?” Roarke asked him.

“The first was more than enough. I want to thank you both for having me. You have a beautiful home, beautiful friends.”

“You’re not leaving already?”

“I’m afraid I have to. I have the evening Mass, with a baptism. The family requested me, so I have to get back to St. Cristóbal’s and prepare. But I can’t think of a nicer way to have spent the afternoon.”

“I’ll drive you,” Eve said.

“That’s kind of you.” He looked at her—warm brown eyes that to her mind always held a lingering hint of sadness. “But I couldn’t take you away from your guests.”

“No problem. They’re focused on food, and dessert’s coming up.”

He continued to look at her, to search, and she knew he saw something as he nodded. “I’d appreciate it.”

“Why don’t you take this?” Roarke handed Eve the platter. “Set it out, and I’ll have Summerset box up some of the desserts for Chale.”

“You’d make me a hero in the rectory tonight. I’ll just say my good-byes then.”

“Thanks,” Eve said when Lopez moved back to the party. “There’s just a couple of things I wanted his take on. It won’t take long.”

“Go ahead then. I’ll have your vehicle brought around.”

She wasn’t sure how to approach it, or even why she felt the need to. But he made it easy for her—maybe that’s what men like Lopez did.

“You want to ask me about Li,” he began as she passed through the gates.

“Yeah, for one thing. I see Morris mostly over dead bodies, but I can get a sense of where he is. Just by wardrobe for a start. I know he’s coming through it, but...”

“It’s hard to watch a friend grieve. I can’t tell you specifics, as some of what we’ve talked about was in confidence. He’s a strong and spiritual man,

one who—like you—lives with death.”

“It helps—the work. I can see it,” Eve said, “and he’s said it does.”

“Yes, tending to those whose lives have been taken, like his Amaryllis. It centers him. He misses her, misses the potential of what they might have made together. I can tell you most of his anger has passed. It’s a start.”

“I don’t know how people get rid of the anger. I don’t know if I’d want to in his place.”

“You gave him justice—earthly justice. From there he needed to find acceptance, and then the faith that Amaryllis is in the hands of God. Or, if not God, the belief that she, too, has moved on to the next phase.”

“If the next phase is so great, why do we work so hard to stay in this one? Why does death seem so *useless* and hurt so damn much? All those people, just going along, living their lives, until somebody decides to end it for them. We should be pissed off. The dead should be pissed off. Maybe they are, because sometimes they just won’t let go.”

“Murder breaks both God’s law and man’s, and it requires—demands—punishment.”

“So I put them in a cage and the next stop is a fiery hell? Maybe. I don’t know. But what about the murdered? Some of them are innocent, just living their lives. But others? Others are as bad, or nearly, as the one who ended them. In this phase, I have to treat them all the same, do the job, close the case. I can do that. I have to do that. But maybe I wonder, sometimes, if it’s enough for the innocent, and for the ones—like Morris—who get left behind.”

“You’ve had a difficult week,” he murmured.

“And then some.”

“If closing cases was all that mattered to you, if it began and ended there, you would never have suggested your friend meet with me. You and I wouldn’t be having this conversation. And you wouldn’t, couldn’t, maintain your passion for the work I believe you were born to do.”

“Sometimes I wish I could see, or feel... No, I wish I could know, even once, that it’s enough.”

He reached out, touched her hand briefly. “Our work isn’t the same, but some of the questions we ask ourselves are.”

She glanced at him. Out of the side window she caught the movement. For a moment it seemed the streets, the sidewalks, were empty. Except for the old

woman who staggered, who lifted an already bloodied hand to her chest an instant before she tumbled off the curb and into the street.

Eve slammed the brakes, flicked on her flashers. Even as she leaped out of the car, she yanked her 'link from her pocket. "Emergency sequence, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. I need MTs, I need a bus, six hundred block of 120 Street. First aid kit in the trunk," she shouted at Lopez. "Code's two-five-six-zero-Baker-Zulu. Female victim," she continued, dropping down beside the woman. "Multiple stab wounds. Hold on," she muttered. "Hold on." And dropping the 'link, she pressed her hands to the chest wound. "Help's coming."

"Beata." The woman's eyelids flickered, opened to reveal eyes so dark Eve could barely gauge the pupils. "Trapped. The red door. Help her."

"Help's coming. Give me your name," Eve said as Lopez pulled padding from the first aid kit. "What's your name?"

"She is Beata. My beauty. She can't get out."

"Who did this to you?"

"He is the devil." Those black eyes bore into Eve's. The words she pushed out held an accent thick as the heat.

Eastern European, Eve thought, filing it in her mind.

"You... you are the warrior. Find Beata. Save Beata."

"Okay. Don't worry." Eve glanced at Lopez, who shook his head. He began to murmur in Latin as he crossed himself and made the sign on the woman's forehead.

"The devil killed my body. I cannot fight, I cannot find. I cannot free her. You must. You are the one. We speak to the dead."

Eve heard the sirens, knew they would be too late. The pads, her own hands, the street was soaked with blood. "Okay. Don't worry about her. I'll find her. Tell me your name."

"I am Gizi. I am the promise. You must let me in and keep your promise."

"Okay, okay. Don't worry. I'll take care of it." Hurry, her mind shouted at the sirens. For God's sake, hurry.

"My blood, your blood." The woman gripped the hand Eve pressed to her chest wound with surprising strength, scoring the flesh with her fingernails.

"My heart, your heart. My soul, your soul. Take me in."

Eve ignored the quick pain from the little cuts in her palm. "Sure. All right. Here they come." She looked up as the ambulance screamed around the corner, then back into those fierce, depthless black eyes.

Something burned in her hand, up her arm, until the shocking blow to her chest stole her breath. The light flashed, blinding her, then went to utter dark.

In the dark were voices and deeper shadows and the bright form of a young woman—slim in build, a waterfall of black hair and eyes of deep, velvet brown.

She is Beata. I am the promise, and the promise is in you. You are the warrior, and the warrior holds me. We are together until the promise is kept and the fight is done.

* * *

“Eve. Eve. Lieutenant Dallas!”

She jerked, sucked in air like a diver surfacing, and found herself staring at Lopez’s face. “What?”

“Thank God. You’re all right?”

“Yeah.” She raked a bloodied hand through her hair. “What the hell happened?”

“I honestly don’t know.” He glanced over to where, a foot away, two MTs worked on the woman. “She’s gone. There was a light—such a light. I’ve never seen... Then she was gone, and you were...” He struggled for words.

“Not unconscious, but blank. Just not there for a moment. I had to pull you away so they could get to her. You saw the light?”

“I saw something.” Felt something, she thought. Heard something.

Now she saw only an old woman whose blood stained the street. “I have to call this in. I think you’re going to be late for Mass. I need you to give a statement.”

She pushed to her feet as one of the MTs stepped over.

“Nothing we can do for her,” he said. “She’s cold. Must’ve been lying there for a couple hours before you found her. Fucking New York. People had to walk right by her.”

“No.” There were people now, crowding the sidewalk, ranged like a chorus for the dead. But there hadn’t been... “No,” Eve repeated. “We saw her fall.”

“Body’s cold,” he repeated. “She’s ninety if she’s a day, and probably more than that. I don’t see how she could’ve walked two feet with all those slices in her.”

“I guess we’d better find out.” She picked up her ’link, called it in.

Three

After cleaning the blood from her hands, she secured the scene, retrieved her field kit from the trunk. She was running the victim's prints when the first black and white rolled up.

"She's not in the database." Frustrated, Eve pushed to her feet, turned to the uniforms. "Keep these people back. Talk to them. Find out if anybody knew her, if anybody saw anything. There's a blood trail, and I don't want these people trampling all over it."

And where the hell were they, she wondered, when the woman was staggering down the street, bleeding to death? The street had been empty as the desert.

"What can I do?" Lopez asked her.

"Peabody's on her way—small slice of luck having a bunch of murder cops a few minutes away. I want you to give her a statement. Tell her everything you saw, everything you heard."

"She had an accent. Thick. Polish or Hungarian, maybe Romanian."

"Yeah, tell Peabody. Once you've done that, I can have one of the cops drive you where you need to go."

"If you need me to stay—"

"There's nothing more you can do here. I'll be in touch."

"I'd like to finish giving her Last Rites. I started, but... She's wearing a crucifix around her neck."

She debated. He'd already had his hands all over the body, and his clothes were stained, as hers were, with the old woman's blood. "Okay. You can do that while I start on her. Try to keep contact to a minimum."

"Your hand's bleeding a little."

"She dug in pretty hard with her nails. It's just a couple scratches."

Lopez knelt at the woman's head while Eve got gauges and tools out of her kit.

"Victim is Caucasian or possibly mixed race female of undetermined origin, age approximately ninety. Before expiring, she gave her name as Gizi. Multiple stab wounds," Eve continued, "chest, torso, arms. Looks like defensive wounds on the arms, the hands. She didn't just stand there and take it."

"She should have died at home, in her bed, surrounded by her children, grandchildren. I'm sorry," Lopez said when Eve glanced up. "I interrupted

your record.”

“Doesn’t matter. And you’re right.”

“That’s the difference between death and murder.”

“It’s the big one. Do her clothes look homemade to you?” As she asked, Eve turned up the hem on the long skirt with its wide stripes of color. “This looks handmade to me, and carefully done. She’s wearing sandals—sturdy ones with some miles on them. Got a tattoo, inside left ankle. Peacock feathers? I think they’re peacock feathers.”

“She’s wearing a wedding ring. Sorry,” Lopez said again.

“Yeah, wedding ring, or in any case a plain gold band, the cross pendant along with a second pendant, starburst pattern with a pale blue center stone, gold earrings. No bag, no purse, but if it were a violent mugging, why not take the jewelry?”

She slid her sealed hand into the pocket on the side of the skirt, closed her fingers over a little bag. It was snowy white, felt like silk, and tied precisely with silver cord in three knots.

She knew what it was even before she untied it and examined the contents. She’d seen this sort of thing before. “Woo-woo,” she said to Lopez.

“What?”

“Magic stuff. Witchcraft or whatever. We got herbs, little crystals. I’d say she hedged her bets. Amulet and crucifix—and a spell deal in her pocket. Didn’t help her.”

Though she’d already noted time of death, she used her gauge to confirm.

“Damn it, this thing must be broken. It’s given me TOD at just past thirteen hundred. She died right here in front of us at sixteen-forty-two.”

“Her skin’s cold,” Lopez murmured.

“We watched her die.” Eve pushed to her feet, turning as Peabody jogged up, Morris in her wake.

“This wasn’t on the party schedule,” Peabody said as she looked at the body.

“I bet it wasn’t on hers either.” Eve took the weapon and harness she’d asked Peabody to bring, and after strapping it on covered it with the jacket her partner held out.

She sat on the curb, changed her skids for her boots.

“You need to get a statement from Father Lopez so we can spring him. Have one of the uniforms drive him back when you’re done. You didn’t have to come,” she said to Morris. “I notified your people.”

“I called them off. I’m right here, after all.”

“Actually, I can use the head guy. My gauge is wonky. I recorded TOD as the damn TOD, since she died in front of me. But my gauge is putting it almost four hours earlier. Cause is pretty clear, but you might find something else. If you can take over on the body, I want to get on this blood trail, find the kill spot.”

“Go ahead.”

She followed the blood west.

The neighborhood was quiet. Maybe the heat kept people inside, she thought, or maybe most of them were at the sale at the Sky Mall or at the beach. But there was some pedestrian and street traffic.

Had no one seen a staggering, bleeding old woman and tried to help? Even for New York, that was too cold to believe. But the trail continued west for two blocks, right over crosswalks—as if the dying had felt obliged not to jaywalk. Then it headed north.

Buildings older here, she noted, squat towers of apartments and day flops, tiny markets and delis, the 24/7s, coffee shops, bakeries, and bodegas—and more people out and about on their Saturday business.

She continued another three blocks, then jogged north where the trail led into the mouth of a narrow alley between buildings.

And there, without question, was the kill spot.

Deep in the narrow trench, shadowed by overhangs, stinking of garbage from an overfilled recycler, blood splattered the pocked concrete walls, drenched the filthy ground.

She hitched open her field kit for a flashlight and played it over the walls, the ground, the neatly tied bag of trash beside the recycler.

“Did you tie that, Gizi? Bringing out the trash? Do you work here, live here? What were you doing in the alley otherwise? And how the hell did you walk better than six blocks after he sliced you to pieces? And why? Help would have been right around the corner.”

Crouching, she unknotted the trash bag. Fruit and vegetable peelings, she noted, packaging from a small loaf of bread, an empty box of powdered milk, a long, slim bottle that had held some sort of wine...

She retied the bag, tagged it for evidence, and shifting it, found the key. Old, heavy, she noted as she studied it. But then there were old buildings here that might still run to straight lock and key. She turned to the alley door and its keypad. Entrance digitally secured, but inside?

She'd have to see.

She bagged the key, labeled it, then walked back to the alley door and tried to see it.

Wants to take her trash out, comes out with her little bag, walked to the recycler.

Was he waiting for her? Why? Did she walk into an illegals deal?

Puts her bag down, turns—spatter says she'd turned, about three-quarters away from the wall when she was attacked. So he came from behind her, most likely. From the mouth of the alley or through the door behind her. Eve positioned herself, started the turn from the wall. The first slice ripped the back of her right shoulder with a shock of pain that knocked her against the recycler. She grabbed for her weapon, swung to defend, but somehow the knife plunged into her back, once, twice. Dimly she heard something clink onto the ground, and thought: My key.

