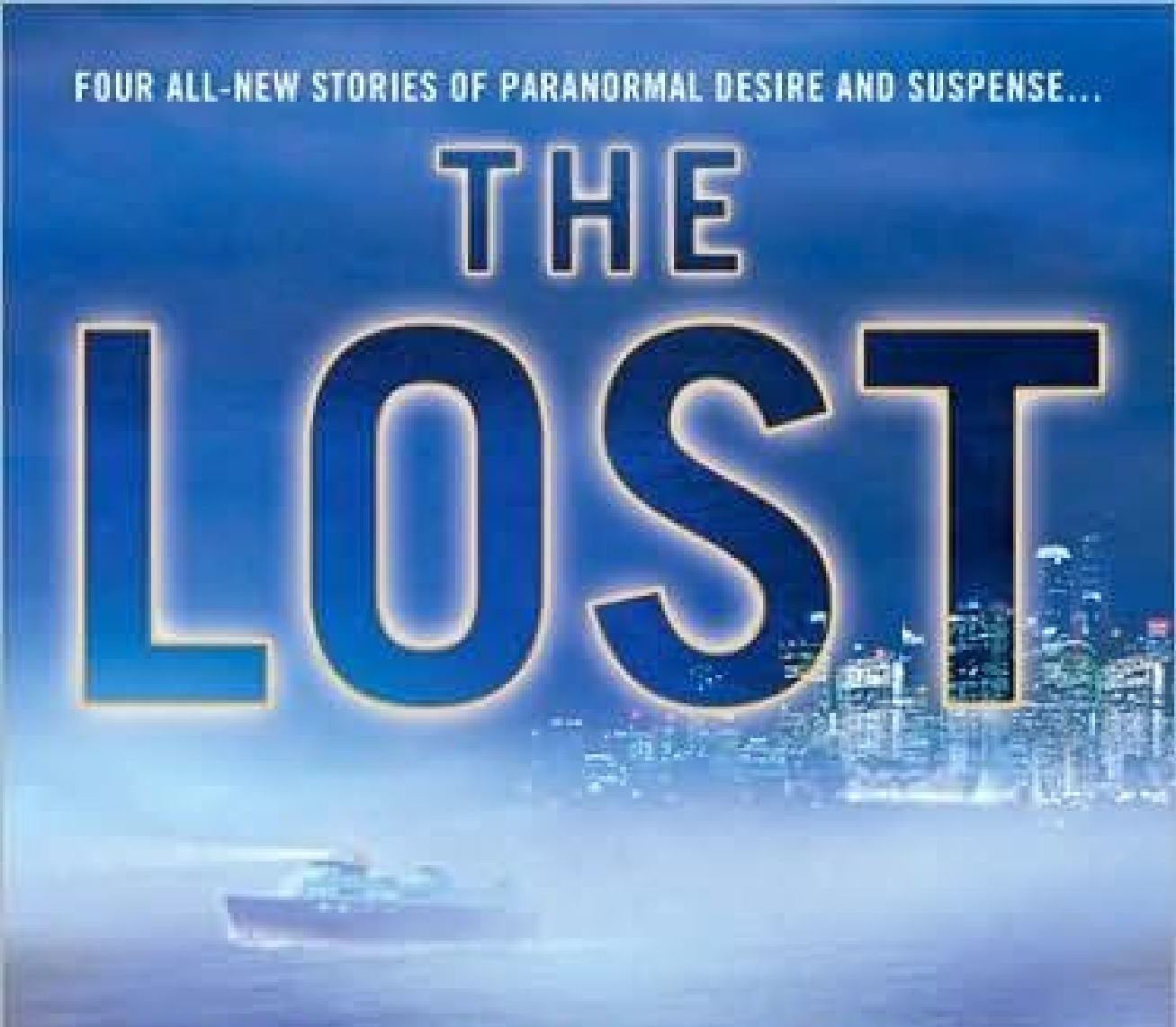


FOUR ALL-NEW STORIES OF PARANORMAL DESIRE AND SUSPENSE...

THE LOST

The background of the cover features a night cityscape with lights reflecting on the water. In the foreground, a boat is visible on the water, creating a misty or ethereal atmosphere.

