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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*-BESTSELLING AUTHOR

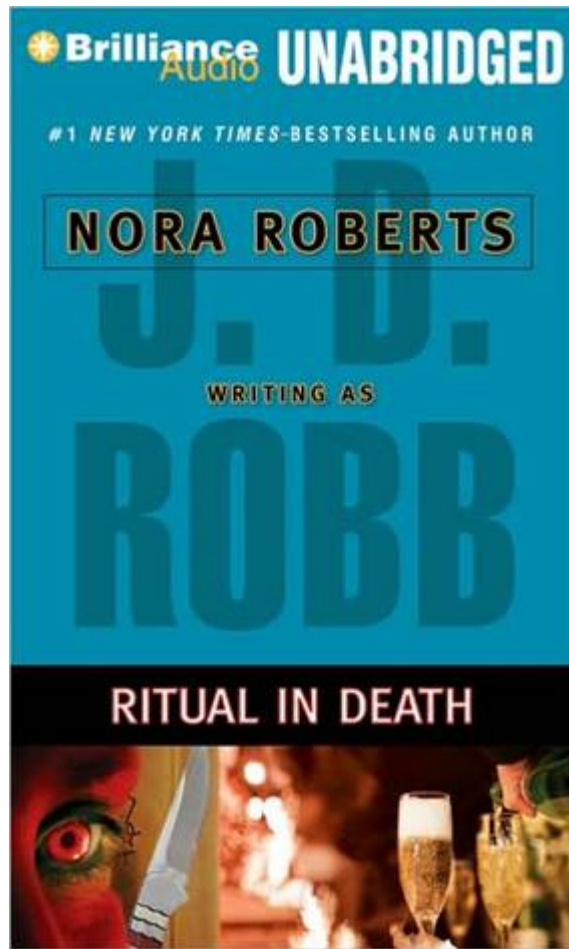
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WRITING AS

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**RITUAL IN DEATH**





**Ritual in Death**  
**Eve Dallas Series – Book 33**  
**By J. D. ROBB**

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*One owes respect to the living; to the dead one owes only the truth.*

—VOLTAIRE

*The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.*

—JOSEPH CONRAD

## One

Her feet were killing her. And made her imagine traveling back in time, hunting down whoever had invented stiletto heels, and beating the crap out of him.

What was the point of them other than throwing a woman off balance, making it next to impossible to run, and inducing foot cramps?

The question occupied Eve's mind as she tuned out the bulk of the party conversation buzzing around her like a hive of drunk hornets. What if one of the guests at this shindig went off and . . . stabbed somebody in the eye with a shrimp fork, for instance? How was she supposed to take him down dressed like this? And a foot pursuit in these stilts? Forget about it.

It was a hell of a getup for a cop, to her way of thinking. The flimsy excuse for a dress left most of her exposed. And she glittered. You couldn't have diamonds hanging all over you and blend.

Of course, you couldn't go to any sort of snazzy function with Roarke and blend.

The only advantage to the ridiculous damn shoes that she could see was the fact that they boosted her up so that she and Roarke were eye-to-eye.

They were stupendous eyes, bold and brilliantly blue. A look from them could give her a tingle in the belly—even after nearly two years of marriage. The rest of him didn't suck either, she reflected. The black silk fall of hair framed a billion-dollar jackpot of a face. Even now, as he glanced at her that sculpted, delicious mouth curved up in a slow, secret smile.

All she had to do, Eve reminded herself, was tolerate the goddamn shoes a couple more hours, then she'd have that mouth—and the rest of the package—to herself. Screaming arches were probably a small price to pay.

"Darling." Roarke took a glass of champagne from the waiter passing them, and handed it to her. Since the glass he'd traded it for had still been half

full, she interpreted it as a signal to tune back in.

Okay, okay, she thought. She was here as Roarke's spouse. It wasn't as if he demanded she gear up like this and attend excruciatingly boring parties every day of the week. He was smooth about it—and as the man had more money than God and nearly as much power and position—the least she could do was play the part when they were doing the public couple thing.

Their hostess, one Maxia Carlyle, glided over in some kind of floaty number. The wealthy socialite was—by her own words—kicking into New York for a few days to catch up with friends. All of whom, Eve supposed, were wandering around Maxia's expansive tri-level hotel suite gorging on canapés and sloshing down champagne.

"I haven't had a minute to talk to you." Maxia put her hand on Roarke's arm, tipped her face to his.

They looked, Eve decided, like an ad for the rich and the gorgeous.

"And how've you been, Maxi?"

"Oh, you know how it goes." She laughed, shrugging one perfect bare shoulder. "It's been about four years, hasn't it, since we've seen each other. Never seem to land in the same place at the same time, so I'm especially glad you could make it tonight. And you," she added with a sparkling smile for Eve. "I was hoping I'd get the chance to meet you. Roarke's cop."

"Mostly the NYPSP considers me theirs."

"I can't even imagine it. What it must be like. Your work must be so fascinating and exciting. Investigating murders and murderers."

"It has its moments."

"More than moments, I'm sure. I've seen you on screen from time to time. The Ilove case in particular."

And wasn't that one going to dog her forever? Eve mused.

“I have to say you don’t look anything like a police-woman.” Maxia’s perfect eyebrows arched as she gave Eve’s dress a quick scan. “Leonardo dresses you, doesn’t he?”

“No, I usually do it myself.”

Roarke gave her a little elbow poke. “Eve’s oldest friend is married to Leonardo. Eve often wears him.”

“Mavis Freestone is your oldest friend?” Now, in addition to interest and curiosity, considerable warmth infused Maxia’s face. “I love her music, but my niece is a slathering fan. I took her to one of Mavis’s concerts, in London, and arranged for a backstage pass. She was so sweet with my niece, and I’ve been the undisputed champion of aunts ever since.”

She laughed, touched Eve’s arm. “You do have a fascinating life. Married to Roarke, friends with Mavis and Leonardo, and chasing killers. I suppose it’s mostly head work, isn’t it? Studying evidence, looking for clues. People like me glamorize it, think about policework the way it is on screen and at the vids. All danger and action, chasing madmen down dark alleys and firing off your weapon, when in reality it’s brain and paperwork.”

“Yeah.” Eve controlled the urge to smirk. “That’s about it.”

“Being married to Roarke’s action enough. Are you still dangerous?” Maxia asked him.

“Domesticated.” He lifted Eve’s hand, kissed it. “Entirely.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute. Oh, there’s Anton. I need to snatch him away and bring him over to meet you.”

Eve took a long, long drink of champagne.

“We’ll meet this Anton, mingle another twenty,” Roarke said, the faint hint of Ireland in his voice, “and slip out and away.”

Eve felt a tingle of joy, right down to her numbed toes. “Seriously?”

“I never intended to stay above an hour or so. And certainly owe you for the points I’m making by bringing a Homicide cop to the party.”

“It’s all paperwork,” Eve said dryly.

He skimmed a finger down her arm, where a knife had slashed only days before. “Yes, your work is nothing but tedium. But I have to agree with Maxi. You don’t look very coplike tonight.”

“Good thing I don’t have to chase down any psycho killers. I’d fall off these stupid shoes and embarrass myself.” She curled her toes in them—or attempted to while she flicked a hand at the short, choppy crop of brown hair she’d recently taken the scissors to herself. Old priceless diamonds dripped from her ears. “I don’t get parties like this. People standing around. Talk, talk, talk. Why do they have to get all dressed up to do that?”

“To show off.”

She thought about that over another sip of wine. “I guess that’s it. At least I don’t have to gear up like this for the shower deal for Louise. Still, another party. More talk, talk, talk.”

“It’s a ritual, after all. When a friend’s about to marry, her friends gather together, with gifts, and . . . well, I have no idea what happens then.”

“If it’s anything like mine, some of them drink till they puke, and others strip it off and dance.”

“Sorry I’ll miss it.”

“Liar.” But she grinned at him.

“Here we are!” Maxia came back, towing a portly, mustachioed man somewhere on the shady side of sixty. On his arm like a whippy vine twined a woman well shy of thirty with full, pouty lips, a bored expression, and a short red dress that covered very little of her expansive breasts.

“You simply must meet Anton and his lovely companion. It’s Satin, isn’t it?”

“Silk,” the bored blonde corrected.

“Of course it is.”

Eve caught the quick glint in Maxia’s eyes and understood she’d mistaken the name deliberately. And liked her better for it.

“Actually we met a few years ago.” Anton stuck out a wide, pudgy hand. “At Wimbledon.”

“It’s nice to see you again. My wife, Eve.”

“Yes, the American cop. A pleasure, Detective.”

“Lieutenant.” Eve glanced down at Silk’s sky-high heels. Just heels, she noted, with the feet arched into them bare on top. “I heard about those.” She pointed. “People are actually wearing invisible shoes.”

“They’re not available to the public for another three weeks.” Silk tossed her long mane of hair. “Sookie pulled some strings.” She plastered herself against Anton/Sookie.

“Anton’s produced several films about crime and police and so on,” Maxia commented. “So I thought he’d enjoy meeting one of New York’s Finest.”

“British-style procedurals.” Anton patted Silk’s hand as she tugged at him like a petulant child. “What we like to think of as crackling whodunits—with plenty of sex and violence,” he added with a laugh. “And a slight connection with reality, as you’d know. I have been thinking about using an American setting, so I—”

“I don’t see why a girl would want to be a cop.” Silk frowned at Eve. “It’s not very feminine.”

“Really? It’s funny because I don’t see why a girl would want to be a bimbo—”

“What is it you do?” Roarke cut Eve off, smoothly—giving her only the slightest pinch on the ass.

“I’m an actress. I just finished shooting a major role in Sookie’s next vid.”



“Victim, right?” Eve asked.

“I get to die dramatically. It’s going to make me a star, isn’t it, Sookie?”

“Absolutely, sweetheart.”

“I want to go. There’s nothing happening here. I want to go dancing, go some place with some action .” She tugged hard enough to pull Anton back a few steps.

“He used to be such a sensible man,” Maxia murmured.

“Guys of a certain age are especially vulnerable to bimboitis.”

Maxia laughed. “I’m so glad I like you. I wish I wasn’t due in Prague in a couple of days so I could get to know you better. I should mingle, make sure everyone isn’t as bored as Linen over there.”

“I think that’s Polyester. Definitely manmade fibers.”

Laughing again, Maxia shook her head. “Yes, I really like you. And you.” She rose to her toes to kiss Roarke’s cheek. “You look awfully happy.”

“I am. And awfully glad to see you again, Maxi.”

As Maxia started to turn, Silk’s strident voice whined out. “But I want to go now . I want to have fun . This party is dead .”

Someone screamed. Something crashed. As people stumbled back, as some turned, shoving through small packs of others, Eve pushed forward.

The man staggered like a drunk, and wore nothing but spatters and smears of blood. The knife clutched in his hand gleamed with it.

A woman in his path fainted, and managed to take out a waiter holding a full tray of canapés with her. As shrimp balls and quail eggs rained, Silk shrieked, turned, and in a sprint for the terrace bowled over guests like pins in an alley.

Eve flipped open the next-to-useless bag she carried, tossed it to Roarke as she pulled out her weapon.

“Drop it. Drop it now.” She sized him up quickly. About five feet, ten inches, roughly one-sixty-five. Caucasian, brown and brown. And the eyes were glazed and glassy. Shock or drugs—maybe both.

“Drop it,” she repeated when he took another staggering step forward. “Or I drop you.”

“What?” His gaze skidded around the room. “What? What is it?”

She considered and rejected just stunning him in a matter of seconds. Instead she moved to him, gripped the wrist of his knife hand, twisted. “Drop the goddamn knife.”

His eyes stared into hers as his fingers went limp. She heard the knife hit the floor. “Nobody touch it. Stay back. I’m the police, do you get that? I’m a cop. What are you on?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. The police? Can you help me? I think I killed someone. Can you help me?”

“Yeah. You bet. Roarke, I need a field kit ASAP, and for you to call this in. I need everyone else upstairs for now. I need you people to clear this room until the situation is contained. Move it!” she snapped when people stood, gaping. “And somebody check on that woman lying in the shrimp balls over there.”

Roarke stepped up beside her. “I’ve sent one of the hotel staff down to the garage to get the field kit out of the boot of the car,” he told her. “I’ve notified your Dispatch.”

“Thanks.” She stood where she was as the naked party crasher sat on the floor and began to shudder. “Just remember, you’re the one who wanted to come tonight.”

With a nod, Roarke planted a foot on the hilt of the knife to secure it. “No one to blame but myself.”

“Can you get my recorder out of that stupid purse?”

“You brought a recorder?”

“If you need the weapon, you’re going to need the recorder.”

When he handed it to her, Eve pinned it to the frothy material over her breasts, engaged it. After reciting the basics, she crouched down. “Who do you think you killed?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s your name?”

“It’s . . .” He lifted a blood-smeared hand, rubbed it over his face. “I can’t think. I can’t remember. I can’t think.”

“Tell me what you took.”

“Took?”

“Drugs. Illegals.”

“I . . . I don’t do illegals. Do I? There’s so much blood.” He lifted his hands, stared at them. “Do you see all this blood?”

“Yeah.” She looked up at Roarke. “It’s fresh. I’m going to need to do a room-to-room, starting with this floor. He couldn’t have walked around for long like this. We start with this floor.”

“I can arrange that. Do you want security to start on that, or sit on him while you do the room-to-room?”

“Sit on him. I don’t want them to talk to him, touch him. What’s that room over there?”

“It would be a maid’s room.”

“That’ll do.”

“Eve,” Roarke said as she straightened. “I don’t see any wounds on him. If that blood’s someone else’s—that much blood—they can’t possibly still be alive.”

“No, but we push the room-to-room first.”

## Two

She needed to move fast. The amount of blood on her naked guy made it doubtful she'd find anyone alive—if she found anyone at all—so she couldn't putz around. While she didn't much like leaving her suspect with hotel security, even once she'd clapped on the restraints from her field kit, she couldn't afford to wait for her uniformed backup, or her partner.

For lack of better, she set her suspect on the floor of the maid's room, ran his prints.

"Jackson Pike." She crouched down on his level, looked into the glazed brown eyes.

"Jack?"

"What?"

"What happened, Jack?"

"I don't . . ." He looked around the room, dazed and stoned. "I don't . . ." Then he moaned in pain and clutched his head.

"Uniformed officers are on their way," she said to the pair from security as she straightened. "I want him exactly where I've left him, and those people upstairs contained until I get back. Nobody comes in except NYPSP officials. Nobody goes out. Let's move," she said to Roarke.