Then she was sliding down toward that filthy ground. But hands grabbed her, wrenched her around, shoved her hard against the wall. Through eyes glazed with shock and pain she saw the face of a demon—curling horns piercing the forehead, skin red as hellfire slashed with black and dirty gold. It bared its fierce teeth as the knife tore through her chest.

She put up her hands to fight, and the blade sliced them. She opened her mouth to scream, to curse, but had no voice.

As she fell, the only thought in her mind was Beata.

She came to coated with sweat. The hand holding her weapon shook as she slapped the other over her body looking for blood.

But she stood, unharmed, just as she'd been before she'd felt the first blow. "What the hell was that?" Dizzy, she bent over, head between her knees until she got her breath back.

"Dallas? Hey!" Peabody rushed forward. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

"Jeez, you're white as a ghost."

"I'm fine," she insisted. "It's the heat." To prove it, maybe to assure herself of it, she swiped the back of her hand over her sweaty brow. "Who's on scene?"

"Five uniforms, Morris. Crime scene got there before I left to follow you in." Peabody scanned the alley floor, the walls, the stinking recycler.

"That's a hell of a lot of blood. How'd she manage to walk all that way after this?"

“Good question. It looks like she came down to take out her trash. The contents of the bag I tagged look like basic garbage from a single. And there was a key between it and the recycler. Could be hers, as it’s about the only clean thing in here. Contact crime scene. We need them down here. Stick with the bag until they get here. I’m going to check the buildings. If that’s her trash, she had to come from one of these two buildings.”

She didn’t draw a clean breath until she’d stepped out of the alley—and the instant she did, the shakes and dizziness vanished as if they’d never been. She tried the ground-floor market first, moving past the displays of summer fruit and sleeves of flowers into the relative cool of the shop.

She walked to the counter where the woman sitting on a stool behind it greeted her with a wide smile. “Good afternoon. Can I help you find something?”

“NYPD.” Eve badged her. “Do you know a woman, in her nineties, gray hair—long, probably worn in a bun, dark eyes, olive complexion, five feet four, about a hundred and twenty pounds? Weathered face. Shows its miles. Heavy East European accent. Might wear a cross and an amulet with a blue stone.”

“That sure sounds like Madam Szabo.” The woman’s smile faded. “Is she okay? She was just in this morning.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“In one of the weekly units above. On three, I think.”

“Do you know her full name?”

“Ah, it’s Gizi, Gizi Szabo. She’s from Hungary. Is she in trouble?”

“She was attacked and killed this afternoon.”

“Oh my God. Oh no. Wait.” She pushed up, opened a door to what looked to be a tiny office/storeroom. “Zach. Zach, come out here. Somebody killed Madam Szabo.”

“What are you talking about?” The man who stepped out wore an expression of annoyance along with a short-sleeved, collared shirt and knee shorts. “She’s fine. We just saw her this morning.”

“This is the police.”

“Lieutenant Dallas, Homicide.”

Annoyance dropped away into quick concern. “What the hell happened? Did somebody break into her place?”

“I’d like to check her unit, if you know the number. And I’ll need your names.”

“Karrie and Zach Morgenstern,” the woman told her. “This is our place. Oh, Zach.” Karrie curled a hand around his arm. “She stopped in here almost every day since she came.”

“How long is that?”

“About a month maybe. She came to find her great-granddaughter. This is terrible; I can hardly take it in. I really liked her. She had such interesting stories—and she told my fortune once. She’s—what is it, Zach?”

“Romany. A Gypsy. The real deal, too. She’s in four D, Lieutenant. I carried some stuff up for her a couple times. Man, this is crap, you know that? Just crap. She was a sweetheart. Do you want me to take you up?”

“No, I’ll find it. The alley between the buildings. This building uses that recycler?”

“Yeah. Damn thing’s been broken for nearly a week, and we can’t get them to come and...” Zach trailed off. “Is that where she was killed? In the alley? You mean we were right in here when...”

“Nothing you could’ve done. Is there anyone you know who gave her any trouble? Anyone who’d want to cause her harm?”

“I really don’t.” Zach looked at Karrie, got a shake of the head. “She was nice. Colorful. Did some fortune-telling out of her place.”

“You said she was here to look for her great-granddaughter.”

“Yes.” Karrie sniffled, blinked at tears. “God, it’s really hitting me. She came over—the granddaughter—about a year ago. She didn’t live far from here, and she came in a couple times. That’s why Madam rented the place upstairs. Anyway, the granddaughter came to work, wanted to dance—on Broadway, like they all do, you know? Then about three months ago her family stopped hearing from her, couldn’t reach her. And the place she worked waitressing said how she just stopped showing up. They contacted the police, but the cops didn’t do much, I guess... Sorry.”

“No need. Do you know the granddaughter’s name?”

“Sure. Madam Szabo talked to everybody about her, put out flyers.” Karrie continued as she reached under the counter, “She worked at Goulash—Hungarian restaurant a block west. We hand out flyers for her. You can have this. She’s beautiful, isn’t she? I think that’s what her name means.”

“Beata,” Eve murmured, and felt as if her heart cracked in her chest. Such grief, such sorrow it almost took her to her knees as she studied the photo on the flyer.

The face that had been the light in the black.

“Ma’am? Um, Lieutenant? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks for your help. I may need to speak to you again.”

“If we’re not here, we live up on six. Six A, front of the building,” Karrie told her. “Anything we can do.”

“If you think of anything, you can contact me at Cop Central.” Eve dug into her field kit for a card. “Anything strikes you.”

Eve walked out just as Peabody approached. “Sweepers have the alley,” she said.

“Vic was Gizi Szabo, and had a weekly unit on four. Claimed to be a Gypsy from Hungary.”

“Wow. A real one?”

“Nobody claims to be a fake one,” Eve returned, and felt herself steady a little. “Been here about three months, looking for a great-granddaughter who went missing.” Eve used her master to access the apartment building’s entrance. “Did some fortune-telling out of her place.”

One glance at the ancient elevator had Eve choosing the stairs. She handed Peabody the flyer. “Run them both,” she said. “Had Morris confirmed TOD before you left?”

“His TOD jibed with your gauge. Around one this afternoon.”

“That’s just bogus.” And it infuriated her more than it should have. “I know when somebody dies when I’ve got my hands on their fricking heart, and I’m *talking* to them.”

“Hungarian Gypsy fortune-teller. Maybe it’s some sort of—”

“Don’t even start with that voodoo, woo-woo, Free-Ager shit. She was alive, bleeding, and talking until about an hour ago.”

At the door of 4 D, Eve took the key she’d found out of the evidence bag, slid it into the lock. And turned the knob.

Four

It reminded her of her first apartment—the size, the age. That’s what she told herself when struck, just for an instant, with a sharp sense of recognition.

The single room had no doubt been rented furnished, with a couple of cheap chairs and a daybed with a cracker-thin mattress, a chest—newly and brightly painted—that served as dresser and table.

Boldly patterned material had been fashioned into curtains for the single window, and with these and scarves and shawls draped over the faded chairs, spread over the narrow bed, the room took on a hopeful cheer.

One corner held a sink, AutoChef, friggie, all small-scale, along with a single cupboard. Another table stood there, painted a deep, glossy red under its fringed scarf. For seating, there were two backless stools.

Eve saw the old woman there, telling fortunes to those who sought to know their future.

“She made it nice,” Peabody commented. “She didn’t have a lot to work with, but she made it nice.”

Eve opened the single, skinny closet, studied Szabo’s neatly hung clothing, a single pair of sturdy walking shoes. Kneeling, she pulled two storage boxes out of the closet.

“Beata’s things. Clothes, shoes, ballet gear, I’d say. A few pieces of jewelry, face and hair stuff. The landlord must have boxed it up when she didn’t come back, didn’t pay the rent.”

It hurt, hurt to look through, to touch, to *feel* Beata as she dug through pretty blouses, skimmed over worn slippers.

She knew better, she reminded herself, knew better than to become personally involved. Beata Varga wasn’t her victim, not directly.

The promise is in you.

The voice spoke insistently inside her head, inside her heart.

“Tag these,” Eve ordered, shoving to her feet. She crossed over to the chest, studied the photo of Beata propped there and fronted by three scribed candles. Beside the photo a handful of colored crystals glittered in a small dish along with an ornate silver bell and a silver-backed hand mirror.

“What do we have on the granddaughter?” Eve asked.

“Beata Varga, age twenty-two. She’s here on a work visa, and employed—until she went missing three months ago—at Goulash. No criminal. The

family filed a report. A Detective Lloyd is listed as investigating officer. Missing Persons Division out of the One-three-six.”

“Reach out there,” Eve told her. “Have him meet us at the restaurant. Thirty minutes.”

She opened the first drawer of the chest, found neatly folded underwear and nightclothes, and a box of carved wood. She lifted the lid, studied the pack of tarot cards, the peacock feather, the small crystal ball and stand.

Tools of her trade, Eve thought, started to set the box aside. Then, following impulse, pressed her thumbs over the carved flowers on the sides. Left, left, right. And a narrow drawer slid out of the base.

“Wow.” Peabody leaned over her shoulder. “A secret drawer. Frosty. How did you open it?”

“Just... luck,” Eve said, even as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Inside lay a lock of dark hair tied with gold cord, a wand-shaped crystal on a chain, and a heart of white stone.

“They’re hers.” Eve’s throat went dry and achy. “Beata’s. Her hair, something she wore, something she touched.”

“You’re probably right. Szabo probably used them, along with the cards and crystals, maybe the bell and the mirror in locator spells. I’m not saying you can find people with spells,” Peabody added when Eve just stared at her.

“But that she thought she could. Anyway, Detective Lloyd’s going to meet us.”

“Then let’s see what else we can find here first.”

The old woman lived simply, neatly, and cautiously. In the cloth bag in the bottom of the chest Eve found a small amount of cash, another bag of crystals and herbs, a map of the city, and a subway card, along with ID and passport and a number of the flyers with Beata’s image and information. But taped under the friggie they found an envelope of cash with a peacock feather fixed diagonally across the seal.

“That’s about ten thousand,” Peabody estimated. “She didn’t have to read palms to pay the rent.”

“It’s what she did. What kept her centered. Bag it, and let’s seal this place up. We should get to the restaurant.”

“She made it nice,” Peabody repeated with another glance around. “I guess that’s what travelers do. Make a home wherever they land, then pack it up and make the next one.”

Beata hadn't packed it up, Eve thought, and wherever she was, it wasn't home.

Goulash did a bustling business on Saturday evening. Spices perfumed air that rang with voices and the clatter of silverware, the clink of glasses. The waitstaff wore red sashes at the waist of black uniforms while moving briskly from kitchen to table.

A rosy-cheeked woman of about forty offered Eve a welcoming smile.

"Welcome to Goulash. Do you have a reservation?"

Eve palmed her badge. "We're not here for dinner."

"Beata! You've found her."

"No."

"Oh." The smile faded away. "I thought... I'm sorry, what can I do for you?"

"We're meeting Detective Lloyd on a police matter. We'll need somewhere to talk. And I'll need to speak with you and your staff."

"Of course." She looked around. "We're not going to have a table free for at least a half hour, but you can use the kitchen."

"That's fine. Your name?"

"Mirium Frido. This is my place, my husband's and mine. He's the chef. Is this about Beata? Beata Varga?"

"Indirectly."

"Give me one minute to put someone else on the door." Mirium hurried over to one of the waitresses. The girl glanced at Eve and Peabody, nodded. Mirium signaled Eve forward, then led them through the dining room, past the bar, and through one of a pair of swinging doors into the chaos of the kitchen.

"Dinner rush. I'll set you up over here—our chef's table. Jan invites customers back sometimes—gives them a treat. I told Vee to send Detective Lloyd back when he gets here. He's been in several times about Beata, so everyone knows him. Can you tell me anything about her? Do you have more information?"

"I'll know more when I speak with the detective. She worked for you."

"Yes. A beautiful girl and a good worker. She was a pleasure." Mirium reached back to a shelf, picked up three setups, and arranged them on the table. "I know they think she just took off—Gypsy feet—but it doesn't make sense. She made amazing tips—the looks, the voice, the personality.

And... well, she just wouldn't be that rude and careless, wouldn't have left without telling us. Or her family."

"Boyfriend?"

"No. Nothing serious and no one specific. She dated—she's young and gorgeous. But she was serious about her dancing. Went to auditions, took classes every day. She had an understudy spot in a small musical review. And she'd just landed a part in the chorus on a new musical spot off-Broadway. There wasn't enough time for a serious boyfriend. I'm sorry, please sit. How about some food?"

"We're good, thanks. You have flyers at the reservation station, I noticed."

"Yes. Her grandmother—well, great-grandmother—is here from Hungary. She had them made up and takes them around the city. She comes by here every day. Detective—"

"Lieutenant," Eve said automatically.

"Lieutenant, Beata worked here nearly a year. You get to know people who work for you, and I promise you, she wouldn't worry her family this way. I'm so afraid something's happened to her. I know Madam Szabo's determined to find her, but with every day that passes... "

"I'm sorry to tell you Gizi Szabo was killed this afternoon."