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J.D. ROBB

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

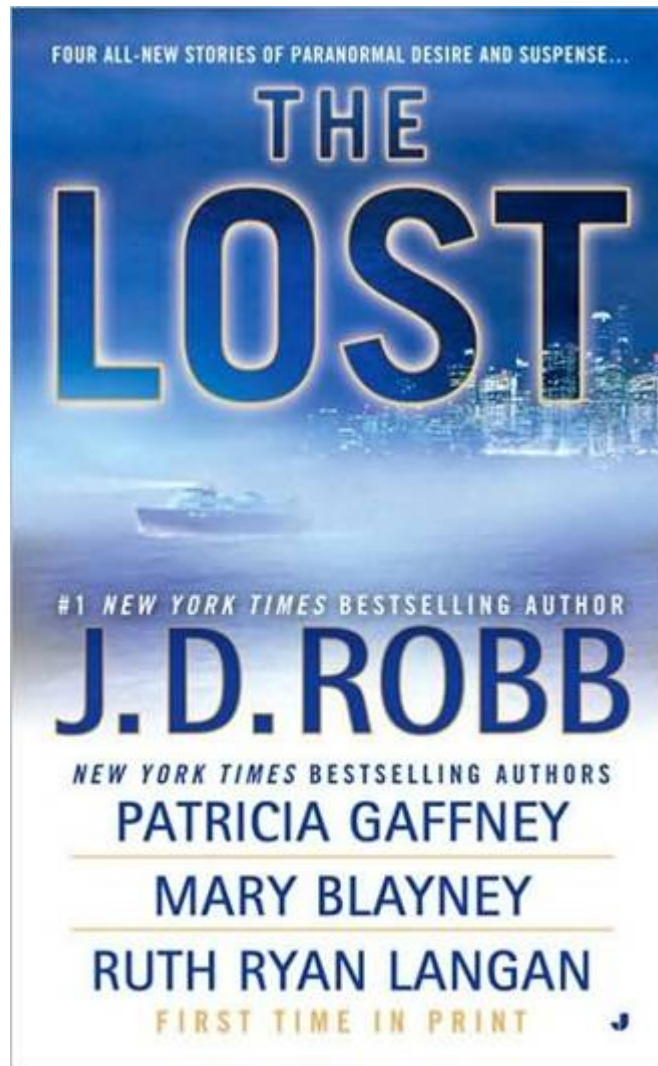
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J



**Missing in Death
Eve Dallas – Book 36
(In Anthology The Lost)
By J.D. Robb**

One

On a day kissed gently by summer, three thousand, seven hundred and sixty-one passengers cruised the New York Harbor on the Staten Island Ferry. Two of them had murder on their minds.

The other three thousand, seven hundred and fifty-nine aboard the bright orange ferry christened the Hillary Rodham Clinton were simply along for the ride. Most were tourists who happily took their vids and snaps of the retreating Manhattan skyline or that iconic symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty.

Even in 2060, nearly two centuries after she'd first greeted hopeful immigrants to a new world, nobody beat "The Lady."

Those who jockeyed for the best views munched on soy chips, sucked down tubes of soft drinks from the snack bars while the ferry chugged placidly along on calm waters under baby blue skies.

With the bold sun streaming, the scent of sunscreen mixed with the scent of water, many jammed the decks for the duration of the twenty-five-minute ride from Lower Manhattan to Staten Island. A turbo would have taken half the time, but the ferry wasn't about expediency. It was about tradition.

Most planned to get off at St. George, jam the terminal, then simply load back on again to complete the round trip. It was free, it was summer, it was a pretty way to spend an hour.

Some midday commuters, eschewing the bridges, the turbos, or the air trams, sat inside, out of the biggest crowds, and passed the time with their PPCs or 'links.

Summer meant more kids. Babies cried or slept, toddlers whined or giggled, and parents sought to distract the bored or fractious by pointing out the grand lady or a passing boat.

For Carolee Grogan of Springfield, Missouri, the ferry ride checked off another item on her Must Do list on the family vacation she'd lobbied for. Other Must Dos included the top of the Empire State Building, the Central

Park Zoo, the Museum of Natural History, St. Pat's, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (though she wasn't sure she'd successfully harangue her husband and ten- and seven-year-old sons into that one), Ellis Island, Memorial Park, a Broadway show—she didn't care which one—and shopping on Fifth Avenue.