"Guy's a doctor," she continued as they started out the door. "Thirty-three years old. Single."

"He didn't walk in off the street like that."

"No. Your hotel. Find out if a Jackson Pike, or anyone with a variation of that name's registered. How's this floor set up?"

Roarke pulled out his 'link as he gestured. "Four triplexes, one on each corner. One minute."

While he spoke to the hotel manager, Eve turned left. “Well, he left a trail. That’s handy.” Moving quickly, she followed bloody footprints over the lush carpet.

“No Jackson Pike, or any Pikes for that matter,” Roarke told her. “There’s a Jackson, Carl, on thirty-two. They’re checking. On this floor Maxia has 600. Six-oh-two is occupied by Domingo Fellini—actor—I saw him at the party.”

“Pike didn’t come from there, trail’s down this way.” She picked up the pace as they started down the long corridor. “It’s the sixtieth floor. Why isn’t it 6002?”

“The sixth floor is the health club, the pool, and so on. No guest rooms. The triplexes cater to those who can afford the freight, and we bill them as penthouses, or apartments. So it’s Suite 600. Perception.”

“Yeah, your perception’s pretty screwed with all this blood on your carpet. Anyone in 604?”

“Not tonight.”

“Empty suite’s a nice spot for bloody murder, but the trail heads off.” She kept moving, her weapon in her hand, her eyes scanning “Does every suite have the private elevator like Suite 600?”

“They do, yes. Those elevators in the center of the floor are also private, in that you need a key card or clearance for the trip up.”

Emergency exits, all four corners, she noted, via stairs. But Jackson Pike hadn’t used them. His trail led straight to the carved double doors of Suite 606.

Eve saw the faint smear of blood over the ornate zero.

Suite 666, she thought. Wasn’t that just perfect?

She signaled for Roarke to stay back, then tried the knob.

“Locked. I don’t have my master.”

“Lucky for you, you have me.” He drew a slim tool out of his pocket.

“Handy, but have you ever considered how a cop’s supposed to explain—should it come up—why her husband’s got burglary tools in his pockets?”

“For bloody emergencies?” He straightened. “Lock’s off.”

“I don’t suppose you’re carrying.”

He flicked her a look, his eyes very cool. “While I didn’t think it necessary to bring a weapon to a cocktail party, I got this from security.” He drew out a stunner. “Civilian issue. Perfectly legal.”

“Hmm. On three.”

It wasn’t their first time through a door. She went low, he went high into a large living area lit by hundreds of candles. In the flickering light blood gleamed as it pooled over the black pentagram drawn on the polished marble floor.

A body floated on that pool, the arms and legs spread to form an X at the center of the sign.

Gone, Eve thought, bled out. Throat slashed, multiple body wounds. She shook her head at Roarke, gestured to the left.

She moved right, in a suite the mirror image of Maxia’s. Sweeping her weapon, she cleared a dining room, a short hallway, a kitchen, a powder room, making the circle that brought her back to Roarke.

“Bed and bath clear, this level,” he told her. “Both were used. There’s considerable blood—smears not spatters. Hers, I expect.”

He wasn’t a cop, she mused, but he could think like one. “We’re going up.” She did a chin point toward the elevator and tried to ignore the stench—not just death, but a kind of burning on the air. “Can you block that? Shut it down?”

Saying nothing, he walked to it, took out his tool again. While he worked, Eve circled the pentagram to clear the terrace.

“Done.”

“What’s the layout on the second floor?”

“Bed and bath, small sitting room to the left. Master suite—living area, powder room, dressing area, bed and bath to the right.”

“I’ll take the right.”

The place felt empty, she thought. It felt dead. The metallic reek of the blood, the sickly sweet overlay of death mixed with candle wax smeared the air. And something more, that burning and a kind of . . . pulsing, she thought. Spent energy, the shadows of it still beating.

Together they cleared the second level, then the third.

She found evidence of sexual frenzy, of food, of drink, of murder. “The sweepers are going to be hours in here, if not days.”

Roarke studied the glasses, plates, half-eaten food. “What kind of people do murder, and leave so much of themselves behind?”

“The kind who think they’re beyond or above the law. The worst kind. I need to seal this place off, all three levels, until crime scene gets here. Who was registered in this suite?”

“The Asant Group.” On the steps, he stared down at the body posed on the pentagram. “Jumble the letters, and you’ve got—”

“Satan. God, I hate this kind of shit. People want to worship the devil, be my guest. Hell, they can have horns surgically implanted on their forehead. But then they’ve just got to slice somebody up for their human sacrifice and drag me into it.”

“Damned cheeky of them.”

“I’ll say.”

“Naked Jack didn’t do this on his own.”



“Nope. Let’s go see if his memory’s a little clearer.”

The uniforms had taken over. Eve directed them to take names and contact info from the guests, then clear them out.

She sat on the floor with Jackson. “I need a sample of the blood you’re wearing, Jack.”

“There’s so much of it.” His body jerked every few seconds, as if in surprise. “It’s not mine.”

“No.” She took several samples—face, arms, chest, back, feet. “What were you doing in 606?”

“What?”

“Suite 606. You were in there.”

“I don’t know. Was I?”

“Who’s the woman?”

“There were a lot of women, weren’t there?” Again he shuddered in pain. “Were you there? Do you know what happened?”

“Look at me, goddamn it.” Her voice was like a slap, shocked him back to her. “There’s a woman in 606. Her throat’s slashed.”

“Did I do it? Did I hurt somebody?” He pressed his forehead to his knees. “My head. My head. Somebody’s screaming in my head.”

“Do you belong to the Asant Group?”

“I don’t know. What is it? I don’t know. Who are you? What’s happening?”

With a shake of her head, Eve rose as the med-techs she’d ordered stepped in. “I want him examined. I want a blood sample. I need to know what he’s on. When you’re done, he’ll be transported to Cop Central.”

“Whose blood is it?”

“You’re too late for her.” She walked back into the living area to leave them to it just as her partner came in the main door.

Peabody’s hair was pulled back in a stubby little tail that left her square face unframed and seemed to enlarge her brown eyes. She wore baggy dark pants and a white tee with a red jacket tossed over it. She carried a field kit.

“Who died?”

“An as yet unidentified female. Prime suspect is in there.” Eve jerked her head. “Naked and covered with what is most likely her blood.”

“Wow. Must’ve been a hell of a party.”

“It happened on the other side. Let’s go work the scene.”

Outside the doors of 606 they coated hands and feet with Seal-It while Eve gave Peabody the rundown.

“He just walked into the cocktail party? And doesn’t remember anything?”

“Yes, and so it seems. He doesn’t come off as faking it. Both pupils are big as the moon. He’s disoriented, motor skills are off, and he appears to have one major headache.”

“Stoned?”

“Be my first guess, but we’ll see what the MTs have to say about it.” Eve unsealed the door, and now used the key Roarke had acquired for her.

When she stepped in, the sturdy Peabody blanched. “Man. Oh crap.” She bent over at the waist, pressed her hands to her thighs and took long, slow breaths.

“Don’t you boot on my crime scene.”

“Just need a minute. Okay.” She kept breathing. “Okay. Black magic. Bad juju.”

“Don’t start that shit. We’ve got a bunch of assholes who had an orgy, topped it off with ritual murder using Satan as an excuse. Used the private elevator,” Eve added, gesturing toward it, “most likely, coming and going. We’ll want the security discs for that. Cleaned up after they did her. Evidence of that in the bathrooms, of which there are six in this place. Beds show signs of being used, and food and drink were consumed. Since I doubt the pentagram is part of the room’s original decor, somebody drew it on the floor. A question might be ‘Why?’ Why use a fancy, high-dollar hotel suite for your annual satanic meeting?”

“Let’s get her prints, get an ID and a time of death.” Since Peabody still looked pale, Eve opted to take the body herself. “Do a run on Pike, Jackson. His prints came up with age thirty-three, and an addy on West Eighty-eighth. He’s a doctor. See if he’s got a sheet.”

Eve stepped over to the body, doing what she could to avoid the blood. Not to preserve her shoes, but the scene. The air chilled, teased gooseflesh on her arms, and once more she felt, sensed, a pulsing.

She lifted the victim’s hand to the Identi-pad, scanned the prints.

“Marsterson, Ava, age twenty-six, single. Mixed-race female with an address on Amsterdam. Employed as office manager at the West Side Health Clinic.”

Eve tipped her head at the tattoo—a red and gold serpent swallowing its own tail—that circled the left hip. “She’s got a tat on her hip, and it’s not listed on her ID. Maybe a temp, or maybe fresh.”

She took out her gauge. “TOD, twenty-two-ten. That’s nearly an hour before Pike crashed the party down the hall.” She replaced the gauge and studied the body. “The victim’s throat is deeply slashed, in what appears to be a single blow with a sharp blade, right to left, slightly downward angle. A right-handed attacker, facing. He wanted to see your face when he sliced you open. Multiple wounds, slices, stab wounds, over shoulders, torso, abdomen, legs. Varying sizes and depths. Various blades held in various hands? Victim is posed, arms and legs spread, in the center of a black pentagram drawn directly onto the floor. Bruising on the thighs. Possible

rape or consensual sex, ME to determine. No defensive wounds. None. Didn't put up a fight, Ava? Did they just take you down by slashing your throat, then have a party on you? Tox screen to determine presence of alcohol and/or drugs."

At the knock on the door, Eve called out for Peabody.

"I got it." Peabody hustled over, used the security peep. "It's Crime Scene."

In minutes the room filled with noise, movement, equipment, and the somehow cleaner smell of chemicals. When the crew from the morgue rolled in, Eve stepped away from the body.

"Marsterson, Ava. Bag and tag. Peabody, with me. Run this Asant Group," she ordered. "We're going in to shake what we can out of Pike."

"There had to be at least a dozen people in there, Dallas. Twelve, fifteen people by the number of trays and the glasses. Why come here to do this? You can't cover it up this way, and hey, party down the hall going on at the same time with a cop right there. By the way, you look totally mag. The shoes are up to wicked."

Eve frowned down at the shoes she'd forgotten she was wearing. "Shit, shit. I've got to go into Central in this getup." She'd also, she realized, forgotten Roarke.

He leaned against the wall outside Maxia's suite doing something that entertained or interested him on his PPC. And looked up as she approached.

"Sorry. I should've told you to go home."

"I assumed you'd want the code for the car since it's not one of yours. I had the garage bring it out front. Hello, Peabody."

"Hey. You guys look superior. It's really too bad the evening got screwed for you."

"It got screwed bigger for Ava Marsterson," Eve commented. "Maxia?"

“Took a soother and went to bed. I’ll get myself home.” He caught Eve’s chin in his hand, skimmed his thumb down the dent, then kissed her. He handed her a mini memo cube. “Code’s on it. Take care, Lieutenant. Good night, Peabody.”

Peabody watched him walk away. “Boy, sometimes you just want to slurp him up without a straw.” She wheeled her eyes to Eve. “Did I say that out loud?”

## Three

Grateful she kept some workout gear in her locker, Eve stripped off the party dress, pried her aching feet out of the hated shoes, then pulled on loose cotton pants and a faded gray tee. Since she couldn't walk around Central or successfully intimidate a suspect dripping in diamonds, she had no choice but to secure them in her locker.

Safe enough, she thought. If they'd been a candy bar, odds were lower that her property would be there when she opened the locker. But a small—probably not so small—fortune in diamonds, no problem.

After stepping into an ancient pair of skids, she met Peabody in the corridor.

“No criminal. Nothing, Dallas. He had a detained and released for disturbing the peace when he was twenty. Some college fraternity party. It wouldn't be on his record except the campus cops slapped the whole fraternity over it. He's from Pennsylvania, just moved here a couple of weeks ago. He's a doctor, pretty much brand-spanking-new, and just took a position on staff at—”

“The West Side Health Clinic.”

“It's annoying to do the run if I don't get the payoff. Interview A. They got him cleaned up.”

“The victim?” Eve asked as they walked.

“Clean to the squeaky level. Moved to New York about two years ago from Indiana. Both parents and younger brother still back there. We'll have to notify them.”

“We'll take Pike first. They can wait a few hours to have their lives shattered.” She pushed open the door to the interview room, nodded to the uniform.

The uniform stepped out, and Eve walked to the table where Jack sat in the orange pants and shirt of a con. “Record on. Dallas, Lieutenant Eve, and Peabody, Detective Delia, in interview with Pike, Jackson, regarding the investigation into the death of Marsterson, Ava.”

“Ava?” Jack looked up, his face squeezed tight as if he struggled on the name. “Ava?”

“That’s right, Ava. You’ve been read your rights, Mr. Pike, is that correct?”

“Ah, I don’t know.”

“Then we’ll refresh you.” Eve recited the Revised Miranda. “Do you understand your rights and obligations?”

“I think. Yes. Why? Why am I here?”

“You don’t remember?”

“My head.” He pressed both hands to his temples. “Was I in an accident? My head hurts.”

“What do you remember about today?”

“I . . . I went to work. Didn’t I? What day is it? Is it Tuesday?”

“It’s Wednesday.”

“But . . .” Jack stared up at her. “What happened to Tuesday?”

“What drugs did you take, Jack?”

“I don’t, I don’t take drugs. I don’t do illegals. I’m a doctor. I’m on staff at . . .” He held his head again, and rocked. “Where? Where?”

“The West Side Health Clinic.”

He looked at Eve, his eyes, his face slack with relief. “Yes. Yes. That’s it. I just started. I went to work. I went to work, and then . . .” He moaned, shuddered. “Please, can I have a blocker? My head’s pounding.”

“You’ve got something in you, Jack. I can’t give you a blocker until I know what it is. Did you go to the Palace Hotel with Ava? To Suite 606?”

“Ava . . . I can’t . . . Ava works at the clinic.” Sweat shone on his face from the effort. “Ava, manages . . . Ava. We . . .” Then horror covered it. “No. No. No.”

“What happened to Ava, Jack?”

“No. No.”

“What happened in 606?”

“I don’t know. I don’t—”

“Stop!” She reached over, grabbed a fistful of his shirt. “You tell me what happened.”

“It’s not real. It didn’t happen.”

“What isn’t real?”

“The people, the people.” He surged to his feet, and Eve signaled Peabody to stay back. “The lights. The voices. Smoke and fire. And hell came.” He lurched around the interview room, holding his head. Tears leaked out of his eyes. “Laughing. Screaming. I couldn’t stop. Did I want to stop? We had sex. No. Yes. I don’t know. Bodies and hands and mouths. They hurt her. Did I hurt her? But she was smiling, smiling at me. Then her blood.”

His hands ran over his face as if wiping at it. “Her blood. All over me.”