"No." Instantly Mirium's eyes filled. "Oh, no. What happened?"

"We're going to find out."

"She told my fortune," Mirium murmured. "Said I would have a child, a son. Jan and I haven't... That was two months ago. I found out yesterday I'm pregnant. I told her just today."

"She was in today."

"Yes, about eleven, I guess." Shaking her head, Mirium swiped at a tear while the kitchen bustle raged on around them. "She was so happy for me. She said she'd felt his search, my son's. An old soul, she said, who'd turned the wheel again. She talked like that," Mirium murmured. "I don't really believe that sort of thing, but when she looks at you... She's—she was—Romany, and a speaker for the dead."

So am I, Eve thought with a quick chill. I speak for the dead. "What time did she leave?"

"She was only here a few minutes. She said she was going home. She said she felt closer to Beata, felt something coming. Or someone. I don't know, she was—I want to say optimistic. She was going to rest and then do a new spell because she was breaking through, well, the veil. She said Beata was

toward the setting sun, below the rays, um, locked beyond the red door. I have no idea what that meant,” Mirium added. “Or if it meant anything, but she was *fierce* about it. She swore Beata was alive, but trapped. By a devil. “I know how that sounds,” she continued. “But—” She glanced over.

“Here’s Detective Lloyd. Sorry I went on like that.”

“Don’t be,” Eve told her. “Every detail, every impression, is helpful.”

“I just can’t believe Madam’s gone. She was such a presence, even for the short time I knew her. Excuse me. I need to tell Jan. Hello, Detective Lloyd, have a seat.”

Lloyd was a square-faced, square-bodied man who transmitted *I’m a cop* from thirty paces. He gave Eve and Peabody a brisk nod, then sat at the little square table. Shook hands.

“It’s too bad about the old lady. She had some juice, had some spine. She should’ve stayed back home.”

She made home where she landed, Eve thought, remembering Peabody’s take. “Tell me about Beata Varga.”

He hitched up a hip, took a disc out of his pocket. “I went ahead and made a copy of the file for you.”

“Appreciate it.”

“She’s a looker. Smart, from what I get, savvy, but still green when it comes to city. Used to wandering with her family—tribe, you’d say. Came here wanting to be a Broadway star, and the family wasn’t happy about it.”

“Is that so?”

“Wanted her home. Wanted her to stay pure, you could say. Get hitched, have babies, keep the line going, that sort of thing. But, the old woman—Szabo—overruled them. She wanted the girl to take her shot, find her destiny, like that. The girl got a job here and a place a couple blocks away. Started taking classes—dance classes, acting classes, stuff like that, at West Side School for the Arts. Went to the cattle calls regular. No boyfriend—or not one in particular. Dated a few guys. I got the names and statements, the data in the file there.” He nodded toward the disc. “Nobody rang the bell.” He paused when Mirium came over with a tray holding three tall glasses. “I don’t mean to interrupt. Just something cold to drink while you talk. If you need me for anything, I’ll be out front.”

“They’re good people,” Lloyd commented when she left them. “Her, her husband. They come up clean. Ran the whole staff when I caught the case. Got some bumps here and there, but nobody popped.”

“What’s the time line?”

When he didn’t refer to his notes, Eve knew the case had him, and his teeth were still in it.

“Beata Varga went to her regular dance class, eight a.m. to ten. Hit a rehearsal for the show she just landed at Carmine Theater on Tenth at eleven. Reported here for work at one, all excited about the show. Worked a split shift, so she was off at three, hit her acting class from three thirty to five, back to work at five thirty, off at eleven. Walked down the block with a couple friends from work—names in the file—then split off to go home. That’s the last anyone can verify seeing her. Eleven ten, then poof.

“Apartment’s not big on security. No cams,” he added. “No log-in. The neighbors can’t say whether she came in that night, but nobody saw her. A bag and some of her clothes and personal items are gone, and there was no money in the place. According to statements, she pulled in hefty tips and was saving. It looks like she got itchy feet, tossed what she wanted in a bag, and took off.”

“That’s not what you think,” Eve said, watching his eyes.

“Nope. I think between here and home she ran into trouble. Somebody snatched her. I think she’s been dead since that night. You know as well as I do, Lieutenant, we don’t always find the bodies.”

No, Eve thought. “If she’s dead, then someone she knew killed her. Why else try to make it seem like she took off? Why pack clothes?”

“I lean that way, but I can’t find anything.” Frustration rippled around him.

“It could be whoever did her used her ID for her address, had her key—she carried all that in her purse. Tried to cover it up. I’m still working it, when I can, as an MP, but my sense is it’s more in your line.”

He glanced around as he sipped his drink. “The old woman didn’t buy it for cheap,” he said. “Claimed she talked to the dead, and if the girl was dead, she’d know. I don’t buy that for free, but... Now the old woman gets murdered? People get dead in the city,” he added as he set his glass down.

“But it’s got a smell to it. I’d appreciate you giving me what you’ve got on it. Something or somebody might cross somewhere.”

“You’ll get it,” Eve promised. Because something or somebody *would* cross.

Five

The ballet studio ranged over the fourth floor of an old building on the West Side. Under the glare of streetlights the pocked bricks were dull and grayed with time and pollution, but the glass in every window sparkled.

Out of Order signs hung on the chipped gray doors of both elevators.

Students, staff, and visitors had expressed their opinions on the situation with varying degrees of humor or annoyance by tagging the doors with obscenities, anatomically impossible suggestions, and illustrations on how to attempt the suggestions. All in a variety of languages.

“Guess they’ve been out of order for a while,” Peabody commented.

Eve just stared at one of the series of strange symbols and letters while her mind—something in there—translated it with a kind of dry humor.

“Fuck your mother,” she murmured, and Peabody blinked.

“What? Why?”

“Not *your* mother.”

“But you just said—”

Eve shook her head impatiently. “It’s Russian. A classic Russian insult.”

She reached out, ran a fingertip over the lettering on the door. “*Yob tvoiu mat.*”

Peabody studied the phrase Eve traced and thought it might as well be hieroglyphics. “How do you know that?”

“I must have seen it somewhere else.” But that didn’t explain how she knew—*knew*—the elevators had been down for weeks. Turning away, she started up the stairs.

Nor could she say why her heart began to beat faster as they climbed, passed the other studios and classrooms. Tap, jazz, children’s ballet sessions. Or why, as she approached the fourth floor, the music drifting out hit some chord inside her.

She followed the music, stepped into the doorway.

The woman was whiplash thin in her black leotard and gauzy skirt. Her hair, wildly red, slicked back from a face that struck Eve as thirty years older than her body. Her skin was white as the moon, her lips red as her hair.

She called out in French to a group of dancers at a long bar who responded by sliding their feet from one position to another—pointed toes, flat feet, lifted leg, bended knees.

In a corner of the studio a man played a bright and steady beat on an old piano. He seemed to look at nothing at all with a half-smile on his face, dark eyes dreamy in a sharp-featured face surrounded by dark hair with wide, dramatic white streaks.

As Eve and Peabody entered the room, one of the dancers, a man in his twenties, dark hair restrained in a curling tail, turned his head a fraction to stare, to scowl.

Interesting, she thought, a guy wearing a leotard and ballet shoes would make a couple of cops so quickly.

The woman stopped, planted her hands on her hips. “You want lessons, you sign up. Class has started.”

Eve merely held up her badge.

The woman sighed hugely. “Alexi, take the class.”

At the order, the scowling man tossed his head, sniffed, then strode out from the bar. The woman gestured them into the hallway.

“What could you want?” she demanded in a voice husky, impatient, and thick with her homeland. “I’m teaching.”

“Natalya Barinova?”

“Yes, yes. I am Barinova. What do I want with police?”

“You know a Gizi Szabo?”

“Yes, yes,” she said in the same dismissive tone. “She looks for Beata, who ran off to Las Vegas.”

“You know Beata Varga went to Vegas?” Eve demanded.

“Where else? They think, these girls, they go make big money showing their tits and wearing big feathers on their heads. They don’t want to work, to sweat, to suffer, to *learn*.”

“Beata told you she was leaving?”

“No, she tells me nothing, that girl. But she doesn’t come back. She’s not the first, will not be the last. Her old grandmother comes—a good woman—looking for this flighty girl who has talent. Wasted now. Wasted.”

The way she cut her hand through the air made her anger clear.

“I tell her this, tell Gizi, Beata has talent. Needs discipline, needs practice. Should not waste so much time with the tap and the jazz and the *modern* business. I tell Beata the same, but she only smiles. Then poof, off she runs.”

“When did you last see Madam Szabo?”

“Ah...” Barinova frowned, waved a hand in the air. “A day ago, I think. Yes, on yesterday. She comes often. Sometimes we have tea. She was a dancer in her day, she tells me, and we talk. She’s a good woman, and Beata shows no respect to her. She thinks harm has come to Beata, but I say how could this be? Beata is strong and smart—except she’s stupid to run to Las Vegas. So, she asked you to come? Like the other police?”

“No. Madam Szabo was killed this afternoon.”

“No.” Barinova held out both hands as if to push the words away. “No. How does this happen?”

“She was stabbed in the alley outside her apartment building.”

Barinova closed her eyes. “Such cruelty. I will pray she finds peace and her killer roasts in hell. Beata must bear some blame for this. Selfish girl.”

“When did you last see Beata?”

“Ah.” She cut a hand through the air again, but now there were tears in her eyes for the old woman and disgust for the young. “Weeks now, maybe months. She comes to class excited about a part in some musical. She works hard, this is true. I give her the pas de deux with Alexi in our autumn gala. My son,” she added. “She dances well with him in practice, then she says she has this part—maybe she does, maybe she doesn’t. But soon after, she doesn’t come to class anymore. I have my brother Sasha to call her on the ’link, but she doesn’t answer. We tell all this to the police when they come.”

“Did Madam Szabo tell you she was concerned about anyone? That she had any leads on Beata?”

“She said the last she was here she believed Beata was close. She was Romany, you understand, and had a gift. Me, I have Romany in my blood, but from long ago. She used her gift and said Beata was close, but trapped. Below, behind a red door.” Barinova shrugged. “She was very old, and gifted, yes, but sometimes hope and wishes outweigh truth. The girl ran off as girls do, and now a good woman is dead.”

“It would be helpful if we could talk to your son and brother, maybe some of the students who took classes with Beata.”

“Yes, yes, we will help. I will miss tea with Gizi and our talks.” She turned back into the studio, moved to her son. She spoke quickly in Russian, gestured, then took his place as he strode out.

“You’re interrupting my practice.” Unlike his mother, he had no trace of an accent. What he had was attitude.

“Yeah, murder interrupts a lot of things.”

“What murder?” His sneer twisted off his face. “Beata? She’s dead?”

“I don’t know, but her great-grandmother is.”

“Madam Szabo?” His shock looked sincere enough, and so, Eve noted, did his relief. “Why would anybody kill an old woman?”

“People always seem to have a reason. In this case, maybe because she was getting close to finding out what happened to Beata.”

“Beata left.” He jerked a shoulder sharply. “She didn’t have what it takes.”

“To what?”

“To dance, to live life full.”

Eve cocked her head. “Wouldn’t sleep with you?”

He tipped back his head to look down his long nose. “I don’t have a problem getting women into bed. If we’d danced together for the gala, we’d sleep together. One is like the other.”

“I thought you did dance together.”

“Practice.”

“So it must’ve annoyed you that she wouldn’t have sex with you.”

“This woman, that woman.” He smiled slowly. “One is like the other.”

“Charming. When did you last see Madam Szabo?”

“Just yesterday. She’d visit class, and my mother, a lot. Talk to the other dancers here, and the other studios down on two and three where Beata took some classes. She’d have tea with my mother, sit with my uncle at the piano. She said she felt close to Beata here.”

“And she mentioned something about Beata being close. Being below.”

“She was a Gypsy—and took it seriously. I don’t buy into that, but yeah, she said some stuff about it. Didn’t make any sense, because if Beata was close, why did she stop coming to class? Why did she bail on the part she got, and screw the understudy position she had? Dancers dance. She took off, that’s what she did, to dance somewhere else. Found a bigger brass ring to grab.”

“Where were you today, Alexi? Say from noon to four?”

“Cops.” He sniffed again. “I slept late in the apartment of Allie Madison. She and I will dance in the gala, and she and I sleep together. For now,” he added. “We stayed in bed until about two, then met friends for a little brunch. Then we came here, to practice, then to take class. She’s the blonde, the tall one with the tattoo of a lark on her left shoulder blade. I need to practice.”

“Go ahead. Ask your uncle to come out.”

Eve waited until he'd strode off again. "Did you run him?" she asked Peabody.

"Oh yeah. He's got a few drunk and disorderlies, a couple of minor illegals possessions, an assault—bar fight, which added destruction of private property, public nuisance, resisting. He's twenty-six, listed as principal dancer and instructor here at the school, and lives with his mother upstairs on six."

Got a temper, Eve thought as the piano player stepped out.

"Officer?"

"Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody. And you're Sasha?"

"Sasha Korchov, yes. My nephew said you came because Madam Szabo was killed." His dreamy eyes were soft and sad, like this voice. Like the slow glide of a bow over violin strings. "I'm very sorry to know this."

"Were you here when she came in yesterday?"