In the spirit of fairness, she'd added on a ballgame at Yankee Stadium, and fully accepted she would have to wander the cathedral of Tiffany's alone while her gang hit the video heaven of Times Square.

At forty-three, Carolee was living a long-cherished dream. She'd finally pushed, shoved and nagged her husband east of the Mississippi.

Could Europe be far behind?

When she started to take a snapshot of her "boys," as she called Steve and their sons, a man standing nearby offered to take one of the whole family. Carolee happily turned over her camera, posed with her boys with the dignified lady of liberty behind them.

"See." She gave her husband an elbow poke as they went back to looking out at the water. "He was nice. Not all New Yorkers are rude and nasty."

"Carolee, he was a tourist, just like us. He's probably from Toledo or somewhere." But he smiled when he said it. It was more fun to yank her chain than to admit he was having a pretty good time.

"I'm going to ask him."

Steve only shook his head as his wife walked over to chat up the picture taker. It was so Carolee. She could—and did—talk to anyone anywhere about anything.

When she came back she offered Steve a smug smile. "He's from Maryland, but," she added with a quick finger jab, "he's lived in New York for almost ten years. He's going over to Staten Island to visit his daughter. She just had a baby. A girl. His wife's been staying with them the past few days to help out, and she's meeting him at the terminal. It's their first grandchild."

“Did you find out how long he’s been married, where and how he met his wife, who he voted for in the last election?”

She laughed and gave Steve another poke.

“I’m thirsty.”

She glanced down at her youngest. “You know, me, too. Why don’t you and I go get some drinks for everybody.” She grabbed his hand and snaked her way through the people crowded on deck. “Are you having a good time, Pete?”

“It’s pretty neat, but I really want to go see the penguins.”

“Tomorrow, first thing.”

“Can we get a soy dog?”

“Where are you putting them? You had one an hour ago.”

“They smell good.”

Vacation meant indulgence, she decided. “Soy dogs it is.”

“But I have to pee.”

“Okay.” As a veteran mother, she’d scoped out the restrooms when they’d boarded the ferry. Now she detoured to steer them toward the nearest facilities.

And, of course, since Pete mentioned it, now she had to pee. She pointed toward the men’s room. “If you get out first, you stand right here. You remember what the ferry staff looks like, the uniforms? If you need help, go right to one of them.”

“Mom, I’m just going to pee.”

“Well, me, too. You wait for me here if you get out first.”

She watched him go in, knowing full well he rolled his eyes the minute his back was to her. It amused her as she turned toward the women’s room.

And saw the Out of Order sign.

“Shoot.”

She weighed her options. Hold it until Pete came out, then hold it some more while they got the dogs and drinks—because he’d whine and sulk otherwise—then make her way to the other restroom.

Or . . . maybe she could just peek in. Surely not all the stalls were out of order. She only needed one.

She pushed open the door, hurried in. She didn’t want to leave Pete alone for long.

She made the turn at the line of sinks, her mind on getting the provisions and squeezing back to the rail to watch Staten Island come into view.

She stopped dead, her limbs frozen in shock.

Blood, she thought, could only think, so much blood. The woman on the floor seemed bathed in it.

The man standing over the body held a still-dripping knife in one hand and a stunner in the other.

“I’m sorry,” he said—and, to her shocked mind, sounded sincere.

Even as Carolee sucked in the air to scream, took the first stumbling step back, he triggered the stunner.

“Really very sorry,” he said as Carolee fell to the floor.

Racing across New York Harbor in a turbo wasn’t how Lieutenant Eve Dallas expected to spend her afternoon. She’d played second lead that morning to her partner’s primary role in the unfortunate demise of Vickie Trendor, the third wife of the unrepentant Alan Trendor, who’d smashed her skull with an inferior bottle of California chardonnay.

According to the new widower, it wasn’t accurate to say he’d bashed her brains out when she simply hadn’t had any brains to begin with.

While the prosecutor and the counsel for the defense hammered out a plea arrangement, Eve had made a dent in her paperwork, discussed strategy with two of her detectives on an ongoing case and congratulated another on closing one.