His eyes rolled up in his head. Peabody managed to break the worst of his fall by going down with him. “Jesus, Dallas, no way this guy’s faking it.”

“No. Let’s get him into a cage. I want him on suicide watch. I want eyes on him.” She stepped to the door at the knock.

“Screening on your suspect, Lieutenant. They said you wanted it ASAP.”



“Thanks.” She took the report from a tech, scanned it. “Jesus, what doesn’t this guy have in him? Erotica, Rabbit, Zoner, Jive, Lucy.”

“Sleepy, Dopey, and Doc,” Peabody finished. Then shrugged at Eve’s frown. “Bad joke. No wonder his head’s screaming. Coming down off a cocktail like that’s gotta rip it up.”

“Get him into a cage, have a medic treat him. He’s had enough for one night.”

“He doesn’t come across like somebody who could do what was done to that woman tonight.”

“That much junk inside him, you don’t know what he could do. But he’s not a regular user. No way he could be a regular with that kind of habit and not have a single pop.”

Eve started back to her office. A couple of uniforms led a weeping woman away in the opposite direction. Outside the bullpen a guy wearing a torn and bloody shirt sat laughing quietly to himself while he rattled the restraints that chained him to the seat.

She swung into the bullpen while he went back to giggling. In her office she hit the AutoChef for coffee first, then sat at her desk. She gulped caffeine while she booted up the security discs from the hotel.

She ran the VIP check-in first, the elaborate parlor reserved for guests in the tonier suites and the triplexes. She ordered the computer to coordinate with the time stamped on the Asant Group’s check-in. And watched the parlor fuzz into white static. She ran it back, noted the glitch began thirty minutes before the log-in, and continued to twenty-three hundred.

The pattern repeated when she ran the security discs for the private elevator, and again when she ran the main lobby discs.

“Son of a bitch.” She turned to her interoffice ’link. “Peabody, wake up your cohab. I need McNab in here to dig into the security discs. They’re wiped.”

If the boy genius from the Electronic Detectives Division couldn't dig out data, she had someone who could. She contacted Roarke.

"Why are you awake?" she demanded when her 'link screen showed him at his desk.

"Why are you?"

"Oh, just a little something about a ritual murder. I thought you'd want to know that all the security discs from your hotel are compromised. Nothing but static on all starting thirty minutes before the log-in for the Asant Group."

"Are you bringing them to me or am I coming to you?"

"I've got McNab coming in, but—"

"I'm on my way."

"Wait. Listen, grab me some work clothes, will you? And my weapon harness, and—"

"I know what you need."

Her screen went black. Pissed off, she thought, and couldn't blame him. She imagined a few heads would roll at Roarke's Palace, and in short order. But meanwhile, she had useless discs on her hands, a suspect with drug-induced memory blanks, and a mutilated body at the morgue.

And it was still shy of dawn.

She opened her murder book, set up her board. According to the hotel records, the Asant Group had booked the triplex two months prior, and secured it with a credit card under the name of Josef Bellor, who carried an address in Budapest.

She fed the data into her computer, ordered a standard run. Only to learn Josef Bellor of Budapest had died there five years before at the ripe age of one hundred and twenty-one.

“Gonna be hard-pressed to get him to pay the bill,” she muttered.

One night’s booking, she thought, going over the notes. All room service delivered through the suite’s AutoChefs or pre-ordered and delivered prior to check-in. Five cases of wine, several pounds of various European cheeses, fancy breads, caviar, pâtés, cream cakes.

No point in ritual murder on an empty stomach.

So they ate, drank, orgied, she thought, pushing up to pace the small space of her office. Popped whatever illegals suited their fancy. Three floors of revelry, soundproofed high-collar digs with the privacy shades activated.

Would’ve saved the best for last, she decided. The sacrifice would’ve been the evening’s crescendo.

Just how did a nice girl from Indiana end up the star of the show? How did a transplanted young doctor from Pennsylvania get invited and left behind?

“Lieutenant.”

She turned to the sleepy-eyed McNab in her doorway. He wore pants of screaming yellow that matched the fist-sized dots shrieking over a shirt of eye-tearing green. His long blond hair was pulled back from his thin, pretty face into a tail. She wondered if the hank of it somehow balanced the weight of the tangle of silver loops in his ear.

“Doesn’t it ever give you a headache?” she wondered. “Just looking in the mirror.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Discs.” She gathered them from her desk, pushed them at them. “Find something on them. Roarke’s on his way.”

“Okay. Why?”

“They’re his discs. Palace Hotel security. I’ve already shot a report to your unit in EDD. Read it, work it. Get me something.”

He stifled a yawn, then focused on her board. "Is that the vic?"

Eve only nodded, said nothing when he came in to study the board. He'd work better and harder, she knew, if he was invested. "That's fucked up," he said. "That's seriously fucked up. And that's gotta be more than one killer." He slipped the discs into one of the pockets of his pants. "If there's an image on these, we'll get it."

If there were no images, she thought when McNab left, it meant the security had been compromised on site. Knowing how tightly any ship in Roarke's expansive fleet ran, that would've taken some serious magic.

She turned toward her 'link with the idea of tagging Roarke on his way in. And he walked into her office.

"That was quick."

"I'm in a hurry." He set a bag on her visitor's chair. "Where are the discs?"

"I just passed them off to McNab. Wait." She shot out a hand as he turned. "If the security was breached on site, how could it be done?"

"I don't know until I see the discs, do I?"

"Be pissed off later. How could it be done?"

He made an obvious effort to settle himself, then walked to her AutoChef to program coffee for himself. "It would have to be through security or electronics, and one of the top levels. Most likely both, working in tandem. No one at that level would consider a bribe of any kind worth their position."

"Threat, blackmail?"

"Anything's possible, of course, but doubtful. It would be more to their advantage to come to me with the problem than to circumvent security."

"I'll need names anyway."

He set the coffee aside, took out his PPC. After a moment's work, he nodded toward her machine. "Now you have them. And if any of my people had a part in what happened to that girl, I want to know when you know."

He walked out, his barely restrained fury leaving a bolt of energy behind. Eve blew out a breath, and since he'd forgotten his coffee, picked it up and drank it herself.

## Four

Though she had no doubt Roarke's screening process was more stringent than the Pentagon's, she ran the names he'd given her. She got clean and clear on all. If, she decided, the word from EDD was an on-site screw-up, she'd run their spouses, when applicable, and family members.

But for now she couldn't put off informing next of kin.

It took, Eve thought when she'd finished, under thirty seconds to shatter the world of two ordinary people, with ordinary lives. More time, she reflected as she turned back to her board, than it had taken to slash Ava Marsterson's throat, for her brain to process the insult. But not much. Not much more.

She rubbed the heels of her hands over eyes gritty with fatigue, then checked the time. A couple of hours until she could bitch at the lab for any results, or go to the morgue for the same on the victim's autopsy.

Enough time for a shower to clear her head before nagging EDD. She picked up the bag Roarke had left her.

"Take two hours in the crib," she ordered Peabody when she stepped back into the bullpen. "I'm going to grab a shower."

"Okay. I ran the Asant Group from every possible angle. It doesn't exist."

"It's just a cover."

"Then I tried a search for any occult holidays, or dates of import that coordinate with today—or yesterday now. Nothing."

"Well, that was good thinking. Worth a shot. It was a damn party, that's for sure. Maybe they don't need an occasion. No, no," Eve corrected herself. "It was too elaborate, planned too far in advance to just be for the hell of it."

“For the hell of it. Ha-ha. God.” Peabody rubbed her eyes. “I need those two hours down.”

“Take them now. It’s the last you’ll be seeing of the back of your eyelids for a while.”

She headed to the showers. In the locker room she checked the contents of the bag, noted that Roarke hadn’t missed a trick. Underwear, boots, pants, shirt, jacket, weapon harness, her clutch piece, communicator, restraints, spare recorder, PPC, and cash. More than she normally carried on the job. She stuffed it all in her locker, grabbed a towel, then wrapped herself in it once she’d stripped off.

In the miserly shower cube she ordered the water on full at 101 degrees. It came out in a stingy lukewarm trickle, so she closed her eyes and pretended she was home, where the shower sported multiple and generous jets that pummeled the body with glorious heat. Then spun around, soaking wet, when her instincts tingled to see Roarke standing in the narrow opening, hands in pockets.

“If this is the best the NYPSD offers it’s no wonder you’re prone to hour-long showers at home.”

“What’s wrong with you? Close the door. Anybody could walk in here.”

“I locked the door, which you neglected to do.”

“Because cops aren’t prone to sneaking peeks while another cop is in the damn shower. What are you doing?”

“Taking my clothes off so they don’t get wet. That’s the usual procedure.”

“You can’t come in here.” She jabbed a finger at him when he draped his shirt over a bench. “Cut it out. There’s barely room for me. Besides—”

“The security was breached on site. It’s going to be a very long day. I want a shower, and since she’s naked, wet, and here, I want my wife.”

He stepped in, slid his arms around her. “Not only is this excuse for a shower stall the approximate size of a coffin, but it’s bloody noisy for the amount of water dripping out.”

“Who’s the most likely to have compromised—”

“Later,” he said, and drew her in. “Later,” and covered her mouth with his.

She’d seen his eyes before their lips met; seen the worry and the fatigue in them. It was so rare for him to show either, even to her, that she instinctively wrapped around him. Need. She understood the need, not just for the physical, but for the unity.

Touch, taste, movement. Knowing who you were, each to the other, and what you became when that need brought you together.

“Anybody finds out about this,” she murmured in his ear, “I’ll get razzed for years.” She bit lightly at his lobe. “So make it good.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs when he drove into her. “Okay. That’s a start.”

He laughed, an unexpected and welcome zing of humor along with the pleasure. The old pipes clanged and rattled as he slowed his thrusts, smoothed the pace down from urgent to easy. He turned his head, found her mouth again, and drew them both down, deep, deep. Filled them both from the shimmering well of sensation and emotion.

He felt her rise up, the cry of her release tangled in the kiss. And let himself follow.

On a long, long breath, she dropped her head on his shoulder. “This is not authorized use of departmental facilities.”

“We expert civilian consultants need our perks, too.” He tipped her head up. “I adore you, Lieutenant.”

“Yeah? Then shove it over some, pal. You’re hogging what there is of the water.”



When they stepped out and she began toweling off, he lifted a brow. "Towel over drying tube? Not your usual."

"I don't trust them in here." She gave the tube a suspicious glare. "You could get fried, or maybe worse, trapped. Anyway, I gave Peabody some crib time, but I'm going to cut it short, see if they've gotten to the vic at the morgue."

"I'll be going with you."

She didn't argue; it was a waste of time. "You're not responsible for what happened to Ava Marsterson."

He watched her as he buttoned his shirt. "If you put one of your men in charge of an op, and there was a screw-up, if a civilian lost her life, who does it fall on?"

She sat to pull on her boots, tried another way. "No security, not even yours, is completely infallible."

He sat beside her on the bench. "A group of people came into my place, breached the security from the inside, and ripped a woman to pieces. I need to know how, and I need to know why. If one of my people was part of it, I'm going to know who."

"Then I'd better roust Peabody. I hope you came down in my ride," she added. "That toy we drove last night won't hold the three of us."

"I drove something that will."

"This is so mag!" Peabody bounced on the backseat of the muscular and roomy all-terrain. "First we get to zip in that way-uptown Stinger, and now we're pumping the road in this."

"Glad you're enjoying yourself," Eve commented. "We wouldn't want murder to dampen your day."

"You've got to take your ups where you get them. I've never even seen one of these before." Peabody petted the seat as she might a purring cat.

“It’s a prototype,” Roarke told her. “It won’t go on line for a couple of months yet.”

“Sweetness.”

“Peabody, as soon as you finish enjoying yourself, run the heads of security and electronics in the file. Run their spouses, parents, siblings, cohabs, offspring, spouses and cohabs of offspring. I want to know if anyone has a sheet. I want to know if anyone’s family pet has a sheet.”

“They’ve been screened,” Roarke told her. “Caro can forward you all the data.”

Eve had no doubt his efficient admin could gather and transmit data in record time. “We need to confirm, and confirm through official channels.”

When he said nothing, she took out her own PPC, copied all data to Dr. Mira’s office unit. She wanted the department’s top profiler and psychiatrist to review and analyze. Added to it, Eve thought, one of Mira’s daughters was Wiccan. Maybe, just maybe, they’d tap that source.

The cold white tiles of the morgue echoed with their footsteps. Eve scented coffee—or what passed for it here—as they strode past Vending. She scented death long before they pushed through the double doors of the autopsy room.

Ava lay naked on a slab with Chief Medical Examiner Morris working on her. His delicate and precise Y-cut opened her, exposed her. Eve heard Peabody swallow hard behind her.

Morris straightened as they came in. The protective gown covered his silver-edged blue suit. He wore his dark hair pulled back in a long, sleek tail. “Company,” he said, and the faintest of smiles moved across his exotically sexy face. “And so early in the morning. Roarke, this is unexpected.” But his eyes tracked over to Peabody. “There’s water in the friggie, Detective.”

“Thanks.” Her face glowed with sweat as she hurried over for a bottle.

“What can you tell me?” Eve asked him.

“We haven’t gotten very far. You flagged her for me specifically, and I’ve only been in about an hour. And that’s because the ME on duty was pissy that he couldn’t get his hands in.”

“I didn’t want anyone but you on her. I’d rather wait. I have a pretty good idea how it went anyway. Can you tell me if she was raped?”

“I can tell you she had rough sex—very rough—multiple times. As to whether it was consensual or not? She can’t tell us. But from the tearing, I’d say rape. Gang rape.”

“Sperm?”

“They doused her—vaginally, anally, orally to remove. I’ve already sent samples to the lab, but I wouldn’t hold my breath for DNA. I’d say multiple partners. She was brutally used, pre-and postmortem.” He looked down at the body. “There are so many levels of cruelty, aren’t there? And they all walk in our doors.”

“What about the tat? It looked fresh and real.”

“It’s both. Inked within the last twelve to fifteen hours.”

“They wanted her marked,” Eve mused. “The throat wound came first. Death blow. Right-handed assailant, facing.”

“If I were a teacher, you’d be my pet. There are sixty-eight other wounds, several of which would have been mortal on their own, some of which are relatively superficial. I want to run a closer analysis, but on a first pass, at least a dozen different blades were used on her. The bruising, from finger grips, hands, fists, feet. Some premortem. And yet—”

“Not one defensive wound,” Eve finished. “No sign she was restrained. She took it. I need to know what she took or what they gave her.”