"I didn't see her. Natalya was using the music disc—advanced students to work on dances for the gala. I am in the storeroom, I think, with the props when she was here. My sister tells me I missed her. We enjoyed talking music and dance. I saw her the day before, on the street, not far from here. I was going to the market. But she was across the street and didn't hear when I called out to her. We talked in Russian," he said with a ghost of a smile.

"Her mother was Russian, like mine and my papa, so sometimes we talked in Russian. I will miss it, and her."

"What about Beata?"

"Beata." He sighed. "My sister, she thinks Beata ran off to Las Vegas, but no, I think something bad happened to her. I don't say so to Gizi, but... I think she knows I believe this. She could see inside if she looked, so I think sometimes she was sad to talk to me. I'm sorry for it."

"What did you think happened to Beata?"

"I think she loved her family, and to dance, and New York. I don't think she would leave all of that by choice. I think she's dead, and now so is Gizi. Now Gizi will find her, so they will, at least, have each other."

"Your nephew was interested in Beata—personally."

"He likes pretty girls," Sasha said cautiously. "What young man doesn't?"

"But she wasn't interested in him?"

"She was more interested in dance than in men. Pure of heart, and with music in her blood."

"Can you tell me where you were this afternoon?"

“I went to market after morning classes—I like to go most days. I came home to have my lunch and to play. I opened the windows so the music could go out. I came down to talk to my sister, and play for the two o’clock class. When that’s done, we have tea, Natalya and me.”

“Okay, thank you. Would you send Allie Madison out?”

“Will they send her body home?”

“I don’t have that information.”

“I hope she goes home,” Sasha murmured, then wandered back inside.

“He immigrated here from Russia with his sister and her kid—Alexi was a couple months old—twenty-six years ago,” Peabody added. “Sister’s husband’s listed as dead, right before the kid was born. Korchov was thirty-five and had been a big-deal ballet guy until he got messed up in a car wreck. They fixed him, but his career was shot. The sister was thirty, and had a pretty decent career herself. They opened the school. He has his own apartment on six. No criminal record. No marriages on record, two cohabs, both in Russia. The second one died in the same wreck that messed him up.”

“Okay.” Eve watched the willowy blonde glide out.

“You wanted to see me?” She had a breathy, baby doll voice that made Eve think it was Allie’s good luck ballet didn’t require vocals.

“Just verifying some information. Would you mind telling me where you were this afternoon?”

“Sure. Alex and I had brunch with some friends at Quazar’s. Caviar and champagne—it was CeeCee’s birthday—which probably wasn’t a good idea right before practice. I’m still carrying those blinis.” She smiled easily.

“Doesn’t bother Alex, I guess, because he jumped right in when we got here. Pushed me through that damn pas de deux until I thought about just sticking my fingers down my throat. But Barinova will skin you for purging, and she always knows. Anyway, I got through it. My Angel to his Devil.”

“His what?”

“Devil.” She lifted the water bottle she carried, took a long sip. “We’re performing the final pas de deux from *Diabolique*. I’m dancing Angel. Alex is Devil. Let me tell you, it’s a killer.”

Eve looked past her to the studio doorway. “I just bet.”

Six

“That’s what I’d call a devil of a coincidence,” Peabody commented when they stepped out on the street.

“Are you buying it?”

“Not even for the couple of loose credits in my pocket.”

“I want you to check with the other people the blonde gave us, and the restaurant. We’ll see if Alexi could’ve managed to slip away. See what the timing is from the restaurant to the alley, from the school to the alley.”

“Beata turned him down, pissed him off. He kills her, buries the body.”

Peabody scanned the area. “God knows where, but that would fit in with the west of the alley, underground deal.”

“She’s not dead. She’s trapped.” Eve snapped it out furiously, shocking herself as much as Peabody.

“Okay... So you think—”

“It’s what she thought. Szabo.” Eve rubbed a hand between her breasts where her heart beat, hard and dull, a hammer against cloth. “I’m saying Szabo thought Beata was alive.”

“Right. Behind a red door. Why do people have to be so cryptic?”

Think like a cop, Eve ordered herself. Facts, logic, instinct. “Szabo spends time at the school, with Alexi et al, sniffs it out, suspects, hints around. Maybe trying to get Alexi to make a move. He kills her.” Eve rolled it around. “Awful damn tidy, but sometimes it just is.”

“Well, the old lady told everybody Beata was still alive, so that doesn’t ride the train very well.”

“She poofs. She’s got a job, her classes, landed a part. Sounds like everything’s working out for her, but she poofs. Odds are she didn’t poof voluntarily—that’s Lloyd’s take, and I agree.”

“Three months is a long time,” Peabody put in. “A long time to hold somebody who doesn’t want to be held. And for what reason?”

“Szabo didn’t want to believe the girl was dead, and who can blame her?”

Eve added. “Not only her great-granddaughter, but she overrode the rest of the family so Beata could come to New York.”

“Had to feel sick about it.” Like Eve, Peabody scanned the street, the buildings, the traffic. “What did she say exactly? To you, I mean.”

Eve didn’t want to go back there, to kneeling in the street, the woman’s hand clasped with hers. Blood to blood.

“She said Beata’s name, she said she was trapped, couldn’t get out. The below bit, the red door. She asked for help.”

You are the warrior. I am the promise.

Fighting to stay steady, Eve shoved a hand through her hair. “She was dying.”

But her eyes, Eve remembered, had been alert, alive.

“We comb through the alibis, check her other habitats.” Do the work, Eve thought, take the steps. “I’m going to check in with Morris, contact the arresting officers about Alexi, get their take on him.”

“Beata’s disappearance and the old woman’s murder—if they’re not connected, it’s another devil of a coincidence.”

“We pursue the investigation as if they are. We figure out one, we’ve got the other.”

“I could tag McNab, have him meet me, go by the theater where she was supposed to work. Lloyd covered it,” Peabody added, “but we could try fresh eyes on it.”

“Good thinking. Send me whatever you get.”

She needed thinking time, Eve told herself as they split up. A stop at the morgue to confirm TOD—which was just stupid, since she’d been right there at TOD—to see if Morris or the lab had been able to get a handle on the type of blade used, if the sweepers had found any trace evidence.

Deal with the facts first, she thought as she got in her vehicle—then move on to theory. But she sat a moment, suddenly tired, suddenly angry. It felt as if something pushed inside her brain, trying to shove her thoughts into tangents.

Not enough downtime, she decided. No time to take some good, deep breaths between cases. So she took them now, just closing her eyes for a moment, ordering her mind and body to clear.

Alive. Trapped. Help.

Keep your promise!

The voice was so clear in her head she jerked up, had a hand on her weapon as she swiveled to check the seat beside her, behind her. Her heart pounded painfully against her ribs, in her throat, in her ears as she lowered her unsteady hand.

“Stop. Just stop,” she ordered herself. “Do what you have to do, then get some sleep.” She pulled away from the curb, but gave in to need and called home.

And her heart slowed, settled a little when Roarke's face flowed on-screen. "Lieutenant, I was hoping I'd—What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Well, nothing except having some old Hungarian woman bleed out under my hands. Tired," she admitted. "I've got to head down to the morgue because there was a glitch with the TOD. I need to get it straightened out, then talk to a bunch of cops about a Russian ballet guy. Sorry," she added. "This one literally fell in my lap."

"I'll meet you at the morgue."

"Why?"

"Where else does a man meet his wife—when they're you and me?" She looked pale, he thought, her eyes too dark against her skin.

"Yeah, okay. I'll see you there."

When she broke transmission, Roarke stared at the blank screen of his 'link. Not even a token protest? More than tired, he thought.

His lieutenant was not herself.

* * *

She got lost. She would have deemed it impossible, but she couldn't find her way. The streets seemed too crowded, too confusing, and the blare of horns when she hesitated at a light had her jumping in her seat. Frustration turned to sweaty fear that ran a snaking line down the center of her back. Battling it back, she ordered the dash navigator to plot her route, then gave in and put her vehicle on auto.

Tired, she assured herself and closed her eyes. Just tired. But there was a lingering unease that she was ill—or worse.

Need a boost, she thought, nearly shuddering with relief as she arrived at the morgue. She'd grab a tube of Pepsi at Vending, down some caffeine. Maybe even choke down a PowerBar because, Jesus, she was starving.

What was wrong with the air in here? she wondered as she started down the white tunnel. The lights glaring off the tiles slapped into her eyes and made them ache. It was frigid, an icy blast after the heat of the summer night. Yet under her chilled skin her blood beat hot, like a fever raging.

She headed for Vending, digging into her pockets, her mind on food and caffeine. A woman sat on the floor beside the machines, her face in her hands, weeping.

"I'm scared. I'm scared," she repeated. "Nobody sees me now."

“What’s the problem?” As Eve crouched down, the woman dropped her hands. Her face, livid with bruising, shone with shock and what might have been hope.

“You can see me?”

“Of course I can see you. You need medical attention. Take it easy. I’m going to get someone, then—”

“It’s too late.” Tears ran down the swollen face as the woman dipped her head again. “Look what he did to me.”

Eve froze as she stared at the gaping wound on the back of the woman’s head, at the dried blood matting the hair, soaking the blouse.

“Hold on. Just—” Eve reached out, and her hand passed through the woman’s arm. “Jesus God.”

“It was Rennie.” Sniffling, she pushed the heels of her hands through the tears.

“What are you? What is this?”

“I don’t know, but I have to tell *somebody*. It was Rennie,” she repeated.

“The bastard. He was mad at me ’cause I helped Sara get away from him. He must’ve followed me from work, and when I was in the park, he was just there. And he yelled and he hit me. He kept hitting me, and I couldn’t get away. Nobody came to help. Nobody saw, and he hit me and hit me, and I fell. And he picked up a rock and he killed me. It’s not right. What am I going to do now? I’m scared to be here. I’m scared to be dead.”

Eve couldn’t swallow, could barely breathe. “This has to stop.”

“Rennie killed me.”

The woman—the hallucination—held out her hands. Tore them up, Eve thought in some cold part of her brain. Tore them up when she fell, when she tried to crawl away.

“He killed me, and now I won’t ever get married or eat ice cream or buy new shoes and have drinks with Sara. Rennie Foster killed me with a rock in Riverside Park, and maybe he’ll kill Sara next. What’s going to happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Aren’t I supposed to go somewhere? I don’t want to stay here. It’s cold here. It’s too cold and it’s too bright. Can you help me? I’m Janna, Janna Dorchester, and I didn’t do anything wrong. Is this hell?”

“No.” But she wasn’t entirely sure.

Maybe hell was cold and bright. Maybe hell was losing your mind.

“Eve.” Roarke dropped down beside her, took her arms. “Christ, you’re burning up. Come on now.”

He started to lift her, but she resisted. “No. Wait.” She sucked in a breath, shuddered it out. “You don’t see her?”

He pressed a hand to her forehead. “I see you, sitting on the floor of the morgue looking like a ghost.”

“At one,” she murmured.

“I guess he can’t see me because I’m dead and everything,” Janna said.

“Why do you?”

“I don’t know. I need Morris,” she told Roarke. “And God, I need something to drink.”

“Don’t leave me,” Janna begged, dropping her head again so Eve could see the ugly wound that killed her. “Please don’t leave me here alone.”

“I’m just going to sit here. Bring Morris, will you? I just... need to sit here.”

Deal, she ordered herself. Deal with what’s in front of you, then figure out the rest. “Could really use something cold to drink.”

Roarke rose, cursing under his breath as he ordered a tube of Pepsi.

“He’s gorgeous.” Janna smiled a little even as she knuckled at tears. “Mega frosted. Is he your boyfriend?”

“We’re married,” Eve murmured.

“Seriously icy for you,” Janna said as Roarke glanced down.

“So we are,” he said. “And I’ll be taking my wife to a doctor in short order. I’ll get you Morris first, but then you’re done here.”

“He’s got a really sexy voice, too.” Janna sighed as Eve took the tube Roarke had opened, drank.

“Thanks. I’m going to sit right here,” she said as much to Janna as Roarke, “while you get Morris.”

And while she sat wondering if she had a brain tumor or had dropped into some strange, vivid dream, she put on the cop and interviewed the dead.

Minutes later, Morris hurried down the tunnel with Roarke.

“Dallas.” He knelt, laid a hand on her brow as Roarke had. “You’re feverish.”

“Just tell me if you’ve gotten a body in—female, mixed race, midtwenties, ID’d as Janna Dorchester. Beating death in Riverside Park.”

“Yes. She’s only just come in. How did you—”

“Who caught the case?”

“Ah... Stuben’s primary.”

“I need to contact him. Can you get me his contact data?”

“Of course. But you don’t look well.”

“I’m feeling better, actually.” Odd, she thought, how the cop approach steadied her, even when her interviewee was dead. “I think I’ll feel better yet once I talk to Stuben. I’d appreciate it, Morris.”

“Give me a minute.”

“Eve.” Roarke took her hand as Morris strode away. “What’s going on here?”

“I’m not sure, and I need you to give me a really open mind. I mean wide-open. Yours is already more open than mine about, you know, weird stuff.”

“What sort of weird stuff is my mind going to be wide-open about?”