A pretty good day, in her estimation.

Now, she and Peabody, her partner, were speeding across the water in a boat she judged to be about the size of a surfboard toward the orange hulk of a ferry stalled halfway between Manhattan and Staten Island.

“This is absolutely mag!” Peabody stood near the bow, her square-jawed face lifted to the wind, her short, flippy hair flying.

“Why?”

“Jeez, Dallas!” Peabody lowered her shades down her nose, exposing delighted brown eyes. “We’re getting a boat ride. We’re on the water. Half the time you can forget Manhattan’s an island.”

“That’s what I like about it. Out here, it makes you wonder, how come it doesn’t sink? All that weight—the buildings, the streets, the people. It should go down like a stone.”

“Come on.” With a laugh, Peabody pushed her shades back in place. “Statue of Liberty,” she pointed out. “She’s the best.”

Eve wouldn’t argue. She’d come close to dying inside the landmark, fighting radical terrorists bent on blowing it up. Even now, she could look at its lines, its grandeur, and see her husband, bleeding, clinging to a ledge outside the proud face.

They’d survived that one, she mused, and Roarke had diffused the bomb, saved the day. Symbols mattered, and because they’d fought and bled, people could chug by on the ferry every day and snap their pictures of freedom.

That was fine, that was the job. What she didn’t get was why Homicide had to zip off the island because the Department of Transportation cops

couldn't find a passenger.

Blood all over a bathroom and a missing woman. Interesting, sure, she decided, but not really her turf. In fact, it wasn't turf at all. It was water. It was a big orange boat on the water.

Why didn't boats sink? The errant thought reminded her that sometimes they did, and she decided not to dwell on it.

When the turbo approached that big orange boat, she noted people ranged along the rail on the tiers of decks. Some of them waved.

Beside her, Peabody waved back.

"Cut it out," Eve ordered.

"Sorry. It's knee-jerk. Looks like DOT sent out backup," she commented, nodding toward the turbos at the base of the ferry with the Department of Transportation logo emblazoned on the hull. "I hope she didn't fall over. Or jump. But somebody would notice that, right?"

"More likely she wandered off from the passenger areas, got lost and is currently trying to wander back."

"Blood," Peabody reminded her, and Eve shrugged.

"Let's just wait and see."

That, too, was part of the job—the waiting and seeing. She'd been a cop for a dozen years and knew the dangers of jumping to conclusions.

She shifted her weight as the turbo slowed, bracing on long legs while she scanned the rails, the faces, the open areas. Her short hair fluttered around her face while those eyes—golden brown, long and cop-flat—studied what might or might not be a crime scene.

When the turbo was secured, she stepped off.

She judged the man who stepped forward to offer his hand as late twenties. He wore the casual summer khakis and light blue shirt with its

DOT emblem well. Sun-streaked hair waved around a face tanned by sun or design. Pale green eyes contrasted with the deeper tone, and added an intensity.

“Lieutenant, Detective, I’m Inspector Warren. I’m glad you’re here.”

“You haven’t located your passenger, Inspector?”

“No. A search is still under way.” He gestured for them to walk with him. “We’ve added a dozen officers to the DOT crew aboard to complete the search, and to secure the area where the missing woman was last seen.”

They started up a set of stairs.

“How many passengers aboard?”

“The ticker counted three thousand, seven hundred and sixty-one boarding at Whitehall.”

“Inspector, it wouldn’t be procedure to call Homicide on a missing passenger.”

“No, but none of this is hitting SOP. I have to tell you, Lieutenant, it doesn’t make sense.” He took the next set of stairs, glancing over at the people hugging the rail. “I don’t mind admitting, this situation is above my pay grade. And right now, most of the passengers are being patient. It’s mostly tourists, and this is kind of an adventure. But if we hold the ferry here much longer, it’s not going to be pretty.”

Eve stepped onto the next deck where DOT officials had cordoned off a path. “Why don’t you give me a rundown, Inspector?”

“The missing woman is Carolee Grogan, tourist from Missouri, on board with her husband and two sons. Age forty-three. I’ve got her description and a photo taken aboard this afternoon. She and her youngest went to get drinks, hit the johns first. He went into the men’s, and she was going into the women’s. Told him to wait for her right outside if he got out first. He waited, and she didn’t come out.”