“I’ve flagged the tox screen priority. I can tell you she wasn’t a user, unless it was very rare, very casual. This was a very healthy woman, one who

tended to her body, inside and out. There'll be a rape drug in her, something potent enough to cause her to tolerate this kind of abuse without a struggle."

"I've got somebody in the tank. He was loaded. I sent a sample to the lab. Her parents and her brother are coming in from Indiana."

"God pity them." Morris touched one sealed and bloodied hand to Ava's arm. "I'll see she's cleaned up before they view her." Morris glanced over at Roarke, with understanding in his dark eyes. "We'll take care of her," he said. "And them. You can be sure of it."

As they walked down the white-tiled tunnel, Roarke spoke for the first time. "It's a hard life you've chosen, Lieutenant. A brutal road that brings you to that so often."

"It chose me," she said, but was grateful to step outside, and into the cool air of the new spring morning.

## Five

Eve gave Roarke an Upper West Side address when they got back into the AT.

“Mika Nakamura’s worked for me for nine years.” He pulled out of the parking slot. “Four of those as head of security at the hotel.”

“Then she must be good,” Eve commented. “And should be able to explain what the hell went wrong last night. She was on the log from noon until just after twenty-three hundred. Do you usually work your people for an eleven-hour stretch?”

“No. She should have logged out at eight.” His eyes stayed on the road, his voice remained cool and flat. “Paul Chambers came on at seven. I spoke with him last night, and again this morning. He took the main hotel as Mika told him she’d handle the VIP and Towers, as she had other work to catch up on. She also told him she’d be running some maintenance on the cams.”

“Is that usual?”

“As head of security, Mika would have some autonomy. She’s earned it.”

Touchy, Eve thought. Very touchy. “Have you spoken with her?”

“I haven’t been able to reach her. And, yes, I fully intended to see her in person before you contacted me about the discs.” The tone, very cool, very level, spoke of ruthlessly restrained fury. “She wouldn’t hold the position she does if she hadn’t passed the initial screening, and the twice yearly screening thereafter.”

In the backseat, Peabody cleared her throat. “She comes up clean. So does her husband of five years. One child, female, age three. Um, born in Tokyo, and relocated to New York at age ten when her parents—who also come clean—moved here for career purposes. Attended both Harvard and Columbia. Speaks three languages and holds degrees in Communications, Hotel Management, and Psychology.”

“How did she end up yours?” Eve asked Roarke.

“I recruited her right out of college. I have scouts, you could call them, and they brought her to my attention. It’s not in the realm of any reality that she had any part in what was done to that girl.”

“She logged out about ten minutes before Pike walked into Maxia’s party. And minutes before the security for the elevators and lobby cleared. We have to look at that. She could’ve been forced, threatened.”

“There are fail-safes.” He shook his head. “She’s smart. She’s too damn smart to get herself trapped that way.”

Better to let it lie, Eve decided, until they spoke to the woman in question.

Security paid well enough, in Roarke’s domain, to warrant a tidy duplex in a tony neighborhood. People clipped along the sidewalk wearing suits and style while they sipped what she assumed was fancy fake coffee out of go-cups. Pretty women with bouncy hair herded pretty children toward what, she assumed again, would be private schools. A couple of teenagers whizzed by on air boards while a third chased after them on street blades.

Eve climbed the short steps to the door. “You can take the lead with her,” she told Roarke, “but when I step in, you have to step back.”

Rather than respond, he rang the bell.

Privacy screens shielded the front windows, and the security lock held a steady red. As the seconds ticked away, Eve wondered how a woman might go into the wind with a husband and a kid. They had a weekend home in Connecticut, she mused, and relatives in Japan. If . . .

The security light blinked green.

Mika Nakamura was a stunner. Eve had seen that from the ID shot. But at the moment, she looked hard used. Sallow skin, dull, bloodshot eyes, the tangled mess of ebony hair all spoke of a hard night, or an illness.

“Sir?” the voice rasped. Mika cleared her throat, opened the door a bit wider. She wore a long scarlet robe messily tied at the waist.

“I need to speak with you, Mika.”

“Of course. Yes. Is something wrong?”

She stepped back. Eve noted the house was dim, that the privacy screens had been boosted up to block the light. Even so, the interior was splashed with vibrant colors from rugs and art.

“Please come in. Won’t you sit down? Can I get you some coffee? Tea?”

“Aren’t you well, Mika?”

“I’m just a little off. I had my husband take Aiko out for breakfast because I can’t seem to pull it together.”

“Long night?” Eve asked, and Mika gave her a puzzled look.

“I . . . sorry?”

“My wife, Lieutenant Dallas, and her partner, Detective Peabody. I’ve been trying to reach you, Mika.”

“You have?” She pushed her hands at her hair in an absent attempt to straighten it. “Nothing’s come through. Did I . . .” She pressed her fingers to her temple. “Did I turn the ‘links off? Why would I do that?”

“Sit down.” Roarke took her arm, led her to a chair in as bold a red as her robe. He sat on the glossy black coffee table to face her. “There was an incident at the hotel last night.”

“An incident.” She repeated the words slowly, as if learning the language.

“You were on the com, Mika. You ordered Paul to cover the main hotel, though it was already covered. And you dismissed the tech from the screen room, telling them you’d be running some maintenance on the cameras.”

“That doesn’t sound right.” She rubbed at her temple again. “It doesn’t sound right.”

Eve touched Roarke’s shoulder, and though impatience flashed into his eyes, he rose. Eve took his place. “Just before sixteen hundred, you shut down the cameras in the VIP lobby and the private elevator for Suite 606. They remained off until approximately twenty-three hundred.”

“Why would I do that?”

Not a denial, Eve noted. A sincere question. “A group checked into that suite. The Asant Group. Do you know them?”

“No.”

“During the time the cameras were shut down, from your com, a woman was murdered in that suite.”

Even the sickly color faded from Mika’s cheeks. “Murdered? Oh, God. Sir —”

“Look at me, Mika,” Eve demanded. “Who told you to turn off the cameras, to send your relief away, to dismiss the tech?”

“Nobody.” Her breath went short as her pale face bunched with pain. “I didn’t. I wouldn’t. Murdered? Who? How?”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “Got a headache, Mika?”

“Yes. It’s splitting. I took a blocker, but it hasn’t touched it. I can’t think. I don’t understand any of this.”

“Do you remember going to work yesterday?”

“Of course. Of course I do. I . . .” Her lips trembled; her eyes filled. “No. No. I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything, it’s all blurred and blank. My head. God.” She dropped it into her hands, rocked herself, much as Jackson Pike had. “When I try to remember, it’s worse. I can’t stand the pain. Sir, something’s wrong with me. Something’s wrong.”



“All right now, Mika.” Roarke simply nudged Eve aside, crouched, and put his arms around the weeping woman. “We’ll take care of it. We’ll get you to a doctor.”

“Peabody, help Ms. Nakamura get dressed. We’ll have her taken down to Central.”

“Damn it, Eve.” Roarke shoved to his feet.

“Dr. Mira can examine her,” Eve said evenly, “and determine if the cause is physical or psychological. Or both.”

Roarke eased back, turned to help Mika to her feet. “Go with Detective Peabody. It’s going to be all right.”

“Someone’s dead. Did I do something? If I did—”

“Look at me. It’s going to be all right.”

It seemed to calm her. But as she continued to tremble, Peabody put an arm around her to lead her from the room.

“Same symptoms as Jackson Pike,” Eve commented. “Down the line.”

“Eve—”

“I’m cutting you a break by not getting pissed off. Don’t push it.”

He merely nodded. “I’ll stay until she’s ready to go. Then I’ve other things to see to.”

“Good.” She took out her communicator to arrange for Mika’s transportation, then contacted Mira’s office. She plowed through Mira’s admin. “I’m pulling rank, are you hearing me? If necessary I’ll go to the commander on this, and nobody’ll be happy about that. I’m ordering a priority. Dr. Mira will clear her schedule as of now. Jackson Pike, currently in custody, will be brought down to her for examination. She has the file. If she has any questions, she can reach me. In an hour, she will examine Mika Nakamura, who will be brought to Central shortly. If you have a problem,

you can take it up with me later, but you'll do exactly what I've told you, and you'll do it now."

Eve clicked off. "Ought to hook her up with Summerset." she muttered. "Couple of tight-asses." While Roarke watched thoughtfully, she contacted her own division and arranged for two uniforms to deliver Pike to Mira's office, ASAP. Satisfied, she shoved the communicator back in her pocket.

"Someone used her," Roarke began.

"Maybe."

"Used her," he repeated. "And a woman's dead because of it. Mika won't ever forget that."

"You can worry about that now. I can't."

"Understood. We're not on different sides, Eve. Just slightly different angles. She's in pain, and afraid, and confused. And she's mine. You understand that."

"Yeah." She understood that right down to the bone. "And Ava Marsterson's mine. Do I think your head of security suddenly thought it would be fun to help a bunch of lunatics carve someone up in the name of Satan? No. But there's a reason they used her, a reason they used your place, that room, that victim. There's a reason for Jackson Pike."

Eve stepped over as Peabody led Mika back into the room.

"Ms. Nakamura, do you use the West Side Health Clinic?"

"What? Yes. Aiko's pediatrician is there, and my doctor."

"Do you know Ava Marsterson?"

"I—" Mika staggered back, one hand pressed to her head. "Who? I can't think through the pain."

Eve glanced at Roarke. "I take that as a yes."

“She’s straight, Dallas.” Peabody brooded out the window of the AT. “She could barely stand for the pain, but she fought to push through it. Worried about her husband and kid, sick—seriously sick—at the idea someone died while she had the com.” She glanced at Eve. “Just like Pike. So you have to think, given the circumstances . . . Ritual magic, on the black side, the gathering of, well, power. By all appearances and all evidence, the ability to cause two straight arrows to behave in a way opposed to their character. We could be dealing with a spell.”

Eve’s brown eyes narrowed. “I knew you were going to get around to that.”

“It’s not unprecedented,” Peabody insisted. “There are sensitives, unscrupulous sensitives who’ve used their gifts for their own gain, their own purpose. Black magic’s taking those gifts, that power, and distorting it.”

“Jackson Pike was loaded with drugs.”

“Add drugs to the mix, it’s easier to bend the will. There was something in that suite, something left over.” Peabody rubbed her arms as if suddenly chilled. “You felt it, too.”

She didn’t argue, because that much was true. “I’m not buying that some witch can . . .” Eve waved a hand in the air. “And get some normal guy to start hacking someone with a knife.”

“I don’t think he did. I think he was supposed to be another sacrifice—or maybe just the patsy.” When Eve didn’t respond, Peabody scowled. “You don’t want to buy into the power deal, but going straight logic, why does this group plan all this and include some young doctor who’s only been in New York a couple of weeks, and has no ties, none to anything off prior to that? You don’t bring some newbie in on the big deal. You don’t—”

“You’re right.”

“Listen, I’m just saying . . . I’m right?”

“About Pike, yeah, you’re right. Maybe they were going to off him, too. Or maybe they pulled him in to take the rap. Drugged the shit out of him, left

him behind. He's got no defense. Naked, full of illegals, covered with the vic's blood, and carrying around one of the knives used on her. Still, they'd have to figure we'd know he didn't do it alone, and once the drugs wear off, we examine him, work with him, he could start to remember some details."

Peabody pondered on it a moment. "Okay, look, you don't buy the magic, but you'll agree that people who get together to light candles, have orgies that end in human sacrifice probably do."

"I'll give you that."

"And can be persuasive—especially if they have a gift, are a sensitive, especially if the person they're persuading is doped up."

"Okay." Eve nodded.

"So, to dissuade we need someone with a gift, someone who believes, to break the spell."

"You want to bring in a witch? Christ."

"It's an option," Peabody pushed.

"Mira's going to examine them, and determine the root of the physical and/or psychological blocks. Let's stick with reality, for just a little while."

She shot up to a slot on a second-level street parking. "Trosky, Brian, on the desk at the time of the group check-in. Let's see what he remembers, or if he's got himself a really bad headache this morning."

Eve strode across the sidewalk and into the apartment building. As it didn't boast a doorman or clerk, she went straight to the intercoms, pressed the one labeled Trosky.

When no response came, Eve bypassed the elevator lock. "Third floor," she ordered.

The music blasted out the moment the doors opened on three. A woman stood beating on the door of 305, Trosky's apartment. "Brian, for chrissake,

turn it down .”

“Problem?” Eve asked at close to a shout.

“Yeah, unless you’re frigging deaf. He’s had that music blaring like that for over an hour. I work nights. I gotta get some sleep.”

“He doesn’t answer the door? Did you try his ’link?”

“Yeah. It’s not like him, I gotta say. He’s a nice guy. Good neighbor.” She beat on the door again. “Brian, for chrissake!”

“Okay, move aside.”

When Eve pulled out her master, the woman goggled. “Hold on, hold on a minute. You can’t just go breaking into somebody’s place. I’m calling the cops.”

“We are the cops.” Eve nodded at Peabody as she used the master, and Peabody pulled out her badge.

“Oh, wow, oh, shit. Is he in trouble? I don’t wanna get him in trouble.”

Eve pushed open the door, felt her eardrums vibrate at the force of the music. “Mr. Trosky, this is the police!” she shouted. “We’re coming in. Music, off,” she ordered, but the roar of it continued. “Peabody, find the source of that noise and kill it. Trosky! This is the NYPSP!”

She drew her weapon, but kept it down at her side as she scanned the living area—trashed—then the bump-out of the kitchen. She moved to the open bedroom door.

He lay across the bed, tangled in the bloody sheets. She swept the room and the adjoining bath, though instinct told her Brian Trosky hadn’t been attacked, that the hammer that had caved his skull—to stop the pain?—had been wielded by his own hand.

## Six

Same side, Roarke thought as he walked into Spirit Quest, different angles. Eve would always search for the logical, the rational. He was a bit more flexible. And so he'd come to talk to the witch.

The shop was pretty, even festive in its way with its crystals and stones, its bells and candles, its colorful bowls and thriving herbs. Its scent was spring meadow, he thought, with a hint of moonlight.

In the small space with the murmur of harps and flutes as background, people browsed. He watched a woman in a flowing white dress carry a ball of smoky crystal to the counter where the young, fresh-faced clerk instructed her solemnly on how to charge the ball by moonlight, how to cleanse it.

When the purchase had been made, wrapped and bagged, Roarke took a step toward the counter. He needn't have bothered, as she stepped out of the back room with an awareness in her dark eyes that told him she'd sensed him—or in the more pedestrian method, had seen him on a security screen.

"Welcome back."