“Okay.” She looked into his eyes, so blue, so beautiful. Eyes she trusted with everything she had. “There’s a dead woman sitting right beside me. Her name’s Janna Dorchester, and some asshole named Rennie Foster bashed her head in with a rock in Riverside Park. She’s worried her friend Sara might be next on his list. So I’m going to pass the information to the primary. I can read Russian.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I can read Russian. I think I can speak it, too, and I’m pretty sure I can make Hungarian goulash. And maybe borscht, possibly pierogies. The old woman, the one who fell into my lap and happened to be a Gypsy speaker for the dead, did something to me. Or I have a brain tumor.”

Staring into her eyes, Roarke cupped Eve’s face in his hands. “*Kak vashi dela?*”

“*U menya vsyo po pnezhne mu.* Hey, you speak Russian?”

He sat back on his heels, rocked right down to the bone. “A handful of phrases, and certainly not as fluently as you, apparently. And despite your answer, I doubt you’re fine.”

They looked up as Morris came back. “I have what you need.”

“Great.” Eve took out her ’link, and staying where she was, contacted Detective Stuben. “Lieutenant Dallas,” she said, “Homicide, out of Central. I’ve got some information on your vic, on Janna Dorchester.” She looked at Janna as she spoke. “You’re going to want to find Rennie Foster and get some protection to a Sara Jasper. Let me lay it out for you.”

When she had, she answered his question on how she came by the information by claiming a confidential informant.

“Unless Stuben’s an idiot—and he didn’t strike me that way—that should do it.” Eve got to her feet. “It’s all I can do.”

“I’m still dead, but I’m not as scared. It’s not so cold anymore.”

“I don’t think you have to stay here.”

“Maybe for a little while. It helped to talk to you. I still wish I wasn’t dead, but...” She trailed off, shrugged.

“Good luck.” Eve turned to Morris. “I don’t know how to explain it. I need to see Gizi Szabo.”

“Dallas, did you just have a conversation with the dead?”

“It sure felt that way. And I’d really appreciate it if you wouldn’t spread it around. I need to work, I need to keep going, or I’m pretty sure I’m going to go crazy. So...” She started forward, glanced back, and saw Janna lift a hand in good-bye. “I need to confirm TOD on Szabo.”

“I’ve run it three times, using various components. It’s still thirteen hundred.”

“It’s not possible.” She shoved through the doors of the autopsy suite. “I was *there*. Lopez was there, hours later. She fell off the curb, we administered first aid. She—”

“Eve,” Roarke interrupted, “you just spoke with a woman killed more than two hours ago, and you’re questioning the possible?”

“I know the difference between dead and alive.” She stepped up to the body.

“Why can’t I see *her*? Why can’t I talk to *her*? I look at her, and I feel... rage and frustration. And... obligation.”

“I spoke with Chale,” Morris told her. At the sink he ran cold water over a cloth, wrung it out. Then he came to her and smoothed it over her face himself to cool it.

“He said the same, but he also said that she took your hand, spoke to you, and there was a light—a blast of light and energy. And for a moment after it, you seemed to be blank. Just blank. He said something seemed to pass between you.”

She took the cloth, mildly embarrassed he’d tended to her—that she’d let him. “You don’t believe that kind of thing.”

“The science says this woman died at one this afternoon—irrefutably—but there’s more in the world than science.”

Maybe, she thought—hard to argue about it right at the moment. But it had been routine and order that had gotten her through the experience with Janna. So she’d stay there as long as she could.

“Let’s stick with science for the moment. What can you tell me about the weapon?”

“All right. A thin, double-edged blade. Seven and a quarter inches in length.” He turned to a screen to bring up the image he’d reconstructed from the wounds, then turned back to the body. “You see here where the killer thrust it fully into her, the bruising from the bolster.”

She leaned in, studying the gouges, the slices. “A dagger.”

“Yes. He hit bone. The tip will be chipped.” Morris showed her a tiny piece of steel, sealed in a tray. “I recovered this.”

“Okay, that’s good. He stabbed her in the back first—back of the shoulder.”

She remembered the shocking, tearing pain. “Because he’s a coward, and because he feared her. She didn’t see his face—he wore a mask or makeup.

A kind of costume, because he’s theatrical. A devil,” she murmured, “because it’s a role he plays, or wants to. Because it’s powerful, because it instills fear, because he wanted that image to be the last she saw.”

“Why?” Morris asked.

“He has something she wanted, and she wouldn’t have stopped until she got it back. Exposed him. Punished him. Deprived him.”

“Now you’ll get it back.”

She turned to Roarke, nodded. “Yeah. I will. I need to go home. You could drive while I talk to some cops.”

“Dallas,” Morris said, “I’d like to talk about this at some point.”

“Yeah. At some point.” She hesitated, handed him back the cloth, then closed her hand over his for just a moment. “Thanks.”

Cooler, steadier, she walked down the tunnel with Roarke.

“Is she there?”

Eve paused, looked down at the floor where she’d sat with Jenna. “No. I guess she’s gone wherever she had to go. Jesus, Roarke.”

He took her hand firmly. “Let’s get to the bottom of this, because right now I don’t know if you need a doctor or a bloody priest.”

“A priest?”

“For an exorcism.”

“That’s not funny,” she muttered.

“It’s not, no.”

Seven

Roarke gave her the time she needed while he drove. He said nothing, listening to her talk with a handful of cops about someone named Alexi Barin. Since her color was back, and her skin no longer felt as though it might burn off her bones, he checked the impulse to take her straight to a health center.

He considered his wife, among other things, cynical, stable, and often annoyingly rooted in reality and logic.

When she told him, straight-faced and clear-eyed, she'd had a conversation with the dead, he leaned toward believing her. Particularly adding in her unhesitating response to his simple *How are you?* in Russian.

She clicked off her 'link again, said, "Hmmm."

"How do you make Hungarian goulash?"

"What? I'm not making goulash."

"I didn't ask you to make it, but how you would."

"Oh, it's a test. Well, you'd cut up some onions and brown them in hot oil—just to golden brown, then you'd take this beef you'd cut in cubes and coated with flour, add that and some paprika to the oil and onions. Then—"

"That's enough."

"Why would you coat good meat with flour? I thought flour was for baking stuff."

"Which proves you know less about cooking than I do, which is next to nothing, and yet you can toss off a recipe for goulash."

"It's weird, and it's pretty fucking irritating. Which is why I'm going home instead of in to Central. I'm not going to find myself talking to some dead guy or whatever in front of other cops."

"You're still you," he murmured, foolishly relieved. "You're more embarrassed than frightened by the situation you appear to be in."

"I don't even believe this is happening, but I know it is. I'm not sure I wouldn't rather have a brain tumor."

She took a breath, then another. "I'm going back over it in my head. She was walking—staggering—bleeding all over the place. Science says she was dead, but Lopez saw her, too—and the medics when they got there. She talked to me. She looked at me."

She moved back to the scene. "But she'd walked that way for blocks—I followed the blood trail back. And no one helped her, no one called for

help. I can't buy that, so, using the twisted logic of this whole deal, I have to conclude no one saw her."

"Continuing with that so-called twisted logic, she came to you. She had enough left in her to cross your path, to leave you a trail, to give you what you'd need to help her."

"You could theorize. And the first thing she said was the girl's name: Beata. That she was trapped, needed help. She told me her name, and when I asked who'd done this to her, she said the devil. And... "

"What?"

"She said I was the warrior. Her eyes were so dark, black eyes, so intense. She said I had to take her in, let her in. She asked me, begged me. Take me in, so I said sure. I just wanted to keep her calm and alive until the MTs got there."

"You agreed."

"I guess I did." Huffing out a breath, she dragged a hand through her hair. "I guess I did, then she grabbed my hand, and bam—blinding light and like this electrical shock. These voices. I saw her face—the girl—Beata. Next thing I know, Lopez is calling my name, the medics are there, and Szabo's dead. Cold and dead."

"Because, scientifically at least, she'd died hours earlier."

"It's fucked up," was Eve's opinion. "I felt shaky and off. I guess I haven't felt all the way steady since. I recognized things I shouldn't have and didn't recognize things I should. God, Roarke, I got lost driving to the morgue. I just couldn't remember the streets."

He thought of how she'd looked, face dead white, shiny with sweat. "I think we should call Louise, have her come take a look at you."

"I don't think a doctor's going to help, or a priest either. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think it's like Janna. When we close the case, it'll be done."

She shifted to him. "She cut me a little with her nails, see?" She held up her hand, palm out. "Said all this stuff about blood to blood and heart to heart. I had her blood all over me by then. And she said it wouldn't be finished until the promise was kept. And the thing is, I promised to find Beata while I was trying to keep the old woman alive."

"You made a blood pact with a Romany."

"A Romany speaker for the dead, apparently. Not on purpose," she added with some heat.

“An accidental blood pact,” he qualified.

“You’d have done the same damn thing.” Peeved, she shifted away again.

“And you’re a civilian. I’m a cop. Protect and serve, goddamn it.”

“Which rarely includes blood pacts with dead travelers.”

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“Got your color back,” he said easily.

“Well, whoopee. Eyes on the prize. I have to find out who killed Gizi Szabo, and I have to find Beata.”

“She’s alive, Beata. You’re certain.”

“In my current condition, tossing out the logic that says otherwise? I think Szabo would have known if the girl was dead. And I think I’d know it now. Instead, I have this certainty, against all that logic, that she’s alive, trapped by the same devil who killed her great-grandmother. He wants to keep the girl, and the old woman made sure people knew she was getting close to finding her. Maybe she did that to lure him out, maybe she did it because it kept her going. But she was a threat.”

Her nerves throttled down a few more notches when Roarke drove through the gates, when she saw the house. Home. Hers.

“Beata’s a liability now,” Eve added. “And that may weigh heavier on him than his need to keep her. Szabo stirred things up, and now I’ve done the same. He may decide to kill her rather than risk discovery.”

“This Alexi Barin?”

“He’s heading the list. He knew her, wanted her, got shut down by her. He’s got an ego the size of Utah. He knew where she lived, where she worked, very likely knew her basic routine. Added, they were rehearsing for this big dance—*Diabolique*, Angel and Devil, which is no fucking coincidence.”

“I’d agree. That would make it easier yet to lure her. Extra practice, after hours.”

“There you go. He’s had violent run-ins, got a sheet, and the cops who busted him all say he’s got a temper that lights him up—quick and fast. And that’s why he’s not in Interview right now.”

“Because while Szabo was killed violently and perhaps on impulse, if Beata’s still alive, being held against her will, that took some planning. And continues to take planning.”

“Right now, it’s a good thing you can think like a cop, because I don’t know if my brain’s firing on all circuits.” She got out of the car. “I need to be home. I need to be back in control. And if you’re up for it, I could use some

help running everybody on my list who knows Beata, studied with her, worked with her. Her neighbors, her friends, people who saw her routinely. You want what you see—or have to see it to want it.”

“You give me the names, I’ll start your runs—on the condition that you rest. An hour,” he said as she started to protest. “Nonnegotiable.”

“I just need to clear my head. And I’m starving,” she admitted. “I feel like I haven’t eaten in days, like everything’s burned off.”

“Possibly a side effect of possession.”

“That’s not funny either.” She stepped inside, gave Summerset a beady stare. “*Baszd meg,*” she suggested and watched his eyes widen.

Suspected she saw his lips twitch in what might have been a restrained smile.

“I see you’re broadening your linguistics.”

“That wasn’t Russian,” Roarke said as they headed up the stairs.

“I think it’s Hungarian. It just came to me—and I figure he knows I just told him to fuck off.”

“Rude, yet fascinating.” He went with her to her office. “You, up.” He pointed at the cat currently sprawled in Eve’s sleep chair. “You, down,” he ordered. “Give me your list, and I’ll get those runs going.” He brushed a hand over her hair, struggling against worry. “How about pizza?”

“I could eat a whole pie.” She dropped into the chair. “Thank God my appetite’s not running to that borscht, because I’d really rather have a brain tumor than beet soup.” She dragged her notebook out of her pocket. “Most of the names are in here. I have to get more. Peabody and McNab were hitting the theaters where she worked or would have, and I need neighbors. But that’s a big start.”

“Food first.” He walked into the kitchen.

Galahad didn’t leap into her lap but sat eyeing her.

“I’m still me,” she murmured. “I’m not her. I’m still me.” When he bumped his head against her leg, her eyes stung. “I’m still me,” she repeated.

Roarke came back with a plate on a tray. “I ordered up a whole one, but you start with that. And drink the soother. Don’t argue,” he warned. “I doubt you’ve looked in the mirror in the last few hours, but when I came in to the morgue, you looked like you belonged there. You’ll eat, drink a soother, then we’ll see.”

With that, he turned to her desk, sat, and began inputting names into her computer. Eve ate like a horse.

“God, that’s better. No shakes.” She held out a hand, a steady one. “No queasiness, no jumps.” Still she looked down at the cat. “He won’t sit in my lap, even for pizza. He’s not sure of me. I guess he senses something’s off. That I’m off. How long do you think—” She couldn’t say it.

“It’s going to be fine.” He rose to go to her. “We’ll do whatever needs to be done, then we’ll do whatever comes after that. You’ll be fine.”

“I have to live with the dead, Roarke, I don’t want to chat with them. I see the advantage for a murder cop. Hey, sorry about the bad luck, but who killed you? Oh yeah, we’ll go pick him up. Move on. I don’t want to work that way. I don’t want to live that way. I don’t think I can.”

“You won’t have to.” He took the tray, set it aside. “I swear to you, we’ll find whatever needs finding.”

She believed him. Maybe she had to, but she believed him.