Warren paused outside the restroom area, nodded to another DOT official on the women's room door. "Nobody else went in or out either. After a few minutes, he called her on his 'link. She didn't answer. He called his father, and the father and the other son came over. The father, Steven Grogan, asked a woman—ah, Sara Hunning—if she'd go in and check on his wife."

Warren opened the door. "And this is what she found inside."

Eve stepped in behind Warren. She smelled the blood immediately. A homicide cop gets a nose for it. It soured the citrusy/sterilized odor of the air in the black-and-white room with its steel sinks, and around the dividing wall, the white-doored stalls.

It washed over the floor, a spreading dark pool that snaked in trails across the white, slashed over the stall doors, the opposing wall, like abstract graffiti.

"If that's Grogan's," Eve said, "you're not looking for a missing passenger. You're looking for a dead one."

Two

"Record on, Peabody." Eve switched on her own. "Dallas, Lieutenant Eve; Peabody, Detective Delia; Warren, DOT Inspector . . ."

"Jake," he supplied.

"On scene aboard Staten Island Ferry."

"It's the Hillary Rodham Clinton," he added. "Second deck, port side, women's restroom."

She cocked a brow, nodded. "Responding to report of missing passenger, Grogan, Carolee, last seen entering this area. Peabody, get a sample of the blood. We'll need to make sure it's human, then type it."

She opened the field kit she hadn't fully believed she'd need for Seal It. "How many people have been in and out of here since Grogan was

missed?”

“Since I’ve been on board, just me. Prior, to the best of my knowledge, Sara Hunning, Steven Grogan and two ferry officers on board.”

“There’s an Out of Order sign on the door.”

“Yeah.”

“But she came in anyway.”

“Nobody we’ve spoken to can absolutely confirm. She told the kid she was going in.”

Sealed, Eve stepped into the first of the four stalls, waved a hand over the sensor. The toilet flushed efficiently. She repeated the gesture in the other three stalls, with the same results.

“Appears to be in order.”

“It’s human,” Peabody told her, holding up her gauge. “Type A Negative.”

“Some smears, but no drag marks,” Eve murmured. She gestured toward a narrow utility closet. “Who opened that?”

“I did,” Jake told her. “On the chance she—or her body—was in there. It was locked.”

“There’s only one way in and out.” Peabody walked around to the sink area. “No windows. If that’s Carolee Grogan’s blood, she didn’t stand up and walk out of here.”

Eve stood at the edge of the blood pool. “How do you get a dead body out of a public restroom, on a ferry in the middle of the harbor, under the noses of more than three thousand people? And why the hell don’t you leave it where it dropped in the first place?”

“It’s not an answer to that,” Jake began, “but this is a tourist boat. It doesn’t carry any vehicles, has extra concession areas. People tend to hug the rails and look out, or hang in a concession and snack as they watch out

the windows. Still, it'd take a lot of luck and enormous cojones to cart a bleeding body along the deck."

"Balls maybe, but nobody's got that kind of luck. I'll need this room sealed, Inspector. And I want to talk to the missing woman's family, and the witness. Peabody, let's get the sweepers out here. I want every inch of this room covered."

Eve considered Jake's foresight in having the Grogan family sequestered in one of the canteen's solid. It kept them away from other passengers, gave them seats, and access to food and drink. That, she assumed, had kept the kids calm.

Calm enough, she noted, for the smaller of the two boys to curl on the narrow seat of the booth with his head in his father's lap.

The man continued to stroke the boy's hair, and his face was both pale and frightened when Eve crossed to him.

"Mr. Grogan, I'm Lieutenant Dallas, with the New York City Police and Security Department. This is Detective Peabody."

"You found her. You found Carolee. She's—"

"We haven't yet located your wife."

"She told me to wait." The boy with his head on Steve's lap opened his eyes. "I did. But she didn't come back."

"Did you see her go into the other bathroom?"

"Nuh-uh, but she said she was gonna, and then we were going to get dogs and drinks. And she gave me the routine."

"Routine?"

He sat up, but leaned against his father's side. "How I had to wait right there, and how if I needed anything, I was supposed to get one of the guys who work on the boat. The uniform guys."