"Isis." He took the hand she offered, held it—and yes, felt that frisson of something. Some connection.

"You're not here to shop," she said in her warm, throaty voice, "which is too bad considering the depths of your pockets. Come upstairs, we'll be comfortable and you can tell me what you need to know."

She led the way, through the back, up the stairs. She moved gracefully, athletically, an Amazon goddess of considerable height and generous curves. Her flaming hair fell in mad curls nearly to the waist of the snug white top she wore, just teasing the back of the first of the many layers of her skirt, a rainbow of hues. She turned at the door, smiled at him out of

those onyx eyes. Her face was bold, broad featured with skin of a dull, dreamy gold.

“Once, in another life, we sought comfort together for more than talk.” Her smile faded. “But now it’s death, again it’s death that brings you here. And weighs on you. I’m sorry.”

She stepped into the living area of an apartment as exotic and appealing as her shop. “Your Eve is well?”

“Yes. Chas?”

She let out a laugh. “Snuck down to the deli for coffee,” she said, referring to her lover. “We pretend he’s having a walk. But you can’t live with and love another and not know at least some of their secrets.”

He stared into her dark eyes, so compelling—so eerily familiar. “Did I know yours, once upon a time?”

She gestured to a chair, took her own. “We knew each other, and loved very well. But I was not your love, your only. You found her then, as you’ve found her again. And always will. You knew when you first saw her. At the first scent, the first touch.”

“I did. It was . . .” He smiled a little, remembering his first contact with Eve. “Annoying.”

“Does she know you’ve come?”

“No. We don’t always follow the same lines, even though we usually end in the same place. I don’t know if you can help, or if I have a right to bring death to your door.”

“Not ordinary death.” Isis took a long, slow breath. “Has someone used the arts to cause harm?”

“I don’t know. They have, at least, used the illusion of them to kill an innocent woman. You haven’t heard of this?”

“We’ve only just opened this morning, and I don’t listen to the media reports.” Rings glittered and gleamed on her fingers as she laid her hands on the arms of her chair, settled back. “What would I have heard?”

He told her then, watched her lovely skin pale, her eyes go darker yet. “Do you know of them? The Asant Group?”

“No, and I would have.” Her fingers stroked the smooth blue stone of the pendant she wore, as if for comfort. “I hear both the dark and the light. Suite 606. Or 666 with such little change. You didn’t know this girl?”

“No.”

“You brought nothing of hers, nothing she owned, wore, touched?”

“I’m sorry, no.”

Still pale, Isis nodded. “Then to help you, you need to take me there. To where they sacrificed her.”

Eve shot over to the West Side Clinic. “They had to troll for the victim here. Scoop up the new doctor, connect with Mika. Somebody on staff, a patient, one of the goddamn cleaning crew.”

“Do you really think Pike or Mika might try to kill themselves like Trosky?”

“Mira’s notified. It won’t happen. It’s not even noon,” Eve replied.

“Sure could use lunch though.”

“Maybe he did slip out on them, or came to sooner than they figured. Walked into the party. Impromptu party, Maxia just planned it the day before. Couldn’t know he’d walk right in to another penthouse. Couldn’t know a cop and the owner of the hotel would be right there, that we’d find the body minutes later.”

“Without the party he might’ve wandered around the floor for hours, or . . . gotten down to a lower floor, even the lobby,” Peabody agreed. “Nobody would’ve zeroed right in on 606.”



“What you’d get is a lot of civilian screaming, running, security taking him down. Cops get called in. At some point, they’re going to check the discs, but they don’t know the exact time frame, so it’d take a while, and a while longer to pinpoint 606 and find her. If three of the key players kill themselves before we interview them thoroughly, before they’re examined by a professional, what’ve we got?”

“What looks like the new guy in town luring a pretty girl to her death, and being in league with the other two, being part of a cult.”

“Yeah, you could waste some time on that. They may not be ready for us.” Eve swung toward the curb, coldly double-parking. “Not quite ready.” She flipped on her On Duty sign, stepped out, and walked to the clinic.

Babies cried. Why, she wondered, did they always sound like invading aliens? People sat with the dead-eyed stare of the ill or the terminally bored. Eve crossed over to the check-in desk where a brunette looked at her with tear-ravaged eyes.

“I’m sorry, we’re not taking walk-ins today. I can refer you to—” She broke off when Eve laid her badge on the counter. “Oh. Oh. Ava.” Tears popped out, fat and fast. “It’s about Ava.”

“Who’s in charge here?”

“I—I—Ava really managed the clinic. She really handled everything. I don’t understand how—”

“Sarah.” Another woman in a smart suit stepped up, touched the receptionist’s shoulder. “Go on into the break-room for a little while. It’s all right.”

“I’m sorry, Leah. I just can’t stand it.” She rose, fled.

“I’m Leah Burke.” The older brunette held out a hand, gave Eve’s a firm shake. “One of the nurse practitioners. We only heard about Ava a couple of hours ago. We’re all just . . . Well, we’re reeling. Please, come back. I need to find someone to cover the desk. We can use Dr. Slone’s office, he’s

with a patient. Left, then right, then the third door on the right. I'll be right with you."

Eve tried to ignore the images of what might be going on behind the closed doors of examination rooms. She hated clinics, hospitals, doctors, MTs. If they were medicals, she wanted them to keep their damn distance.

Slone's office was polished and prim. Diplomas in black frames made the walls important, while a photo of a hot blonde on the desk added that personal touch. Sturdy, straight-back chairs ranged in back and in front of the wide desk.

"Run her," Eve told Peabody.

"Already am. Forty-eight years old, divorced. One child, female, deceased. Aw, jeez, hit while crossing the street. Drunk driver. Graduated Columbia Medical School. Put in ten years at the free clinic in Alphabet City, took five years as professional mother, did another two in Alphabet City, unemployed for a year after her kid died, then came here. Six years in. No criminal. She—"

At Eve's signal, Peabody lowered her PPC. A moment later Leah hurried in. "I'm very sorry. We're all turned around and upset today. We're scrambling to reschedule appointments, and deal with patients when we can't. Do you want Ava's medical and employment records? Dr. Collins authorized us to turn them over to the police if you came for them."

"Yeah, we'll take them. And Dr. Pike's."

"Jack?" She seemed to sink. "We were afraid . . . We haven't been able to reach him, and he didn't come in for his shift. They were together last night. Their first date."

"Is that so?"

"Ava was so nervous, and Jack was so sweet. I can't believe they're dead."

"She is; he isn't. Where were they going?"

“What? He’s all right?” Her eyes widened, went shiny with tears. “Jack’s all right?”

“He’ll do. Do you know where they were going?”

“Ah, just something casual. Dinner and vid, maybe a club. What happened? Can you tell us what happened? The reports don’t make any sense, and when we call for information, we can’t get any. We’re all—”

She stepped aside as the door opened. He was an imposing man, maybe six-two, lean as a whip with a sharply chiseled face. His eyes were green with a touch of gold, his hair a deep bronze.

“Dr. Slone, this is . . . I’m sorry, I’m so turned around. I didn’t get the names. The police.”

“Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody.”

“Yes, of course. Leah, see to Sarah, will you? She should go home.” He went to his desk, sat behind it. “What happened to Ava?”

“She was murdered.”

“Mutilated, the reports say. The word was ‘mutilated.’ ”

“That would be accurate.”

He breathed slowly in, slowly out. “In a hotel room. I find it hard to believe Ava would go to a hotel room with Jack on a first date. With anyone for that matter.”

“She was a young healthy woman. Young healthy women often go to hotel rooms on a date.”

“She was shy, and what I’m sure you’d think of as old fashioned.” The flare of anger brought out the gold in his eyes. “She must have been forced to go there, and Jack would never force her, or anyone. Where is Dr. Pike?”

“He’s in custody.”

Now Slone rose from his seat. "You've arrested him? For this?"

"I said he was in custody, not that he was under arrest."

Disdain tightened his face as he stared holes through Eve. "Does he have a lawyer?"

"He hasn't requested one."

"I won't have that boy accused of this. I brought him here. Do you understand? I brought him here."

"You recruited him," Eve said, thinking of Roarke's earlier statement.

"He's a fine doctor, a fine young man. A healer, not a killer. I'll personally arrange for his counsel."

"That's your choice. Where were you last night, Dr. Slone?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Eve often wondered why people used that phrase when they really meant "fuck you."

"It's routine. What time did you leave the clinic?"

"I left about four, and walked home. I believe I arrived close to five."

"Can anyone verify that? Your wife, your staff?"

"It was our housekeeper's day off," he said stiffly. "My wife was out. She got home shortly after seven. I resent the implications of this."

"I'm going to implicate the same to the rest of the staff and employees of the clinic. I can use your office, or conduct the implications downtown."

"We'll see what my lawyer has to say about that."

Before he could reach for his 'link, Eve snatched Peabody's bag, and pulled out the still of Ava at the crime scene.

“Take a look, take a good one.” Eve slapped the photo on his desk. “Then curl your lip at my implications and call your damn lawyer.”

He didn’t pale; he didn’t tremble. But he looked for a very long time. And when he raised his head his eyes were hard, and they were cold. “She was hardly more than a child. Use the office. I’ll notify the others. They’ll have to speak with you between patients.”

He strode out, shut the door behind him.

“He’s got a mean bedside manner,” Eve commented.

“So do you, sir.”

With a shrug, Eve dipped her hands into her pockets. “Run him. Run them all.”

## Seven

While Isis gathered what she needed, Roarke took out his 'link to contact Eve. He struggled against the resentment that burned through him at the idea he felt obligated to get clearance from his wife to enter his own property. And, he realized, resented the struggle against the resentment.

Bloody cops, he thought, and their bloody procedure. And then, bloody hell when he was dumped straight to her voice mail.

"Well then, if you can't be bothered to answer your 'link, I'll tell you that I've my own expert. I want her to have a pass at the crime scene, so I'll be taking her there shortly. Any problem with that, well, you'll have to get back to me, won't you? And we'll see if I can be bothered answering my 'link."

When he clicked off he saw Isis watching him with amusement dancing in her eyes. "Two strong-headed, strong-willed people, both not only used to giving orders but to having them obeyed. It must be an interesting and stimulating life you have together."

"There are times I wonder how we ever managed to get through two hours together much less two years. And other times I wonder how either of us survived before we found each other."

"She'll be angry with you for taking me to this place."

"No, what she'll be is right pissed. But they used my place, you see, and at least one of my people. So pissed she'll have to be. I'm grateful to you for doing this."

"Gifts aren't free. What I have, what I am makes its own demands. Will you take this?" She held out a small white silk bag tied with a silver cord.

"What is it?"

“A protection charm. I’d like you to carry it when we go in that room together.”

“All right.” He slipped it in his pocket, felt it bump lightly against the gray button he habitually carried there. Eve’s button, he mused, and wasn’t that a kind of charm? “I’ve been in before.”

“Yes. And what did you feel?”

“Beyond the anger, the pity? I suppose if I were a fanciful man I’d say I caught the scent of hell. It’s not sulphur and brimstone. It’s the stench of cruelty.”

Isis took a long breath. “Then we’ll go. And we’ll look.”

In Slone’s office, Eve glanced at the readout on her ‘link, and let the transmission go to voice mail. Roarke would have to wait, she decided, and turned back to Sarah Meeks. The receptionist had a soother in her now, but tears still trembled.

“Where were Ava and Jack going?”

“They weren’t sure. They both wanted to keep it light, you know? First date, and you work in the same place, so if it doesn’t work out . . .”

“Did they leave together, from here?”

“No—I mean, I don’t think so. She was—they were—still here when I left. But I know she planned to go home first. Even though it was casual, Ava wanted to fuss a little, so she was going home to change.”

“What time did you leave?”

“About three. I came on at seven yesterday, and left around three.”

“Who else was here when you left?”

“Oh, let’s see. Dr. Slone, and Dr. Collins, and Dr. Pratt. Um, Leah, Kiki, Roger, one of our physician assistants, and . . .”

Eve took notes as Sarah listed names.

“Was Ava seeing anyone else?”

“No. I mean, she dated sometimes, but not a lot, and nothing serious. There was just this spark, you know, between her and Jack. We all thought they might . . .”

“Did she have any interest in the occult?”

“The what? You mean, like ghosts or something?”

“Or something.”

“I don’t think so. Ava was . . .” She trailed off again, as if trying to find the word. “Grounded. That’s it. She was just really real. She loved her job here, and was so good at it. Good with the staff, the patients. She remembered people’s names, and what they came in for, and what everybody liked in their coffee.”

“Was there anyone who showed a particular interest in her—other than Jack?”

“Everyone did. She was like that. Everybody loved Ava.”

Eve sent Sarah out, sniffing. “Anything pop on those runs?” she asked Peabody .

“Nothing that sings. You’ve got a lot of highly educated people on staff. Slone’s married, two kids, no criminal. Wife’s an interior designer. Homes in the city, in the Hamptons , and in Colorado . Collins, Dr. Lawrence, second marriage, two offspring from each, no criminal. Current wife is professional mother. Upper West Side digs here, and a home in Costa Rica . Pratt—”

“Copy the data to my pocket unit.” Eve paced the office. “This is going to take a while. We need to split up. Go over and check Ava’s apartment. Have EDD pick up her electronics. I’ll meet you back at Central when we’re done here.”

“Okay. You know, Dallas , we’re both going to need sleep at some point.”



“We’ll get to that. Tell them to get someone else in here.”

At least one of the killers was here, Eve thought. She was sure of it. The vic hadn’t been in the city two full years, and from what Eve had learned, most of her time and energy and interest funnelled into her work. These were her contacts, her people.

Pike, brand-spanking-new.

It was possible they’d run afoul of someone at Ava’s apartment—and Peabody would ferret that out, if so. But logic said both Ava and Jack had known at least one of her killers well enough to trust.

And what easier place was there to drug someone than in a health center? The place was full of drugs—and people who, in Eve’s opinion, just loved sticking them into other people. Subdue them here, she speculated, give them enough happy juice to make them compliant and transport them to the hotel, where one or more partners has already dealt with Mika and Trosky.

Get them upstairs, she imagined, and let the party begin. Had to be early. The whole thing had been done by twenty-three hundred, latest. It took time to eat, drink, orgy, and perform a human sacrifice.

She glanced up as the door opened. The man who hurried in was about five-ten and carrying a good five excess pounds in the belly. His round face held a pleasant if harried smile. Eyes of faded green radiated both fatigue and kindness. He scooped his hand through his short tangle of brown hair.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting. We’re . . . well, we’re short-staffed today, as you know. We didn’t have enough time to notify all the staff, the patients, and close today.” He sat, wearily. “I think we’re all running on sheer nerves. Sorry, I’m Dr. Collins, Larry Collins.”