“In the meantime...” She took his hand. “Can you be with me? I need to be *me*. I need you to touch me—*me*—and feel what I do when you’re with me. Know that you feel me.”

“There’s no one but you.” He slid onto the chair beside her. “Never anyone but you.”

“Don’t be gentle.” She dragged his mouth to hers. “Want me.”

She needed those seeking hands, that mouth hungry for hers. Needed to feel and taste and ache, needed to know that it was her mind, her body, her heart meshed with his.

Love, the dark and the light of it, was strength, and she took it from him. He tugged her jacket down her shoulders, hit the release on her weapon harness as his mouth captured and conquered hers. And those hands, those wonderful hands lit fresh fires, a new fever that raged clean and bright in her blood. Her fingers fumbled for the chair controls so they tumbled back when it slid flat.

It wasn’t comfort she wanted, he knew, but lust—the greed and speed.

Perhaps he needed the same. So he pinned her arms over her head, used his free one to torment until she bucked beneath him, crying out as she came. And there was more. Dewy flesh quivering under his hands, frantic pulses jumping at the nip of his teeth. The lust she wanted beat inside him as wildly as her heart.

His woman. Only his. Her flesh, her lips, her body. Strong again.

“Now. Yes. Now!” Her nails dug into his hips as she arched against him, opened to him.

Hot and wet, she closed around him, crying out again as he thrust hard and deep, as she bowed to take him. Holding there, holding for one heady moment as he looked in her eyes. As he saw only Eve.

Then the whirlwind, wicked and wild, spinning them both too high for air, too fast for fear.

And when the world settled back, all the colors and shapes and light, then came the comfort. She lay locked in his arms, breathing him in. Her body—*her* body—felt used and raw and wonderful.

Eyes closed, she ran a hand through his hair, down his back. “No problem, considering you might have just indirectly banged a ninety-six-year-old woman?”

“If I did, she gave as good as she got.”

She laughed, tangled her legs with his. “We’ll still bang when we’re ninety, right?”

“Count on it. I’ll have developed a taste for old women by then, so this could be considered good practice.”

“It’s got to be sick to even be thinking this way, but it’s probably like making jokes in the morgue. It’s how you get through.” She untangled, sat up. “What I’m going to do is grab a shower, then coffee, then go over your runs. I’m going to work this like it needs to be worked and keep this other thing off to the side. Because if I think about it too hard, I’m just going to wig out.”

He sat up with her, took her shoulders. And what she saw in his eyes blocked the air from her lungs. “What? What?”

“You are who you are. I know you. You believe that?”

“Yeah, but—”

“You’re Eve Dallas. You’re the love of my life. My heart and soul. You’re a cop, mind and bone. You’re a woman of strength and resilience. Stubborn, hardheaded, occasionally mean as a badger, and more generous than you’ll admit.”

Fear edged back, an icy blade down the spine. “Why are you saying this?”

“Because I don’t think you can put what’s happened aside, not altogether. Take a breath.”

“Why—”

“Take a breath.” he said it sharply, adding a shake so she did so automatically. “Now another.” He kept one hand on her shoulder as he shifted and touched the other to her ankle.

And the tattoo of a peacock feather.

Eight

She got her shower, got her coffee. She told herself she was calm—*would* be calm. Panic wouldn't help; raging might feel good, but in the end wouldn't help either.

"There are options," Roarke told her.

"Don't say the *E* word. No exorcisms. I'm not having some priest or witch doctor or voodoo guy dancing around me, banging on his magic coconuts."

"Magic... Is that a euphemism?"

"Maybe." It helped to see him smile—to think she might be able to. "But I'm not going there, Roarke."

"All right then. What about Mira?"

"You think she can shrink Szabo out of me?"

"Hypnosis might find some answers."

She shook her head. "I'm not being stubborn. Or maybe I am," she admitted when he cocked his eyebrows. "Right now I'd rather not bring anybody else into this. I just don't want to tell anybody I invited a dead woman to take up residence in my head, or wherever she is. Because that's what I did."

She shoved up, began to pace. "I said sure, come right in. Maybe if I'd been paying attention to what she was saying, what she meant, I'd have locked the door. Instead I'm all, yeah, yeah, whatever, because I'm trying to keep a woman science says was already dead from bleeding out. It doesn't make any sense, goddamn it. And because it doesn't, I have to set it to one side. I have to," she insisted. "I have to work the cases—cases—with my head, my gut. Fucking *A mine*. Which I damn well would've done anyway if she'd left me the hell alone."

"So you'll fight this with logic and instinct?" He decided they could both use a glass of wine.

"It's what I've got. It's what's mine. And if there's any logic to this other part, the part that makes no sense, when I find the killer, when I find Beata, it—she—goes away. If I don't believe that, I'm going to lock myself in a closet and start sucking my thumb."

He took her the wine, touched her cheek. "Then we'll find the killer and Beata. And for now, we'll keep the rest of it between you and me. Twenty-four hours. We'll work it your way, and I'll find someone who can undo what was done. If this isn't resolved in twenty-four hours, we'll work it my way."

“That sounds like an ultimatum.”

“It most certainly is. You can waste time arguing, or you can get to work. I’m not going to share my wife with anyone for more than a day.”

“I’m not your possession either, pal.”

He smiled again. “But you belong to me. We can fight about it.” He shrugged, sipped his wine. “And you’ll have wasted part of your twenty-four. Still, it might fire you up, so I’m open to it.”

“Smug bastard.”

“Maybe you’d like to swear at me in Russian or Hungarian.”

“And you said *I* was mean. Twenty-four.” She took a slug of wine, considered how she’s push for more if she needed it. “Let’s look at the runs.”

Roarke ordered data on-screen, leaned a hip against the side of her desk.

“Your prime suspect,” he began. “You had most of this, but the second-level run added a bit, and I extrapolated from your notes. Allie Madison’s apartment, where it’s verified Alexi Barin began the day, is an easy ten-minute walk to the alley—considerably less if a healthy, athletic man took it at a jog, even a run. It’s about the same from the restaurant where he had brunch. As is his own apartment,” Roarke added, ordering the map he’d generated on-screen. “These locations are clustered, more or less, in the general area.”

“So he could’ve slipped out, slipped away, put on a mask, sliced Szabo up, and gotten back. Which would involve knowing she’d be in the alley at that convenient moment, and wearing something for the blood spatter. Because you don’t hack somebody up the way she was hacked and walk away clean and fresh to take your alibi to brunch.”

She paced in front of the screen. “He could have set a meet with her, pinning the timing. Told her he had some information on Beata. It’s a lot of planning for an impulsive guy with a temper.”

“Something set him off at the brunch if we go with your TOD, or prior if we stay with science,” Roarke suggested. “He went to confront her, saw her in the alley—he’d have come from this direction, so he’d have passed the alley. He snaps, pulls the knife, goes in.”

“Why is he disguised?”

“She could have seen his face, Eve. The condition she was in when you found her? It’s not a stretch to believe she wasn’t lucid.”

“She didn’t see it. She saw the devil.” Eve paused a moment. “I know. It’s what I saw. I had... a moment in the alley. I know what she saw.”

“All right.”

Because she’d expected an argument, even yearned for one, she rounded on him. “I don’t know whether to be grateful or pissed off that you accept so easily.”

“Not as easy as it might seem, just easier than you. So if you say you saw what she saw, I know you did. The occult, on some level, is involved—even that’s logical.”

“If you’re a superstitious Irish guy.”

“If you’re currently able to curse in Hungarian and make goulash,” he countered—and shut her up. “It could be your suspect has some power of his own.”

“I’m not going there. Logic, facts, data. So while it’s possible Alexi slipped out, did the murder, it’s low on the logic and probability scale with the data we have at this time. Give me the guy Beata worked with. The one who walked out of the restaurant with her the night she was last seen.”

“David Ingall, twenty-two, single. He’s had two bumps. One for an airboard incident where he lost control and mowed down a group of pedestrians in Times Square, and another for manufacturing and using false ID—he was underage and got into a sex club before an undercover busted him. He dropped out of NYU and takes a couple of virtual courses a semester, lives in a one-bedroom apartment a few blocks from the restaurant with two roommates. He’s worked at Goulash for three years.”

“Doesn’t sound particularly murderous.”

“In addition, the file from your Detective Lloyd has a statement from one of the roommates confirming his arrival home—and the drunken night of computer gaming that followed, on the night Beata Varga went missing.”

“Roommates make it harder for him to take Beata, hold her, unless they’re complicit.”

“The information on the roommates is as benign as this one.”

“Switch to the theater,” Eve decided. “Where she was understudying. What did Peabody get?”

She studied the data as it scrolled, listened to Roarke’s summaries. And paced.

None of them popped for her. Holding a woman against her will for an extended length of time required privacy, sound-proofing, supplies, and

time.

Maybe she was wrong—maybe the old woman had been wrong—and the girl was dead. And the thought of that pierced her so deep, she shuddered.

“Eve—”

“No, it’s nothing. Keep going. I need to set up a murder board. I should’ve done it already.”

She pinned up her photos, let the information Roarke provided wind through while she arranged what she needed on the board.

“Work and the school,” Eve said. “Her most usual and regular spots other than her apartment. We focus there. She went out on auditions, and that’ll be another level if we bomb here. Work, school, her neighbors. Then the theater, then audition sites, shops, and so on.

“Let me see the map again.”

She moved closer to the screen. “She takes this route basically every day. Home to morning class. Then from class to work if she was scheduled. Back to class, back to work or an audition. Evening class three nights a week, and work again four nights.”

“A regular customer at the restaurant,” Roarke suggested. “Someone she waited on routinely. Wanted her, took her.”

She nodded. “Possible. Someone she knew is most probable. Someone who could lure her where he wanted her to go. Doesn’t make the ripples a forced abduction would. Had to have a place. Underground. A basement? A cellar?”

“The underground itself,” Roarke commented. “There are places under the streets no one would pay attention to a woman struggling, screaming, calling for help.”

“Too many,” Eve agreed. “But it’d be risky. Someone could take her from you. Private,” she said again. “Can you get the blueprints for the building—the dance school?” When his answer was simply a long look, she rolled her eyes. “Go ahead, show off. Let me see the uncle’s data. Sasha Korchov.”

“I’ve got deeper data on Natalya Barinova as well.”

“It’s a man. Go with the man first.”

Benign. That was the word Roarke had used to describe Beata’s coworker and his roommates. It was a word that came to mind with Sasha. Dreamy eyes, she remembered—a little like Dennis Mira there—and indeed his ID photo showed the same, along with the soft smile.

But the images Roarke had dug up from before the accident that had cost him his career and his lover showed a dynamic, intense, passionate man. Leaping, spinning a long, leanly muscled body showcased in dramatic costumes. The mane of hair coal black, the eyes on fire.

“How do you lose that?” she murmured. “Lose that energy, that passion, that fierceness? It must be almost like death or losing someone to death. Something breaks, something more than a leg, an arm. Something gets crushed, more than a foot, more than ribs.”

How do you get over the anger—that’s what she’d asked Lopez about survivors, about families who lost someone to murder.

“You lost your badge once,” Roarke reminded her. “What did it do to you?” “Destroyed me. Temporarily. Cut me off from what I was. But I had you to help bring me back, and I got my badge back. He lost his woman, too. His woman,” she repeated. “Another dancer. And look here, they danced the *Diabolique* ballet together. The Devil was his signature role. Son of a bitch. I should’ve seen it.”

“The building has a basement,” Roarke told her. “It runs the length and width of the building and holds a number of rooms, listed as storage and/or utility and maintenance on the plans.”

“Who owns the building?”

“Funny you should ask. He owns it. He made quite a bit of money during his career and was awarded a large settlement after the accident.”

“He’s got no record anywhere. Unless it got covered up. No history of violence.”

“Money can smooth the way.”

“Yeah.” She angled her head at Roarke. “It can. But you can usually find a few bumps in the media. Speculation, gossip. A man might not be charged and still be guilty.”

“I’ll see what I come across, and it’s telling, I think, that he gave no interviews I can find, no public statements or appearances after the accident.”

“He went underground,” Eve murmured. “So to speak. Lost everything that mattered to him? That could be it. Had his sister, and she left her home and possibly the remains of her career to come here with him, bringing her infant son. Dreamy eyes,” she recalled. “Medication? His medicals show extensive injuries from the accident, the kind a man’s lucky to live through. Had to have a lot of pain.”

More than physical, she decided, thinking of losing her badge again. Much more than physical pain.

“He sits in that studio now playing music for others to dance to. For this beautiful young woman who’s about the same age, the same build and coloring as the woman he loved. She’s going to dance that same role with his nephew.

“Would that piss him off, make him sad? They go to Vegas.” She stopped as her gut twisted. “Natalya said they go to Las Vegas to be showgirls. Maybe Beata’s not the first.”

She strode to the auxiliary comp, started a search for missing persons, female of the same age group, coded in ballet.

“There’s some speculation and juice regarding a young Sasha Korchov and his temper. Storming off stage at rehearsals, berating other dancers—neither of which is particularly unusual,” Roarke added. “And more, here and there, about wild parties and breaking up hotel rooms and such. Before he met and danced with Ariel Nurenski. She, it’s speculated here, was balm to his troubled spirit and other romantic analogies. She changed him, calmed him, inspired him. They were to be married two weeks after the accident that killed her.”