“Okay. Then you went into the men’s bathroom.”

“It was only for a minute. I just had to . . . you know. Then I came out and waited like she said. It always takes girls longer. But it was really long, and I was thirsty. I used my ‘link.” He slid his eyes toward his father. “We’re only allowed to use them if it’s really important, but I was thirsty.”

“It’s okay, Pete. She didn’t answer, so Pete tagged me, and Will and I headed back to where he was waiting. They’d been gone at least ten minutes by then. There was the Out of Order sign on the door, so I thought she might’ve used another restroom. Except she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t have left Pete. So I asked this woman if she’d just take a look inside. And then . . .”

He shook his head.

“She said there was blood.” The older boy swallowed hard. “The lady came running out, yelling there was blood.”

“I went in.” Steve rubbed his eyes. “I thought maybe she fell, hit her head, or . . . But she wasn’t in there.”

“There was blood,” Will said again.

“Your mom wasn’t in there,” Steve said firmly. “She’s somewhere else.”

“Where?” Pete demanded in a voice perilously close to weeping. “Where did she go?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.” Peabody spoke with easy confidence. “Pete, Will, why don’t you help me get drinks for everybody? Inspector Warren, is it okay if we forage in here?”

“You bet. I’ll give you a hand.” He added a warm smile. “And make it Jake.”

Eve slid into the booth. “I need to ask you some questions.”

“It was too much blood,” he said in a soft voice, a voice that wouldn’t carry to his children. “A fatal loss of blood. I’m a doctor. I’m an ER doctor, and

that much blood loss without immediate medical attention . . . For God's sake, what happened to Carolee?"

"Do you know her blood type, Dr. Grogan?"

"Yes, of course. She's O Positive."

"You're certain?"

"Yes, I'm certain. She and Pete are O Positive. I'm A Positive, so's Will."

"It wasn't her blood. The blood in the restroom wasn't hers."

"Not hers." He trembled, and she watched him struggle for composure, but his eyes teared. "Not her blood. Not Carolee's blood."

"Why were you going to Staten Island?"

"What? We weren't. I mean . . ." He pressed his hands to his face again, breathed, then lowered them. Steady nerves, Eve thought. She imagined an ER doc needed them. "We were taking the ride over, then we were going to ride back. Just for the experience. We're on vacation. It's our second day on vacation."

"Does she know anyone in New York?"

"No." He shook his head slowly. "She wasn't in there. But she wouldn't have left Pete. It doesn't make sense. She doesn't answer her 'link. I've tried it over and over." He pushed his across the table. "She doesn't answer."

He glanced toward the concession where Peabody and Jake kept the kids busy, then leaned closer to Eve. "She would never have left our boy, not willingly. Something happened in that room. Somebody died in that room. If she saw what happened—"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're still searching. I'm going to check on the status."

Rising, she signaled to Peabody. "It's not her blood. It's the wrong type."

“That’s something. They’re really nice kids. They’re scared.”

“They’re on vacation. Don’t know anyone in New York according to the husband, and he comes off straight to me. What doesn’t come off is how a body could disappear, a woman who we’ll presume for the moment is alive could disappear, and potentially a killer/abductor could disappear. They’re here somewhere. Get the wit statement, though I don’t think that’s going to add anything. I’m calling in more officers, ours and DOT’s. We’re going to need to get data, statements and do a search on every person on this damn ferry before we let anyone off.”

“I’ll take care of our end before I talk to the woman. Ah, he’s kind of flirting with me.”

“What? Who?”

“The adorable inspector.”

“Please.”

“No, seriously. I am spoken for,” Peabody added with a flutter of lashes, “but it’s still flattering to have cute guys flirt.”

“Do the job, Peabody.”

Shaking her head as her partner went out to do just that, Eve gestured to Jake. “We’re going to need more men. I can’t let anyone off until we’ve confirmed IDs, interviewed and searched.”

“Over three thousand people?” He let out a low whistle. “You’re going to have a revolt.”

“What I’ve got is a missing woman, and very likely a dead body somewhere on this vessel. I’ve also got a killer. I want somebody in here with them,” she added. “I want a look at all security discs, cams, monitors.”