“Lieutenant Dallas. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s incomprehensible. At least a half dozen times today I’ve started to ask Ava for something. In the six months or so since she’s been here, she’s become the hub of the practice.”

“You’re aware she was planning to see Dr. Pike last night, socially.”

“Yes. We were all invested, a bunch of matchmakers.” His lips compressed on the term. “And now . . . Jack couldn’t have hurt her, Lieutenant. It’s just not possible.”

“What time did she leave yesterday?”

“Ah, let me think. I believe she was still here when I left, and that would have been close to five. Yes, yes, because I said good night to her and—” He broke off, looked away, struggled for composure. “—and good luck.”

“Where did you go?”

“I went home, and had a drink.” He smiled a little. “My last patient of the day was a very, let’s say, active and opinionated five-year-old.”

“You’re a pediatrician?”

“That’s right.”

Eve nodded, watching him. “I have to ask, it’s routine. Is there anyone who can verify your whereabouts from five P.M. to midnight?”

“My wife. She fixed me the drink, bless her. We had a quiet evening at home as the kids were spending the night with friends.”

“All right. Who was here when you left, other than Ava?”

“I’m not entirely sure.” He furrowed his brow in thought. “I think Rodney, one of our nurses, and Kiki, a lab tech. I know the waiting room was clear, because I commented on it to Ava. We try to close at five, but realistically it’s nearer to six most days.”

“Dr. Pike? Was he still here?”

“I didn’t see him. Of course, he may have been with a patient.”

“Thanks for your time. I may have some followups later, but for now, that’s it. Would you send either Kiki or Rodney in?”

“I think Rodney’s on his lunch break, but I’ll see that Kiki’s told you’re waiting.” He rose, walked to the desk where she sat, offered a hand. “Thank you, Lieutenant, for all you’re doing.”

She got to her feet first so their eyes would be level. She thought of when she might grab a meal, and took his hand. “It’s my job.”

“All the same.” He held her hand, her eyes a moment longer, then released it. “Thank you.”

She waited until he’d left the room before she spoke for her recorder. “Note, Dr. Lawrence Collins is a sensitive. And one who doesn’t mind poking into another’s mind without permission.”

Hope he enjoyed her thoughts of pepperoni pizza, Eve mused. Then checking the time, pulled out her ’link to check her messages.

She was snarling and steaming before Roarke’s message played out. “Son of a bitch!” She tagged him back. “You’d better answer, goddamn it, you’d just better—Stay out of my crime scene,” she snapped out when his face came on screen.

“That crime scene is a suite in my hotel.”

“Look, pal—”

“You look for a change. One of my people is in custody. Another, I’ve just been informed, is dead by his own hand. I won’t sit and do nothing.”

“I’m getting somewhere here, and I’ll be in contact with Mira within the hour. She’ll have finished the initial exams, and if she gets the results I think I may have enough for a search warrant.”

“That’s all very well, and good for you. Meanwhile, I’ve my own line to tug, and at the end of it, you may have enough for arrest warrants.”

“You can’t just walk into a crime scene and take someone with you. Who the hell is with you?”

“Isis.”

There was a long, stunned silence. “You’re taking a witch into my crime scene? What the hell’s wrong with you? If the two of you compromise—”

“Your sweepers and techs have been through, the scene’s been recorded and photographed, evidence removed and logged. You’ve been over that suite top to bottom yourself. Added to that, goddamn right back at you, I didn’t come down in the last shower of rain. I know what’s to be done to protect the bleeding scene.”

“You both need a nap,” Eve heard Isis say, very pleasantly.

“Listen. I’m on the Upper West Side, finishing up interviews with the staff at the health center. I’ll be done in about thirty minutes, and can be at the hotel in forty. Wait. Just wait until I get there.”

There was another silence, then she saw him nod. “Forty minutes,” he said and clicked off.

Eve hissed out a breath, kicked Slone’s desk. She might have kicked it a second time, but the door opened.

The woman who came in reeked of Neo-Goth. The black hair, red lips, and the silver hoop through her pierced left brow projected a kind of careless defiance that merged with the tattoo that peeked out from the slope of her breast.

Eve might have considered it all a matter of personal style, along with the snug black top and pants, the chunky black boots, but for the smug gleam in the black-lined eyes.

Weak link, Eve thought, and smiled. “Hello, Kiki.”

“I’m swamped.” She dumped herself in a chair. “So let’s cut to it. I left about five—Ava, the pure and wholesome—was still here, all shiny-eyed about her date with Dr. Dull. I lit out, met up with some friends downtown. We hit some clubs, got trashed, hung out, and I got home about two. Is that it?”

“Not quite. I’ll need the names and contact information for your friends.”

Kiki shrugged, rattled off names and 'link numbers.

"You didn't like Ava?"

"Wasn't my type, that's all. Too bad she's dead and all that. Saint Jack probably freaked when she wouldn't put out, and did her." Now those eyes glittered. "But since I wasn't there, I don't know. Ava and I weren't buds, so I got no clue what she was into. You need more, you'll have to catch me later. I'm backed up."

"Thanks for your time."

"Whatev."

Eve waited a few seconds, then walked to the door, stepped out. She saw Kiki at the end of the corridor in an intense conversation with Leah Burke. The moment Leah spotted Eve coming toward them, she squeezed a hand on Kiki's arm to silence her, and started forward. "Lieutenant, can I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Rodney."

"He's not back from his break." She checked her wrist unit. "He should be only a few more minutes. He's very prompt."

"Okay, I'll take Dr. Pratt."

"He's still with a patient. I can't—"

"I'll keep it short. I'm sure we'll all be happy when this is done. Before you interrupt him, what time did you leave last night?"

"Me? Ah, just after five."

"Was Ava still here?"

"No, she'd just left. I, ah, scooted her along, actually, so she could get ready for her date. I closed up last night."

"You were the last to leave?"

“That’s right.”

“And where did you go?”

“I went home. I, ah, walked home, changed, had some dinner.”

“You didn’t go out again?”

“No.”

“Make or receive any calls, have any visitors?”

“No, it was a quiet night. Lieutenant, I have patients myself.”

“Okay. I’ve only got a couple more staff members, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

Eve stepped back into Slone’s office. Collins, Burke, and Kiki, she thought, were top of her suspect list. She scanned Silas Pratt’s data, but he didn’t keep her waiting long.

He strode in, a sharply handsome man with an air of confidence. His eyes were a laser blast of blue, and she could admit they gave her a jolt. When he offered his hand she allowed herself to think just that: Here’s a great-looking man with killer eyes.

He smiled at her. “Lieutenant, I’m Silas Pratt.”

Her heart pumped a little harder as he squeezed her hand. She felt the probe of his gaze, and yes, of his power, like heat along her brain. “Have a seat, Dr. Pratt,” she said and removed her hand from his.

“Can you tell me if you have any leads? Other than Jack. No one who knows him will believe Jack did this to our Ava.”

“You’ve only known him a couple of weeks.”

“That’s true. Peter recruited him, but I like to think I’m a good judge of character. What they’re saying was done to Ava, well, it’s monstrous, isn’t it? And to someone so young, so vibrant.”

Now he did sit, and passed a hand over those potent eyes. “I thought of her almost as a daughter.”

“You don’t have children. According to your official data.”

“No. But it was easy to feel a paternal kind of affection for Ava.”

“I don’t want to intrude any longer than necessary.” And she wanted out, Eve admitted. There was a heat in the room now, a kind of singeing of the air. “When did you leave yesterday?”

“About quarter to five. Ava was getting ready to leave, I remember. Leah was shooing her out. She and Jack—well, you know about all that.”

“Yes. Did you approve of that? One of your doctors dating your office manager.”

He looked surprised by the question, even bemused. “They were both adults—and frankly, they seemed besotted with each other from the first minute.”

“Where did you go when you left?”

“Home to change. My wife and I had a small dinner party last evening. A few friends.”

“I apologize, but it’s routine. I’ll need the names and contact numbers.”

“Of course.” He smiled at her. “No apology necessary.” And he gave her six names. She thanked him, dismissed him. Then added those names to her list of suspects.

## Eight

Roarke arranged lunch for himself and Isis in the owner's suite of the hotel, and passed the forty minutes eating food that didn't interest him while making polite small talk with a witch.

"When's the last time you slept?" Isis asked him.

"I suppose it's been about thirty-two hours now. She'll push herself until she drops, you see. Eve."

"And you relax and recreate?"

"More often than she. But no, in this case, in this particular case, I suppose we'll both push. Her time's up, so if you've finished, I'll take you to 606."

"First." She rose, stepped to him, and placed her hand on his head. "No, relax, just for a moment. Clear your mind. You can trust me."

A warm flow, he thought. Not the quick burst of energy that came from popping a booster, but more of a slow, steady build of stamina.

"Better?"

"Thank you, yes."

"It won't last long, but between that and the little you ate, it should get you through. What you need is some rest." She picked up her bag. "I'm ready."

He led her to the elevator.

"You said there's a private elevator that opens into the suite, as well as the doors to the hallways."

"That's right."

"I want to see it from the outside first. I want to go through the door, not through a machine."



“All right. Sixtieth floor,” he ordered. “Main bank.”

“I’ll ask you, whatever happens, not to leave me alone.”

“I won’t.” When the elevator doors opened, Roarke took her hand.

The bloody footprints still walked the carpet. Blood smears marred the walls where Jack had laid his hand for balance. In Roarke’s hand, Isis’s fingers tensed.

“People think of it as a cliché.” She stared at the door where the tail of blood made a six from the middle zero. “But it has power and meaning. It should be cleaned—all of this—with blessed water as soon as possible.”

Roarke stepped forward, drew out his master. And Eve strode off the elevator like vengeance.

“Wait. Didn’t I tell you to wait?”

“And so I did.” Roarke turned to her, his gaze as icy as hers was hot. “You’re late.”

She put herself between him and the door. “I know who did this. At least I know some of them. I can close this without the mumbo.”

“Nice to see you again, Eve.”

Eve shifted her gaze to Isis. “No offense. I appreciate you being willing to help, and in fact, have some questions you may be able to answer. You don’t have to see what’s in there.”

“I’ve already seen some of it, through him and now through you. Seen what’s trapped in your minds. But I can’t feel unless I go in. I can’t feel or see what she saw and felt unless I go in. I might help, I might not, but he needs it.”

Isis took Eve’s arms so that for a moment, she stood as the link between Eve and Roarke. “You know that.”

Eve yanked out her master and turned to the door. “When I say it’s done, it’s done,” she stated.

Roarke slipped the protection charm into her pocket as she unsealed the door.

She stepped in first. “Lights on full.” She turned quickly when she heard Isis let out a quick, shuddering breath. But Isis put out a hand, and took another step into the room.

“It reeks still, and will until it’s cleansed. No one can stay here until a cleansing. You feel it, do you feel it? This is not the work of a dabbler, not the vile work of one who only seeks blood and death for their own sake. This is power and purpose, and it brought the dark.”

“You’re going to tell me they called up Satan?”

Isis turned her black eyes on Eve. “I imagine he has more important things to do than answer a summons. But evil can be called, and it can be fed. You can’t do what you do and believe otherwise. Or see what you see.”

She stared at the pentagram, and the pools and rivers of blood that washed over it. “She doesn’t know me, neither in body nor spirit. I need some of her blood. Get that, while I prepare.”

She knelt and began taking items from her bag.

Eve said, “Crap,” but she stalked off to get swabs from the bathroom amenities.

“I’ll need three. Head, heart, hand.” Isis set out candles, crystals, herbs.

Though she rolled her eyes, Eve crossed to the pentagram. If she felt a pull when she stepped into it, she willfully pushed it away. She slapped a look toward Roarke as she coated the swabs. “If it ever gets out that I not only allowed but participated in some voodoo bullshit—”

He crouched beside her, took her free hand. “My lips are sealed as long as you want them to be. I owe you for this.”

“Damn right you do.”

“You’re so tired, darling Eve.” Before she could evade, he leaned to her, brushed her lips with his.

“There’s power there, too,” Isis murmured. “We’ll need it. Light the candles, please, and stand with me. Together with me while I cast the circle. Hurry. I can’t stay here long.

“The power of three in light,” she said as Roarke lit the candles. “The power of three in flesh.” She took a bag and walked a circle of salt around them. “Order the lights off,” she commanded, and when only the candles lit the room, she began to chant in a language Eve didn’t recognize.

With a curved knife she turned, like the hand of a compass. Her face glowed; her eyes burned. She placed crystals at the compass points of the circle, then sprinkled herbs into the water she’d poured into a small copper bowl.

Whether it was fatigue or the power of suggestion, Eve felt something cold, cold, brutally cold push against the air.

“It cannot enter what is light. It cannot enter what is bright. And we will not open !” Isis threw her hands high, and her biceps quivered with the strain. “I am daughter of the sun, sister of the moon. I am child and servant of the goddess. In this place, at this hour, I call upon her power. Into me, into mine, bring both light and sight divine. Set the murdered spirit free, send her essence into me.

“The power of three, by her blood.”

Isis smeared Ava’s blood on her forehead, on her breast, on her hand. And falling to her knees, she shook. Her eyes glazed like black glass while her face went white as wax. Horror etched into her features. Both Eve and Roarke dropped down beside her. Her hands grasped theirs, her fingers tightened like wires.

“She’s in some sort of trance. We have to get her out.”

“We gave our word,” Roarke reminded her. “Christ, she’s cold as ice.”

Isis bowed back until her head nearly touched the floor. And screamed. For one mad moment, Eve imagined she saw a gash open and gush blood from her throat. And when the witch slumped, Eve wasn’t certain if she was unconscious or dead.

“Fuck this, we’re getting her out of here now.”

“Don’t leave the circle.” Isis’s voice was weak, but her eyes fluttered open. “Don’t. The red bottle there. I need it, and a little help to sit up.”

They eased her up, and taking the bottle, she sipped slowly from it. “It’s not an illegal,” she said, with both pain and humor in her eyes. “A potion. There’s always a price for power.”

“You’re in pain,” Eve said flatly. “We need to get you out of here.”

“The circle needs to be closed as it was opened. Properly. Then, yes, we all need to get out of here.”

When it was done, and her tools gathered again, Isis leaned on Roarke while Eve resealed the door.

“Can we go back to where we had lunch? I’ll tell you what I can tell you, but I want to be away from here.”

In the owner’s suite, Roarke helped her to the couch, tucked pillows behind her head. “What do you need?” he asked her.

“A really big glass of wine.”