“Vanessa Warwich, age twenty-two, last seen leaving a café to go to rehearsal at the West Side School for the Arts. She was to dance the role of Angel in their autumn gala—just like Beata. That was two years ago. There are more.” She looked over at Roarke. “I need to cross-reference, find a connection with the school or Barin, or the role.”

“Send me your list. I’ll take half.”

She shot the data to his computer. “Roarke, if he’s been taking these women, holding them, trapped in a basement? He is a devil.”

They found eight.

Nine

It was no backyard barbecue, but it had nearly the same guest list. In the conference room at Cop Central, Eve laid out what she had.

“Nine women over twenty-three years,” she began, “with a direct or indirect connection to the school, or a connection to the ballet, have gone missing. All were in their early to mid-twenties, dark hair, slim build. All were dancers, and all vanished without a solid explanation.”

She turned to the screen, to the images. “In some cases they’d made some noises about leaving the city; in most there were personal items missing from their apartments, as if they had done so.”

“The nine includes this Beata Varga.” Commander Whitney studied the board Eve had arranged with ID shots of the missing. “Who connects to your murder victim.”

“She’s the latest. Detective Lloyd can give you the background on that.” She nodded at him.

Lloyd stood and walked to the board. “Last seen leaving the restaurant where she worked. Here.” He used the laser pointer Eve handed him. “In the company of two coworkers. They separated here, with Beata continuing south in the direction of her apartment.”

He went over the time lines, the other particulars, reviewed his interview statements. “Up to the point she went missing, she had regular contact with her family. Her work hours weren’t regular, as her employers scheduled her around her classes and auditions and rehearsals, but when she was scheduled to work, she showed up, and statements from her employers, coworkers, customers corroborate she was responsible. Happy. Dedicated to forging her career. She’d just landed a part in an off-Broadway musical. She wasn’t the type to just take off.”

“Neither was Vanessa Warwich.” Eve used her own pointer to highlight the photo. “Missing for twenty-six months, last seen leaving her apartment—here—to rehearse at the school. She’d enrolled only five weeks earlier, had a new boyfriend. Or Allegra Martin, age twenty-four, a principal dancer for the City Ballet who was starring in the role of Angel when she went missing four and a half years ago.

“Lucy Quinn, seven years missing,” Eve continued, and worked down the line. “The pattern’s clear, as is the victim type.”

“You believe Sasha Korchov is replacing his lover with these women.”

Eve nodded at Mira. “I know he is. He lost her, lost everything in one terrible moment. He left his home and is reduced to teaching others to dance, more to watching them—those young women—dance when his lover can’t, while he plays for them.”

“He plays the tune,” Mira added. “They dance. If he’s taken these women, it could be he needs them to dance for him—only him. He needs to keep them to himself, possibly to recreate the relationship he had with his fiancée, professionally and personally.”

“Could they still be alive?” Peabody asked.

“I think there could only be one at a time,” Mira told her. “One dancer, one lover, one partner if you will, or the illusion shatters. It would be more likely he’s replacing the replacements over time than adding to the number.”

“Beata’s alive.” Eve felt it in her bones. “But he’s killed Szabo to protect himself. She made it known she believed Beata was alive and close by, trapped. Underground. A Romany, a dead talker, breathing down his neck.” She saw Baxter roll his eyes at that, stuck with logic. “He has some Romany blood. His sister and the old woman talked regularly—she’s poking around, getting too close. He’s afraid of her, superstitious. Enough so he disguises himself before he kills her. He doesn’t want her to see his true face. And now he’s had the cops at his door over it. How long can he keep Beata alive?”

“The pressure may push him to eliminate her,” Mira agreed.

“I need a warrant. We need to search that basement, his apartment, the whole damn place.”

“I can get one.” APA Reo pushed to her feet. “The pattern and connections should be enough.” She checked her wrist unit, winced at the time. “Waking up a judge or interrupting the Saturday night party isn’t going to win me a popularity award.”

As Reo left the room, Eve ordered the blueprints on-screen. “His apartment. We need to take him first, secure him so he doesn’t have the chance to panic and take Beata out. We also secure the sister and nephew. They may be involved, may be protecting him. Feeney, I want to locate everyone in the building before we go in.”

“We’ll set it up. Get you heat source imagery.”

“I need the exits secured,” she continued. “And there are a lot of them: doors, windows, fire escapes, roof access. Elevators are down. If Korchov’s in his apartment, we secure him. If he’s not, we find him. We’re also

looking for the murder weapon. A dagger, seven and a quarter inches, likely a chipped tip. Renicki, Jacobson, you're on the apartment. Baxter, Trueheart, Peabody, we'll take the basement." She glanced at Roarke.

"We'll take the civilian."

A locked door, she thought, would be easier to deal with if they had a thief—former—along.

"Feeney, McNab, Callendar, you run the electronics. I want locations, movements. Once the suspect, the sister, the nephew are secured, you'll move in."

She went over the rest of the assignments, detailing the operation stage by stage.

This is what she did, she told herself. This was the logic, the instinct, the training. And if there was something inside her urging her, all but begging her to hurry, she had to ignore it.

"I want all of you to watch your asses," she concluded. "This man is suspected of abducting and imprisoning at least nine women, very likely killing them when he was finished. He's suspected of slicing up a ninety-six-year-old woman in broad daylight. Just because he used to wear tights and ballet shoes doesn't mean he's not dangerous."

"Potentially very," Mira confirmed, "when cornered, when desperate. I'll ride with EDD," she added. "If any of his victims are alive, I may be able to help."

"Appreciate it." She looked at Morris. "And if they aren't."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Let's get moving. Load it up, ride it out. Father Lopez, if I could have a moment."

She gestured him to the side of the room. "I don't make a habit of calling a priest into an op, but—"

"I'm grateful you did in this case. I'll do whatever I can to help."

"You were there when Szabo died. You did the Last Rites thing. I figured if the old woman was Catholic, the girl probably is. Between you and Mira she'd be covered."

"It's kind of you."

She didn't know if it was—didn't know if it had been her impulse to call him in or if she'd been directed.

"How are you, Eve?"

"Hell if I know, and I don't have a lot of time to think about it right now."

“If you need me—”

“I’m hoping not to go there. No offense.”

He smiled at her. “None taken.”

“I’ll need you to stay in the EDD van with Mira until we’re clear.”

“Understood, even if it’s disappointing not to be able to get in on some of the action.”

“This devil’s my fight. Stick with Mira,” she said before she started toward Roarke.

“I can’t figure out how you connected the dots.” Peabody stopped her. “The basement, all those missing women, the soft-spoken piano player. I feel like I missed a couple dozen steps.”

“Things just started falling into place. Let’s just say I followed Szabo. She was already closing in. Check with Reo. See if she’s got the warrant.”

She continued on to Roarke. “I need to ask you for something.”

“Are you asking your husband or your civilian?”

“Looks like you’re both. I need you to stay close to me. If I start to lose it —”

“You won’t.”

“If, I think you can help me stay grounded. She’s in here.” Eve touched a hand to her chest. “This is the guy who took Beata, the guy who killed her. She might want some payback. If it looks like I’d turn that way, stop me. You stop me.”

“I have every confidence in Lieutenant Dallas, but if it makes you feel easier, I won’t let you do anything you’ll regret.”

“Good. But be, you know, subtle about it.”

He had to laugh. “You are absolutely you. All right then, while preventing you from taking a dead Gypsy’s revenge, I’ll do whatever I can to preserve your dignity. How’s that?”

“It’ll do.”

She reviewed the blueprints again on the way to the building, checked in with her teams, focused on the work.

“We go in the front, pass the main stairs, to the right and straight to the basement access door. It’s going to be locked. If the master doesn’t work, we use the battering ram or”—she glanced at Roarke—“other means. If Feeney picks up images down there, we follow his lead. Otherwise, Peabody, Baxter, Trueheart, take this sector. Roarke and I this one. One of

you sees a mouse riveting, everybody hears about it. We clear sector by sector. If a door's locked, take it down. Call for backup if you need it." She toggled to the exterior view. "Locations of cams are highlighted. I don't see anybody watching them this time of night. But there are very likely cams down there not on the blueprints."

Think like him, she ordered herself. Not like a frantic old woman.

"He'd want to watch her, and want his area secured in and out. Can't have somebody stumbling across her, and can't let her find a way out. If Renicki and Jacobson lock him down, they can work him for more information—but we won't count on getting it. We'll bring in the others, and we'll go through every inch of that basement.

"Feeney," she said into her mic, "give me the word."

"Got nothing in the suspect's place. Got two in the other apartment.

Everything else aboveground is clear. Got nothing for you in the basement, but there are voids down there, Dallas, either due to the thickness of walls, jammers, or sensor blocks."

"Tucks them up tight," she murmured. "Give me the location of the voids."

She keyed them in, felt the adrenaline begin to pump. "We hit those first. If he's not upstairs and didn't go for a goddamn walk, he's down there with her now. We're green. All teams, we're green. Move."

She jumped out of the back of the transport, weapon out. She prayed she hadn't missed a deeper level of security, prayed he wasn't monitoring the cameras as she used her master to access the main door.

Cops spread out to the exits, up the stairs, moving quick and quiet while she and her team rushed to the basement door.

"Master's ineffective."

"Give me a minute," Roarke told her. "Battering rams are crude, and they're noisy."

She stepped back to give him room, mentally checking off each exit as her men reported them secure.

When Roarke's clever tools and fingers unlocked the door, she signaled to Peabody. "High and left," she told her, "then straight down."

She went in low and right—and knew immediately her instincts had been on target.

Lights burned in the ceiling, dim but activated. The old metal stairs led down to a concrete floor, thick walls, narrow corridors.

She signaled Peabody to lead her team, then set off in the opposite direction with Roarke.

They passed through a cavernous room piled with old furniture, lamps, fabrics, down another dim corridor. She heard the clink and hum of the building mechanicals as they moved through a utility area where tools were neatly stored on freestanding shelves.

“This area needs to be maintained,” she said quietly, sweeping with her weapon as Roarke did the same with the one he’d slipped out of his pocket.

“Wherever he keeps them has to be soundproofed and fully secured.”

“This sector’s void’s west. Down that way.”

Eve started to turn, then went into a crouch, weapon up. Her muscles trembled as the ballerina blocked her way.

“I can’t get out,” the woman said and held out her hands. “We can’t get out. Can you help me?”

“You have to wait.”

“Eve?”

“It’s Vanessa Warwick.” Eve fought off shudders as her skin shivered from the sudden cold. “You have to wait a little longer.”

“I couldn’t dance anymore.” She lifted her sparkling white skirt. “He cried when he killed me.” She touched her fingers to the gaping slice across her throat. “But I couldn’t dance anymore.”

“Just wait.” And gritting her teeth, Eve walked through the pleading woman. She reached out to try to balance herself when her head spun.

Roarke grabbed her, braced her. “Bloody hell. Stay here.”

“I have to finish it. You know I have to finish it. I have to make it stop.” She glanced back and into Vanessa Warwick’s eyes but saw the others behind her. All the pretty girls in their sparkling skirts and toe shoes.

All those white throats gaping.

“She’s waiting. Warwick waiting—trapped. And God, she’s not alone. We have to move.”

“Hold on to me if you have to.”

He took the lead, brooked no argument. She steadied herself as she followed, cleared her throat as she listened to team updates.

Her op, she reminded herself. She was in command here. She had to be.

Natalya and Alexi were secured, Peabody had reached the first of her voids.

An empty room. The search of Sasha’s apartment was under way, but neither he nor the murder weapon had been found.

Roarke held up a hand, stopped her. “Sensors,” he murmured. “They’ll read us.”

“Then we’re getting close.”

“They’ll likely signal in his apartment but could very well alert him if he’s down here. Give me a minute to jam them.”

“You’re handy.”

“We do what we can.” He took out what looked like an innocent PPC, keyed in various codes. “It’s rudimentary,” he told her. “Just a precaution to let him know if anyone’s down this way.”

“Or if his current ballerina managed to get out. Are we clear?”

“We are.”

“Peabody, we hit sensors. Watch for them. We’re moving.”

Another turn, another twenty feet, and they spotted the door. “Secured door,” she said into her mic. “Accessing now.”

She rolled her shoulders as Roarke got to work. She was ready, she thought. She was herself.

When he nodded, they went through the door together, swept it.

She supposed it would be called a sitting room—windowless, but with a softly faded carpet, a sofa, a lamp. And a small monitoring station.

He could sit here and watch her before he went in, she thought, studying the blank monitor, then the second secured door, the one painted bright bloodred.

“The red door,” she murmured. “Locked behind the red door.”

Without a word Roarke went to the door, checked the security. She had to breathe deeply, slowly, fighting the voice inside her begging her to hurry, hurry, hurry.

“Got his lair,” she said to Peabody. “Key in on me. Secondary door and inner security being bypassed. Feeney, I’ve got a monitoring station here. Send McNab in. We’re clear,” she said at Roarke’s nod. “We’re going in.” She looked at him, trusted him to keep her centered. She held up three fingers, closed to a fist, then held up one, two. On three they were through the door.

Ten

He'd set his prison with a stage with filmy white curtains on either side and lights to enhance the mood of the music that soared. Roses, their petals glowing silver in the light, scented the air. Eve spotted all this, and another door, in an instant, but her focus centered on the stage and the dancers. Beata, her face pale with exhaustion, her eyes empty of hope, wore a white, filmy skirt, topped by a bodice glittering with gold like the ring that crowned her.