“That’s no problem.”

“We need an e-m an to try to triangulate the signal with Grogan’s ’link. If she’s still got it, we may be able to locate her. What time did she go

missing?”

“As close as we can determine, right about one thirty.”

Eve glanced at her wrist unit. “More than an hour now. I want to—”

She heard the boom, the gunfire crackle, the shouts. Before the next blast, she was rushing through the door and out on deck.

Passengers whistled, stomped, cheered, as an impressive shower of color exploded into the sky.

“Fireworks? For Christ’s sake. It’s still daylight.”

“There’s nothing scheduled,” Jake told her.

“Diversion,” she muttered, and began to push and shove her way in the opposite direction of the show. “Get somebody to find the source, stop it.”

“I’m already on it,” Jake said and shouted into his communicator. “Where are we going?”

“The scene of the crime.”

“What? I can’t hear a freaking thing. Say again,” he yelled into his communicator. “Say again.”

Eve broke through the celebrating crowd, ducked under the barricade.

She stopped as she saw the woman arguing frantically with the DOT officer guarding the door of the restroom.

“Carolee!” she called out, and the woman whirled. Her face was deathly pale with high spots of color on the cheeks, and a purpling knot on her forehead.

“What? What is this? I can’t find my boy. I can’t find my son.”

The eyes were wrong, Eve thought. A little glassy, a little shocky. “It’s okay. I know where he is. I’ll take you to him.”

“He’s okay? You . . . Who are you?”

“Lieutenant Dallas.” Eve watched Carolee’s eyes as she took out her badge. “I’m the police.”

“Okay. Okay. He’s a good boy, but he knows better than this. He was supposed to wait right here. I’m sorry to be so much trouble.”

“Where did you go, Carolee?”

“I just . . .” She trailed off. “I went into the restroom. Didn’t I? I’m sorry. I have a headache. I was so worried about Pete. Wait, just wait until I—” She stepped into the snack bar when Eve opened the door. Then slapped her hands on her hips.

“Peter James Grogan! You are in so much trouble.”

The boy, his brother, his father, moved like one unit, bolting across the room. “Didn’t I specifically tell you not to—”

This time the words were knocked back as her three boys grabbed her in frantic embraces. “Well, for heaven’s sake. If you think that’s going to soften me up after you disobeyed me, it’s not. Or only a little.” She stroked the boy’s hair as he clung to her legs. “Steve? Steve? You’re shaking. What is it? What’s wrong?”

He pulled back to kiss her, her mouth, her cheeks. “You—you’re hurt. You’ve hit your head.”

“I . . .” She lifted her fingers to touch the bump. “Ouch. How did I do that? I don’t feel quite right.”

“Sit down. Pete, Will, let your mother have some room. Sit down here, Carolee, let me take a look at you.”

When she had, he took her hands, pressed them to his lips. “Everything’s okay now. It’s okay now.”

But it wasn’t, Eve thought, not for everyone.

Someone was dead. Someone had caused that death.

They were both missing.

Three

“Inspector, I need you to locate the source of those explosives, then I want that area secured. I want a complete list of DOT and ferry employees, including any independent contractors, aboard at this time. I want those security discs. When NYPSP officers arrive, they will support those assignments. Peabody, make that happen. Now.”

She glanced toward the Grogan family. She could give their reunion one more minute. “There are lifeboats, emergency evacuation devices on this boat?”

“Sure.”

“They need to be checked, and they need to be guarded. If any have been used, I need to know. Immediately. I want to talk to the guard Mrs. Grogan talked to when she . . . came back. For now, get his statement.”

“No problem. Lieutenant, we’re going to have to deal with getting these people, at least some of these people, off.”

“I’m working on it. Explosives, employees, discs, emergency evac, secured areas. Let’s get on it.”

She turned away, moved to where Carolee still sat surrounded by her family.

“Mrs. Grogan, I need to speak with you.”

“I’d like to treat her head wound.” Steve kept his arm protectively around his wife. “And check her out more thoroughly. If there’s a medical kit, I could use it.”

“I’ll find one,” Peabody told him, then glanced at Eve. “Our guys will be on board in a couple of minutes.”