“I can get that for you. Lieutenant?”

“Coffee. I understand you’re a sensitive,” Eve began, “and you believe, strongly believe in your . . . faith.”

“You sometimes hear the cries of the dead. Feel their pain, and know their need for you. We’re not so far apart.” Isis closed her eyes a moment, opening them when Roarke brought her wine. She drank slowly, as she had

her potion. “She was a lovely child. I saw some of what they did to her. Not all, I think, not all, but enough. She was inside herself, screaming to get out, but trapped there. There are ways to trap a spirit, with drugs, and other methods. She drank what they gave her, ate, let them touch her. She had no choice. They marked her with a serpent.”

Eve thought of the tattoo, said nothing.

“Sex for power. Well, for some of them, it was only sex—the greed for it, the meanness of it. No love, not even lust. Just greed and violence and power. The one they brought her first, not one of them. Trapped as she was. Something there.”

Isis touched a hand to her forehead, sipped more wine. “Something light between them,” she continued. “Light and new, twisted now when they coupled on the sign. Snuffing out that fragile light with chants and drugs and power until it, too, turned mean. They raped her, took him away and raped her, again and again while she lay unable to fight, to resist. And her trapped spirit screaming, screaming.”

“Easy now,” Roarke murmured, and took Isis’s hand. “Easy.”

She nodded, gathered herself again. “They pulled her up, dragged her to the one who leads them. She looked at him. He said her name, and she looked in his eyes when he cut her throat.

“And they fell on her like beasts. I couldn’t bear any more. I couldn’t bear it.”

Eve rose and walked away while Isis wept in absolute silence, while Roarke sat with her, held her hand. She walked to the wide glass doors, yanked them open, and stepped out into the spring air that buzzed like a mad hive from the city.

When Roarke came out, she continued to stare out at the snarls of traffic, the rush of people below. “What am I supposed to do with this?” she demanded. “Go to the PA and tell him I want to arrest these people because a witch communed with the tragic spirit of the victim?”

“Eve.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder, but rather than turn to him, she curled her hands on the rail until they were fists. “I know she didn’t bullshit that, okay? I may be cynical, but I’m not stupid. And I’m sick at the thought that she saw what she saw. Nobody should. Nobody should have to see that, feel that.”

“No one but you?” he asked, and turned her to face him.

She shook her head. “I looked right in the faces of some of the people who did this to that girl. And I looked right in the eyes of one of them, the one I think cut her throat. And for a second—hell, longer—I was scared right down to my guts.” She let out a breath. “Now, I’m just pissed off.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Then take them down, Lieutenant.”

“I damn well will.” She put her arms around him first, squeezed. “You pissed me off.”

“Same goes. Now, it seems, I’m not. And I just love you.”

“I’m still a little pissed.” But she tipped her head back, looked into his eyes. “But I love you, too.”

Stepping away, she went back to Isis. “Are you steady enough to look at some pictures?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s hope I don’t need your statement, your ID, or . . . the rest of it to take these bastards down. But just in case.” Eve pulled a stack of ID photos from her bag, spread them on the coffee table.

“Yes.” Shifting to sit up, Isis took another sip of wine. Then, without hesitation, pointed out Ava’s murderers.

## Nine

Eve rushed through Central, dodging other cops on the glides on her way to Homicide. The time with Isis had put her behind. She needed to meet with Mira, go over her notes, organize them. Then talk the PA into issuing more than a dozen arrest warrants.

And God, she needed coffee.

She veered toward her bullpen just as Peabody came out.

“I was about to tag you. Grabbing an energy bar first. You want?”

Eve started to decline, the things were disgusting. But they worked. “Yeah. I need to put a couple of things together, then meet with Mira.”

At Vending, Peabody plugged in some credits. “You want the Razzmatazz or the Berry Burst?”

“What difference does it make? They’re both revolting.”

“I kinda like the Berry Burst.” As Peabody made the selections, the machine cheerfully congratulated her on her choices, then listed the ingredients and nutritional information. “I checked in with Mira since you were late getting back.”

“Ran into stuff. Fill you in. Coffee.”

Peabody hiked after Eve to Eve’s office. “She said she needed another thirty minutes, that was about five minutes ago. Down-the-hall neighbor at the vic’s apartment states the vic never came home after work yesterday. They were supposed to do the girl thing together for the date. Hair, outfit, like that. Ava never showed. Nothing in her apartment to indicate an interest or connection with the occult. EDD’s got her electronics.”

“She never went back to the apartment because they took her at the clinic.” Eve took a bite of the energy bar, washed it down with coffee. She filled Peabody in, and as expected, her partner’s eyes went big as planets.

“You— you did like a ritual?”

“You had to be there,” Eve muttered.

“No, really happy to pass. Was it scary?”

“The point is, while I’m not sure how much weight the woo-woo might carry in court, Isis fingered every single one of the people on my list. Damn smug is what they are, alibied up. Alibiing each other. Break one, break all. If Mira’s got anything solid, we top it off. We’ve got enough to push for a search warrant on the clinic—and if we push right, on the residences of the staff. Contact the PA. Get them.”

“Me? Me?” If she’d just been ordered to run naked through the bullpen, Peabody would’ve been less stunned. “But you should do it. They listen to you over there. What am I supposed to do?”

“Jesus, Peabody. Sing, dance, shed a goddamn tear. Put the package together and get it done. I’ve got Mira in fifteen. Go.”

She all but shoved Peabody out the door, then closed it. Locked it. She two-pointed the rest of the energy bar into the trash. It wasn’t doing the job. She needed five minutes down, she admitted. Just five. She set her wrist unit to alarm, sat at her desk, laid her head down on it, and shut her eyes.

She went straight under.

A sound woke her, a kind of humming. Voices, tinny with distance, tapped on her subconscious. One—young, male—spiked with excitement.

“Look! Flying cars. Look out the window! That is so cool .”

Eve allowed herself a groan, started to slap at her wrist unit. Opening bleary eyes, she stared groggily at the swirl of luminous blue light, and the man, woman, and child cloaked in its circle. Instinct had her reaching for her weapon even as she registered them—tall man, a lot of gold hair, slim brunette with startled green eyes, and a shaggy-haired boy.



She thought she heard the woman say, "Oops." Then they were gone, and her wrist unit was beeping.

"Okay, with a dream that weird, I need more than five minutes down." She turned off the alarm, scrubbed her hands over her face. After downing the rest of her now lukewarm coffee, she gathered what she needed for Mira.

As she left the office, she shot a frown over her shoulder. Weird, she thought again. The whole damn day was weird.

Mira's admin gave Eve a glare that turned the room into an arctic cave. Knowing the way to Mira lay at the dragon's feet, Eve cut through the bull. "I kicked you, and kicked you hard this morning." She pulled out one of the crime-scene photos. "She's why." And laid it on the desk.

The admin sucked in a breath, held it, let it out slowly. "I see. Yes. She's waiting for you, Lieutenant."

"Thanks." Eve picked up the photo and walked into Mira's office.

Mira wasn't at her desk but standing at the window, her back to the room. She looked smaller somehow, Eve thought. Almost delicate in her quiet lavender suit.

"Dr. Mira."

"Yes. Such a lovely day. Sometimes you need to remember the world is full of lovely days. You've had a very long one, haven't you?"

"It's got a ways to go yet."

Mira turned. Her sable hair curled around her pretty face, but her eyes looked tired and troubled. "Where do you want me to begin?"

"I know what happened, and I know who's responsible. At least the main players. I need to know what was done to Jackson Pike and Mika Nakamura, how it was done, and who did it. What was done to them was also done to the desk clerk at the hotel, and he bashed his own brains out with a hammer. So I need to know if it was done to anyone else."

Rather than sit in one of her cozy scoop chairs as was her habit, Mira continued to stand. "First, the toxicology screening showed a combination of drugs in their systems. I have that list for you. Both had a hallucinogenic in their bloodstream and a drug we sometimes use to control patients with violent tendencies. As you know, both Pike and the victim were also given sexual drugs."

"Would that explain the headaches, the memory blanks?"

"The combination would likely result in a kind of chemical hangover, but no, not the violent pain. There may be blank spots as well, but again, no, that's not my conclusion."

She did sit now. "The drugs were used to begin a process, and to enhance it."

"They've been hypnotized."

"You're ahead of me."

"No, but I'm hoping we're on pace. At least two of the suspects are sensitives. They took a pass at me. Since I've dealt with a homicidal psychic before, I used the same method to block them, to steer them away. One of them, Silas Pratt, he's . . . Look, I know you've got a daughter who's Wiccan, and I get there are theories and faiths and even documentation, studies, blah, blah. I'm not big on that. But this guy?"

It went against the grain to admit it. "He's got a punch," Eve told her.

"You don't want to use the word 'power.' "

"It doesn't take power to load people up with drugs, or to hypnotize them. It's a technique. You use it." She stuffed her hands in her pockets and began to pace. "One of these bastards is Mika's kid's doctor. She took the kid in for a standard checkup three weeks ago. So, we theorize Pratt hypnotizes her. Maybe they slip her something first to make her more susceptible, but he takes her under, and gives her the assignment. Posthypnotic suggestion, right?"

“Yes.”

“It needs a trigger—something she sees, hears. Easy enough to take care of that while she’s on her way to work, maybe give her a booster shot. She goes in, shuts down the cameras. They had to get to the desk clerk. We’ll find the intersect there, but they turned him on like a damn droid. They waltz Pike and the victim right in. They go along like puppies. They’re loaded by then, and under . . .”

“A spell?”

“If that’s the word. Pike’s left as patsy, with that trigger still cocked in his head. The pain’s impossible, and trying to remember takes it up to excruciating.”

“I believe if you hadn’t gotten them to me, into a controlled, medical environment when you did, they’d have ended it as the desk clerk did. I’ve had to use that pain to try to get to the trigger. It’s . . . difficult.”

Understanding, Eve moved to Mira’s AutoChef. “What’s that tea you’re always drinking?”

Mira managed a smile. “It varies. I think jasmine would be nice. Thank you.”

Eve programmed a cup, brought it to Mira, took a seat. “You’re not hurting them. You know that. The one who cocked the trigger is.”

“They, both of them, begged me to kill them.” Mira sipped the tea, then eased wearily back in the chair. “It’s taken hours for me to find the right method to dial the pain down. Not turn it off, not yet, but lower it from inhuman to hideous. Enough that Jack remembered a little. He remembered that Dr. Pratt called him into his office at the end of the day. He’s not sure of the time, it’s cloudy, but thinks it was after his last patient. Pratt gave him a cup of coffee, and after he drank it, it’s more jumbled. He remembers being in a limo with Collins and Ava. He thinks there were more. I recorded everything, of course. He remembers having sex with Ava.”

“Does he remember the murder?”

Her eyes troubled, Mira shook her head. “He’s suppressing. Even without the trigger, his mind’s not ready to go there. He next remembers waking in a bed, covered with blood, and a woman he called Leah sitting beside him, crying.”

“Leah Burke. Good, that’s good. I can break her, and she’ll take them all down with her.”

“It wasn’t just a young woman killed in that suite, Eve. Parts of the two people I have sedated and restrained for their own safety were murdered in there. When I find the way to remove the trigger and they remember what was done, their part in it however unwilling, they’ll never be the same.”

“You’ll help them deal with it, or find someone who’ll help them deal with it. It’s what you do.”

“Take them down, Eve. Take them down hard. When I can tell Mika and Jack that’s been done, we can start on the healing.”

In all the time they’d worked together, Mira had never asked. Eve rose. “Like you said, it’s a lovely day. Before it’s over, they’ll be down.”

As she walked out, Eve whipped out her communicator to contact Peabody. “Search warrants?”

“It’s looking good on the clinic. I just need to—”

“Put a hold on it. We’ve got a wit who puts Leah Burke in Suite 606. We’re bringing her in. Book an interview room.”

“You want me to have her picked up?”

“Here’s how it goes. Two uniforms at her door. If she’s not home yet, I need to know ASAP. She’s not under arrest, and she’s not to be read her rights. Got that?”

“Got it.”

“She’s needed down here for further questioning. That’s all they know. She’s not to be permitted to contact anyone. She’s not under arrest. I’ll finish up with the search warrants.”

Eve was still listing the names for the APA when she approached Homicide. What sounded like a small riot had her quickening her steps.

Then she smelled the pizza. “Yeah, I mean even the house in the Caribbean. I’ve got goddamn probable cause right down the line. I’ve got witness statements, and within two hours I’m going to hand you a confession on a goddamn platter that will take down every son of a bitch on the list I just gave you. They’re going to have hoodoo voodoo crap tucked away,” Eve said meeting Roarke’s eyes as she stepped into the bullpen. “Because they believe it. A dozen blades were used on the vic. We’re going to find some, most, or all of them.”

She clicked off. “Figured you’d be back around after you got your witch home.”

“You haven’t eaten.” He picked up a box of pizza while her men swarmed like ants over the five others he’d brought in. “Eat now.”

She grabbed a slice, chomped a huge bite. “Oh. God. Good.” She swallowed, took another. “I got them.”

“I can see that. Can I watch?”

She took the tube of Pepsi he offered, guzzled. “It’s a good bribe. Take Observation.”

## Ten

Revived and revved, Eve stood with Roarke in Observation and watched Leah pace the interview room in her smart suit.

“She’s already sweating. Ten minutes in, and she’s already sweating. She’s scared and guilty, and the doctors aren’t here to tell her what to do, what to say.”

“Why her? Out of all of them?”

“She cried.” She glanced over as Mira came in.

“Word’s out that you have one of them in,” Mira said. “I wanted to see for myself.”

“I haven’t arrested her yet. Listen, I’m going to ask you not to turn on the audio until I give you the go. Actually, I’m not asking. I’ve got to get started.”

“Will I be able to see Mika?” Roarke asked Mira after Eve stepped out.

“Not yet. She’s comfortable for the moment. I’ve spoken with her husband.”

“So have I. Is there anything I can do for her?”

“There will be.” Mira laid a hand over Roarke’s, and watched Eve enter Interview. “What she’s going to say needs to be off the record. At least for my ears.”

“Do you object?”

“No.” Mira stared at Leah Burke through the glass. “No, I don’t.”

Inside, Leah spun toward Eve. “I demand to know why I was brought here, why I’m being treated this way. I have rights. I have—”

“Shut the fuck up. You’ve got nothing here until I give it to you. Sit down.”

The words, the tone, had Leah's whole body recoiling. "I will not—"

"I'll put you down, bitch. Believe it."

The threat, so hot and hard in Eve's eyes, had Leah sitting at the small table. "You'll lose your badge." But her voice trembled, just a little. "Worse. There are laws."