The same costume as all the others. All the pretty dancers.

Beata rose, fluid as water, *en pointe* and into an arabesque before turning into the arms of the devil.

He gripped her waist, lifted her high, while his eyes shone through the holes in his mask. His cape flowed from his shoulders as he dipped her head toward the floor.

Eve's weapon seemed to burn in her hand. She longed to fire it, craved it as her heart raged in her chest. And the words, the thoughts that roared through her head were in Romany.

Roarke touched a hand to the small of her back, just a bare brush of fingers.

"Your move, Lieutenant," he murmured beneath the swell of music.

Her move, she thought, and took it when the dancers leaped apart.

"Nice jump," she called out, training her weapon on Sasha. "Now freeze, or I'll drop you off your twinkle toes."

She heard Beata's cry, swore she felt it rip through her soul, but kept her eyes on Sasha.

"You're interrupting the performance." He spoke with some heat—as a man would when bumped violently on the street by a stranger.

"Show's canceled."

"Don't be ridiculous." He dismissed her with a wave of the hand, then reached it out for his partner. Roarke had already moved in and put himself between them.

Sasha pulled the dagger from his belt. "I'll kill you for touching her."

"You can certainly try, and I admit I'd enjoy beating you to hell and back again, but I believe the lieutenant will indeed drop you if you take a step toward this girl."

"She's mine." He whirled back to Eve. "No one takes her from me. She is my Angel, and here she lives forever."

“I am Beata Varga.” Beata yanked the crown from her head, heaved it. “I’m not your Angel, and you go to hell.”

Sasha lunged for her, and even as Roarke braced to counter the attack, Eve kept her word. She dropped him, stunned and shuddering, to center stage. As he fell, Beata covered her face with her hands and slid to the floor at the edge of those glittering lights. “I knew someone would come. I knew someone would come.”

Eve moved forward, went to her knees, and wrapped her arms around Beata as Peabody’s team rushed in.

Once again Roarke stepped between. “I think you might want to restrain your suspect before he recovers, and take him out. Give Beata a moment.” He gave the dagger a light kick across the stage. “And there’s your murder weapon.”

“Yeah.” If Peabody thought it strange to see her partner rocking the weeping girl, she said nothing of it. “We’ll clear him out, and I’ll tell Father Lopez and Dr. Mira to stand by.”

“Crazy fucker.” Baxter looked around the room as he locked restraints on Sasha. “All his world’s a freaking stage. Trueheart tagged the MTs. For her,” he added, and with Trueheart’s help, hauled Sasha to his feet.

Eve let the police routine play out behind her—under control, she thought and concentrated on Beata. “Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?”

“Not really, not much. How long? How long have I been here? Sometimes he gave me something that made me sleep, and I lost track.”

“You’re all right now. That’s what counts.”

“He locked me in. In there.” Though she continued to shake, she lifted her chin toward the inner door. “This horrible, beautiful room. He brought me flowers and chocolates, and all these beautiful clothes. He’s out of his mind, out of his mind.” She dropped her head back on Eve’s shoulder.

“Did he touch you? Beata.” She drew the girl back.

“No, no, no. Not that way. I thought he would rape me, kill me, but it wasn’t what he wanted.”

She continued to tremble under Eve’s hands, but even as they streamed with tears, her eyes held fury.

“He said we would be together forever, and I would do what I was born to do: dance. Always dance. And night after night he would come and put on the costume. If I wouldn’t wear mine, he’d give me the drug, and when I woke I’d be in it. So I put it on rather than have him touch me. And I

danced, because if I refused or if I fought, he'd tie me and leave me in the dark."

"You did what you had to do," Eve told her. "You did exactly right."

"I called, but no one heard, and I tried to break the door, but I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't."

"Okay. It's okay."

"Every day I'd try to find a way out, but there wasn't one. I don't know where I am. How did you find me?"

"You're in the basement of the school where you took classes. We'll get into all the details later. We're going to get you out of here now."

"My family."

"You can contact them." Eve laid a hand on Beata's cheek. "Your family is always with you, wherever you are, wherever you go."

Beata closed a hand around Eve's wrist, let her head rest in Eve's hand.

"That's what my grandmother would say to me whenever I was sad or scared."

I know, Eve thought, and helped Beata to her feet. "I want you to go with these officers now. They'll take you out."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"I'll be there soon. There are things I have to do. Beata, did they know, were they part of this? Natalya, Alexi."

"No. He said it was only us, our secret—that they wanted him to be calm, to accept, to live without me. Her, Arial, the one whose name he called me. But that he never would. He wouldn't share me with them or the world. He wouldn't lose me this time. He told me often."

"Okay, go ahead now. Go outside. Go breathe the air."

Eve knew what it was to be locked up, to be trapped and helpless. And to want to breathe free.

Eve shut off her recorder, looked at Roarke. "It's not done. I hoped, when we found her... I have to find the others. I know where they are," she said before Roarke answered. "They're pressing on me. The dead. I know where they are, and I think—hope—I know what to do."

"Then we'll go find them."

She turned her recorder back on, reengaged her mic. "I need a unit down here with tools. We need to take down a wall. And I'll need Morris. I'm on the move. Key in on my location when I get there, and send a team down to process this goddamn prison."

“Let’s go,” she said to Roarke.

She didn’t have to ask him to hold her hand, to keep her close as they walked those dim corridors, or to talk to her quietly, soothingly.

“He must’ve built that place years ago,” she said. “And updated it, maintained it—down here in the bowels of the building. There were tools in that utility room we went through. A sledgehammer and—”

“I’ll get something.” She was pale again, he thought, feverish again. It had to end. “Are you all right alone?”

“I’m not exactly alone, but yeah.”

While Roarke doubled back, she walked straight to the void, the empty room Peabody had reported, stared—her eyes burning dry—at the far wall. Old wood, old brick, so it looked patched and repaired and nondescript. But she felt the misery, the horror, and had to force herself not to attack it with her bare hands.

Morris came in behind her. “I passed Roarke. He told me to bring this.”

She grabbed the pry bar out of his hands, began to drag at the boards, the spikes and nails.

“Dallas—”

“They’re back there. Trapped in there.”

“Who?”

“The others. All the others. They can’t get out, can’t get to the other side. They need to be seen, need to be shown.” Her muscles trembled with the effort as boards splintered. “They need help.”

“Step back,” Roarke snapped as he strode in. “Eve, step back.”

He slammed the sledgehammer he carried at the brick, exploding dust and shards. As he pounded again, again, she moved in, away from the arc of his swing to rip and pry.

The stench seeped in, one she knew too well. Death entered the room.

“I see her.” Eve grabbed for the flashlight on her belt. “Her—them. Three, I think. Wrapped in plastic.”

As she spoke, Roarke slammed the hammer again. Through the gap he created a skeletal hand reached out, palm up, as if in supplication.

“Careful now.” Morris laid a hand on Eve’s shoulder. “We need to go carefully now. This is for my team and forensics.”

“Let me see your light.” Roarke took it from Eve, shone it in the gap.

“Christ Jesus. He’s stacked them, like berths in a bloody train.”

“And when bricks were too much trouble or he just ran out of them, he switched to boards. Can you see how many?” Eve asked him.

“Five, I think. I can’t be sure.”

“Hold off now. It’s enough.” She took out her communicator. “Peabody, we’ve got bodies. Eight, maybe more. I need a recovery team, the sweepers. Morris is calling his people in.”

“Acknowledged. Jesus, Dallas, eight?”

“Maybe more. They’re found now. And Peabody, send down the priest.” She clicked off, said nothing as Roarke picked up the bar and continued to carefully knock away loose bricks. Instead she reached in, laid a hand on the plastic covering the ruined shell of Vanessa Warwich.

You’re found now, she thought. You’re free now.

She stepped out of the room, just leaned against a wall as she struggled against waves of grief.

And the old woman stepped to her, spoke.

“You found our Beata.”

“I’d have found her my own way. I’d have stopped this my own way.”

“I think perhaps you would. But the child is so precious to me, how could I risk it? I was guided to you, or you to me, when I was between. Who can say?”

“I’d think you could at this point. Death ought to come with a few answers.”

Now Gizi smiled. “Perhaps it will. You didn’t kill him.”

“It’s not how I work.”

“I would have,” she said simply, “but your way will be enough. You are the warrior. I can leave the gift with you.”

“No. Seriously.”

“Then it goes with me. I had a good, long life, but he didn’t have the right to end it. You’ll see there is balance.”

“He’ll pay, for all of it.” She hesitated, then asked what she had asked Lopez, asked herself. “Is it enough?”

“This time. For others?” Gizi lifted her shoulders, let them fall. “Who can say?”

“This time then. I have to finish. I have to finish my way.”

“Yes. As do I. You’ve freed them. Now I’ll guide them to the other side where there will be light and peace. Until we’re called again. *Pa chiv tuka*, Eve Dallas.”

“*Ni eve tuka.*” Eve shook her head. “You’re welcome,” she corrected. She saw the light again, not blinding now, but warm. She simply closed her eyes as the heat flowed through her, then out again. When she opened them, there was nothing but the dim corridor and the sound of approaching footsteps.

She pushed away from the wall, moved forward to direct cops and techs. To do her job. “They’re in there,” she said to Lopez. “Maybe you can do... what you do.”

“Yes. The girl, Beata, she’s waiting for you. She won’t leave until she speaks to you.”

“I’ll go up.”

“A very hard day,” he said. “And yet... ”

“Yeah.” She reached over as Roarke came out, brushed mortar and brick dust off his shirt. “Let’s go up.”

“Tell me how you are.”

“I’ll show you.” She stopped, yanked up her pants leg. Her clutch piece rode on her unmarked ankle. “No more tattoo. It’s a lot less crowded in here.” She tapped her head. “Say something in Russian.”

“I only have a few phrases, but this one seems appropriate. *Ya liubliu tebia.*”

She grinned at him, felt a lightness she hadn’t felt in hours. “I have no idea what you said. Thank God.”

He grabbed her, held tight. Then he drew her face up, crushed his mouth with hers.

“On an op,” she murmured but kissed him back before drawing away.

Linking hands, they continued down the corridor. “I said I love you—and it’s true in every language.”

“Nice. Let’s just keep it all in English for a while. God, I’m starving again.”

She pressed her hand to her belly. “Anyway, thanks for the assist. In there and all around.”

“No problem. But next time we have a barbecue, Lieutenant, we both stay the bloody hell home.”

“That’s a deal.”

Upstairs she paused, walked over to where Natalya and Alexi sat on the steps, nodded at the cop standing by them. Natalya looked up, eyes flooded with tears.

“They said—we heard—there are bodies.”

“Yes.”

“My brother.” Her voice broke as she pressed her face to her son’s chest.

“He was broken, but he took his medication. We went on—we both went on. What has he done? In the mercy of God, what has he done?”

“She didn’t know.” Alexi held her close while she sobbed. “We didn’t know, I swear it. My uncle, he’s such a quiet man. Such a quiet man. Beata? She’s all right?”

“She’ll be all right. We’re going to have to take you and your mother down to Central. We need to talk.”

He only nodded and stroked his mother’s hair. “We didn’t know.”

“I believe you.”

“A nightmare for them,” Roarke commented as they stepped outside into the warm night.

“One that won’t end anytime soon.”

Gawkers pressed behind the barricades. Cops swarmed, lights flared, and the air was busy with voices and communicators. Reporters, alerted to the scene, shouted questions.

Eve ignored them all as Beata broke away from Mira and ran to her.

“They said Mamoka is dead. Sasha killed her—my great-grandmother.”

“Yes. I’m very sorry.”

The sound she made was deep, dark grief. “Mamoka. She came for me, to find me. And he killed her.”

“He’ll pay for that, for all of it.” And this time, Eve reminded herself, it was enough. “She did find you, and that’s what mattered most to her. She told me your name. She... showed me the way.”

“She spoke to you?”

“She did. And I know she’s okay, because you are. You can see her tomorrow. I’ll arrange it. But now, you need to go to the health center, get checked out. You need to listen to Dr. Mira. We’ll talk again.”

“There were others.” Her face stark, Beata stared at the old building with its glittering windows. “I heard—”

“We’ll talk again,” Eve said.

Beata pressed her fingers to her eyes, nodded, then dropped them. “I’m sorry. I never asked your name.”

“I’m Dallas.” Through and through, she thought, in and out and all the way.

“Lieutenant Eve Dallas.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant Dallas.” Beata held out a hand. “For every day of the rest of my life.”

“Make good use of them.” Eve shook her hand, then sent her back to Mira. Eve took a breath, then tuned in to the lights, the noise, the movement. Her world, she thought, and walked back to Roarke.

“Things to wrap up,” she told him. “Reports to file, killers to question.”

“You look pretty pleased about it.”

“All in all, I am. But tomorrow? Why don’t we stay home, watch old vids and eat junk food, maybe drink a whole bunch of wine and have half-drunk sex?”

“A master plan. I’m in.”

“Excellent. I have to go back down there. You could wait here or go on home.”

“Lieutenant.” He took her hand again. “I’m with you.”

“Well, you’re handy,” she said, grinned again.

She walked back toward the building with him to do the job. She felt tired, violently hungry, and completely herself.