Eve slammed both fists on the table, hard enough to have Leah covering her face in defense. "Laws? I bet you were thinking about laws when Ava Marsterson was being hacked to death. Jack remembers, Leah." She leaned close, snapped her fingers in front of Leah's face. "Boom. Spell broken. You've got one shot. One, then I move on to the next. But I'll hurt you first."

"You can't touch me. You can't put your hands on me. I want—"

"I know how to hurt you so it won't show." Eve let the heat burn in her eyes as she circled the table. "Your word against mine. Decorated cop against murder suspect. Guess who they'll believe? I haven't put this on record. I haven't read you your rights. And we're all alone here, Leah. One shot once I turn on the record. You don't take it, I move to Kiki or Rodney, to Larry's wife, and down the line—and you go back to a cage blubbering with the pain."

"Everybody gets one shot. Take it, I deal down to Murder Two. You'll do life, but you'll do it on planet. Pass? And you'll find out what hell really is because you'll be in some concrete cage in an off-planet penal colony where I will personally see that word gets out you fucked with tiny little children. Do you know what cons like to do to people who fuck with tiny little children?"

"I've never touched a child—"

"I'll lie." Eve grinned. "And I'll love it. One shot, and if you so much as think lawyer, it's done. You only get the chance because Jack's soft-hearted enough to think you feel real bad about what happened. Me? I'm hoping you pass so I can look forward to getting the reports on how many

inventive ways the other cons and the guards rape you over the next, oh, fifty years.”

She came around the table, whispered in Leah’s ear. “They find ways to get sharp, ugly tools into those cages, Leah. They’ll slice and dice you, let them stitch you up again just so they can slice and dice some more. The more you beg, the more they’ll enjoy it.”

She watched tears plop on Leah’s trembling hands, on the rough surface of the table. And thinking of Ava, felt no pity. “She trusted you, you bitch.”

“Please. Oh, please.”

“Screw you.” Eve walked to the door, stepped out. She took a deep breath, signaled Peabody. “Let’s do it.” Walking back in, she nodded toward the observation glass. “Record on. Dallas, Lieutenant Eve—”

“Please, please. I’ll tell you everything.”

“Hey, great.” Eve slid into her chair, composed and easy. “Let’s just get everything on record first, and read you your rights.”

When she’d finished, she nodded to Leah. “What do you want to tell us, Ms. Burke?”

“I didn’t know it would be like that. I swear, I swear I didn’t know.”

“Like what?”

“So much blood. I never thought they would really kill her.”

“Be more specific.”

“I thought it would be a symbolic death.”

“Bullshit.” Eve leaned back in her chair with the warning in her eyes clear. Lie, and your one shot dies. “You knew exactly what was going to happen, and when it did, you couldn’t handle it. If you want me to go to the PA and say you came in, you confessed, you gave the details and feel remorse,



don't bullshit me. Did you participate in the ritual murder of Ava Marsterson?"

"Yes. I didn't understand. Believe me, I didn't understand. I thought I did, but . . . She didn't accept, and neither did Jack. Not like Silas said they would."

"Silas Pratt participated in the murder of Ava Marsterson?"

"He cut her throat. She just stood there, and he cut her throat, and the blood gushed out of her. She didn't accept. She didn't know what was happening, so how could she accept?"

"Accept what?"

"Her sacrifice. That she would be the gift."

"Whose gift?"

"The gift from us to the prince. To Lucifer."

"How long have you been a satanist?"

"I am not a satanist. I am a disciple of the One."

Eve gave it a moment, unsure if she was amused or irritated by the obvious insult in Leah's voice. "Okay. And does the One demand the murder of innocents?"

"Your God murdered my child." Leah's hands balled into fists, beat lightly on the table. "He took her, and what had she ever done? She was just a baby. I found my way back. I found my strength and my purpose."

"Silas Pratt showed you the way back."

"He's a great man. You'll never understand. A man of power. You'll never hold him with your pitiful laws and your bars."

"But he lied to you, this great man, this man of power," Peabody put in. "He lied to you about Ava and Jack."

“No, I think . . . No, he wouldn’t lie. I think he miscalculated, that’s all. She just wasn’t ready. Wasn’t as strong as Silas thought. Or maybe it’s me. Maybe I’m weak. I couldn’t stand what they did to her.”

“Tell me who they are. Every name of everyone who was in Suite 606.”

“Silas and his wife, Ola. Larry—Dr. Collins, and his wife, Bria.” In a dull, empty voice, she gave Eve a dozen names in addition to her own. “And Ava and Jack.”

“Dr. Slone?”

“No. Peter and the others from the clinic who weren’t there aren’t disciples or priests. It’s important, Silas thinks, that there are those who aren’t part of us—and to know who is open to our faith, and who would be closed. Everyone who is of our group attended. It was an important ritual, a celebration.”

“A celebration?”

“Yes. It was Silas’s birthday.”

“I’ve seen his records. It wasn’t his birthday.”

“His date of rebirth in the One.”

“Right.” Eve sat back again. “Why Ava and Jack?”

“Ava was the gift. Silas recognized her as such the day she came in to interview for the position. And Jack . . . the sexual energy between them would be a vital element to the ritual.”

“Why that room?”

“We’d considered other venues, but . . . A palace, it seemed right. And Larry’s connection to the head of security gave us the way in. I’m only a disciple. I don’t plan.” She folded her hands now, bowed her head. “I follow.”

“You followed them into that suite. But first you helped drug Ava and Jack at the clinic.”

“We gave them what would open them to the coming ritual, what would help them accept, and embrace Silas’s power.”

“He used hypnosis, Leah, on top of hallucinogens.”

Tears continued to gather and spill. “You don’t understand. You’re closed.”

“Fine. You used chemicals to open Ava and Jack, without their knowledge or permission.”

“Yes, but—”

“And once they were under that influence, you took them to the hotel. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“There, Mika Nakamura and Brian Trosky had also been drugged, and embraced by Silas’s power. That power caused them to shut down the security cameras to the lobby, and to the elevators for the sixtieth floor. It also, as had been done to Jack, caused them to forget what had been done, or suffer pain.”

“The pain is only if they refuse to accept, only to help them—”

“Inside the room, you ate and you drank, you engaged in sexual activity.”

Color flushed into her cheeks. It was amazing, Eve mused, what embarrassed murderers.

“Sex is an offering.”

“Ava didn’t offer, did she? After you’d feasted and stoked up, painted your pentagram, lit your candles, said whatever it is you people say, you stretched out a drugged, helpless, naked woman on the floor, and told a drugged, helpless man to have at her. He cared for her. They cared for each other, isn’t that true?”

“Yes, yes, but—”

“And when he finished what he’d have never done of his own will, the rest of you raped her.”

“Yes.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Everyone was required to take from the gift, and to give of ourselves. But I felt . . .”

“What?”

“Cold. So cold. Not the heat, not the fire, but ice. I heard her screaming in my head. I swear I heard her.” She covered her face with her hands. “But no one would listen. They pulled her to her feet. Kiki and Rodney. Silas stepped into the circle, and the cold, the cold was terrible. Her screaming was like spikes in my head. But no one heard her. He slashed her throat, and her blood sprayed all over him. Everyone rushed forward when she fell to take more blood, to make more blood. Jack passed out, so they coated him with her blood. They took him upstairs, left him in bed while they finished with her. Larry told me to go up, to take one of the knives and put it in Jack’s hand, and to give him another round of drugs so he’d overdose.”

“The plan was to kill Jack, leave him behind, so it looked as if he’d killed Ava.”

“Yes. Yes. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t give him more. Her blood was on my hands, and I could hear her screaming.” She laid down her head and wept.

“Give her five minutes to pull it together,” Eve told Peabody. “The charge is Murder in the Second, two counts,” she added, thinking of Trosky. “Additional charges are kidnapping, two counts, rape, inducing chemicals without consent or knowledge, including illegals. Have her booked and bolted. I’m going to go get us a shitload of warrants.”

Lack of sleep didn’t put a hitch in Eve’s stride as she walked to Silas Pratt’s front door. Big, fancy house, she noted. Well, he’d seen the last of that. The droid that answered looked down its nose. “Dr. and Mrs. Pratt are unavailable at this time. Please leave your name and state your business, and—”

He didn't get any further as Eve shoved him aside. "Shut that thing down," she ordered the uniforms that trailed after her and Peabody. She walked into the spacious living area where the doctor and his wife were sipping martinis.

"Exactly what is the meaning of this?" Silas demanded as he surged to his feet.

"Deal with the woman, Peabody. He's mine. Silas Pratt, you're under arrest. The charges are Murder in the First Degree in the death of Ava Marsterson, a human being. Murder in the First Degree in the death of—"

"This is absurd. You're absurd."

Eve felt that punch of his, accepted the ice that coated her belly. Even welcomed it. "Don't interrupt. Resist, by all means, because I'd love to spend the next several minutes kicking your ass. Jesus, Peabody, can't you shut her up?"

"She's a screamer," Peabody said cheerfully as she passed the hysterical Ola to waiting uniforms.

"Now where was I? Oh yeah, the death of Brian Trosky, another human being. We've got kidnapping charges, illegals, fraud, medical abuse, and just for fun, destruction of property. You guys seriously trashed that suite. You have the right to remain silent," she began.

"You can go to hell."

"Thanks, but New York 's close enough for me." She grabbed one of his arms to pull it behind his back as she read him the rest of the Revised Miranda. When he tried to shake her off, she gave herself the pleasure of slamming the heel of her boot into his instep. He cursed at her, snarled at her as she clapped the restraints to his wrist. "What is that, Latin? Greek? Or is just all made up?"

He struggled as she frog-marched him across the room, which, she thought, it could be argued was the reason his head smacked into the

doorjamb. "Gee, I bet you're going to have a headache now. Cut it out, before you hurt yourself."

"I'll drink your blood from a silver cup."

"That's just disgusting." She moved her mouth close to his ear. "You don't have any power here, asshole. Getting arrested, dragged out of your fancy house in front of your fancy neighbors, and hey, look, it's Channel 75." She beamed, pleased her heads-up to her contact there had brought the media. "Nothing like humiliation to water down power. I bet even the devil himself's embarrassed."

She muscled him into the back of the police car. She fixed dark glasses over his head, over his eyes. "Remember he's a sensitive," she told the cops she'd put in charge. "He goes straight into isolation."

She slammed the door, put her hands on her hips. "Go home, Peabody," she said when her partner stepped beside her and yawned until her jaw cracked. "Get some sleep."

"I am so on that. Some day, huh?"

"Yeah, some day." Eve stood where she was, watched Roarke come to her. Gosh, she thought, pretty. And realized sleep deprivation had goosed up her brain.

"I imagine this arrest will be playing on screen for some time."

"That's entertainment." Eve gave him a quick smile.

"Please tell me you're not going to make all the other arrests personally, then deal with the ensuing paperwork tonight."

"Nah, I just wanted this one, 'specially. I delegated, and the paperwork'll wait till morning. I'm pretty close to falling on my face."

He put his arms around her, amused that she was tired enough not to resist even though some of the media remained. "I want to go home, sleep with my wife. For days."

“Settle for eight straight hours?”

“Deal.”

With their arms around each other’s waist they walked to the car. Roarke got behind the wheel; Eve slid into the passenger’s seat. And, he noted, got started on that eight hours immediately.

## Epilogue

Jack sat up in bed when Eve entered his treatment room. He was pale, and bruises of fatigue dogged his eyes. No doubt she'd had a more restful night than he had. "Doctor?" he began.

"Lieutenant. Lieutenant Dallas. Do you remember me?"

He stared through her for a moment. "Yes. I remember." He held up a hand, a signal to wait. And shutting his eyes, breathed. "I remember. You were at the hotel, but not, not in that room. And you were talking to me in another room. The police station. Am I under arrest?"

"No, Jack. I know you're working with Dr. Mira. She says you're better than you were, and you'll be better yet."

"The drugs are out of my system. It helps. The headaches . . . it's not as bad. Ava's dead. I was there." The words trembled out. Once more he closed his eyes, breathed. "I was there. I raped her."

"No, you didn't. They used you both. You're a doctor, Jack. I know Mira told you what they'd put in you, and you know what those chemicals can do. You were drugged, put under hypnosis. Kidnapped. Nothing that happened was your fault or responsibility. You were a victim."

"I'm alive. She's not."

"I know. That's hard. You're afraid to remember, afraid to ask if you used the knife you had in your hand."

His eyes welled, and tears leaked out. "How can I live with that? Whatever they put in me, whatever they did, how can I live with that?"

"You don't have to. You didn't use the knife. I have a number of statements from people who were there, who were involved. Every one of them says you passed out. They put the knife in your hand when you were upstairs, unconscious."



“The blood. Her blood.”

“They put it on you. You were supposed to die, holding the knife, covered in her blood. There would have been questions, sure, a lot of questions. Who else was with you. They had two other people they believed would be dead who’d be tied in. One of them is dead, Jack—he didn’t do anything, and he’s dead. Another is across the hall in a room like this, struggling to deal with what happened. They drugged her, used her. Do you blame her for Ava?”

“No. God.”

“Why blame yourself?”

“I couldn’t get out. I couldn’t get out of . . . myself, and help her. Even when I heard her screaming. In my head.”

“Thirteen people killed Ava. You weren’t one of them. Because you lived, we found them. Every one of them is locked up. Every one of them is going to pay. You lived, and you found me, Jack. I was in suite 606. I saw what was done to her. I had her blood on my hands. She was in my head, too, Jack. I’m telling you, she doesn’t blame you. She doesn’t want you to carry this.”

He put out a hand, took hers. “They’re going to pay?”

“Every goddamn one.”

“Thank you.”

She stepped out, and watched through the observation window as Roarke leaned over and kissed Mika on the brow.

“How is she?” she asked when he came out.

“Better. Better than I’d hoped, really. Mira said she has a strong mind. How about your Jack?”

“He’ll get there.”

Roarke took her hand. “Another long day, Lieutenant, with all your interrogations and reports and media conferences.”

“You had one, too, I imagine, making up for the time lost yesterday. Buying up wide chunks of the universe takes it out of a guy.”

“Yet I feel surprisingly . . . fresh.”

“Good, because I want to go home and sleep with my husband—in a much more active sense than last night.” She let him keep her hand as they walked away from the treatment rooms. “You know, I found this little bag full of stones and flowery things in the pocket of the jacket I had on yesterday. How do you suppose that got there?”

“Hmm. Magic?”

She gave him a shoulder bump and let it go. As far as she was concerned, the only magic she’d ever need was the good strong grip of his hand in hers.