“Okay. Find the kit. Organize the team. I want another search, every square inch of this ferry. I want the sweepers in that bathroom. I want it scoured. See if you can find out if anyone else has been reported missing.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Peabody left, Carolee shook her head. “I’m sorry, I’m a little confused. Who are you again?”

“Lieutenant Dallas, NYPSD.”

“The police,” Carolee said slowly. “You need to talk to me? I know I got a little upset with the security man, but I was worried about Pete. I couldn’t find my boy.”

“Understood. Mrs.—”

“If you’re police, do you have a zapper?” Obviously content now that his mother was where she belonged, Pete gave Eve a curious squint.

“Don’t interrupt,” Carolee admonished.

“Mrs. Grogan,” Eve began again, but lifted her jacket aside to reveal her sidearm—and the boy flashed her a grin. “Can you tell me what happened, after you and your son went to use the restrooms?”

“Actually, we were going to get drinks, then Pete needed to go, so we swung over that way. I told him to wait, to stay right there if he got out before I did.”

“But, Mom—”

“We’ll talk about that later,” she said in a tone that warned of lecture, and the kid slumped down in his seat.

“And then,” Eve prompted.

“Then, I waited a minute, watched Pete go in, and I . . .” Her face went blank for a moment. “That’s funny.” She offered a puzzled smile. “I’m not quite sure. I must’ve hit my head. Maybe I slipped?”

“Inside the bathroom?”

“I—It’s silly, but I just don’t remember.”

“Don’t remember hitting your head, or going into the bathroom?”

“Either,” she admitted. “I must’ve really knocked it.” She tapped her fingers to the bump, winced. “I could use a blocker.”

“I don’t want to give you anything until I check you out a little more,” Steve told her.

“You’re the doctor.”

Eve thought of a case, not so long before, where memories had been lost. Or stolen. “How bad’s the headache?”

“Between crappy and lousy.”

“If you try to remember, does the pain increase?”

“Remember hitting it?” Carolee closed her eyes, squeezed them in concentration. “No. It stays between crappy and lousy.”

“Any nausea, baby, or blurred vision?” Steve shined a penlight in her eyes to check pupil reaction.

“No. I feel like I walked into a wall or something and smacked my head. That’s it.”

“There was an Out of Order sign on the door,” Eve reminded her.

“There . . . That’s right!” Carolee’s eyes brightened. “I do remember that. So I . . . but I wouldn’t—I know I didn’t go off to one of the other restrooms. I wouldn’t leave Pete. I must’ve gone in. I must’ve, because I had to come out again, right? He wasn’t there waiting. I must’ve slipped and hit my head, and I’m just a little shaky on the details. I’m not sure I understand why it matters to the police.”

“Mrs. Grogan, you were missing for over an hour.”

“Me? Missing? That’s crazy. I just—” But she glanced at her wrist unit, and went sheet white. “But that can’t be. That can’t be the right time. We were only gone for a few minutes. The ferry ride takes less than a half hour, and we’d barely started. This can’t be right.”

“Nobody could find you. We couldn’t find you,” Steve said. “We were so scared.”

“Well, God.” She stared at her husband, shoved a hand through her hair as it started to sink in. “Did I wander off? Hit my head and wander off? Maybe I have a concussion. I wandered off.” She looked down at Pete. “And then I yelled at you when I was the one. I’m sorry, kiddo. Really.”

“We thought you were dead ’cause there was the blood.” The boy pressed his face to Carolee’s breast and started to cry.

“Blood?”

“Mrs. Grogan, the DOT officials notified the NYPSP not only because you were, apparently, missing, but because the facilities they believed you entered had a considerable amount of blood on the floor, as well as spatter on the walls and doors of the stalls.”

“But . . .” Her breathing went shallow as Carolee stared at Eve. “It’s not mine. I’m okay.”

“It’s not yours. You went into the bathroom,” Eve prompted, “despite the Out of Order sign.”

“I can’t remember. It’s just blank. Like it’s been erased. I remember watching Pete go into the boys’ room, and I . . . I remember seeing the sign, but then, I can’t. I would’ve gone in,” she murmured. “Yes, that’s what I would’ve done, just to check, because it was right there and why not look? I couldn’t leave Pete. But I don’t remember going in, or . . . coming out. But I couldn’t have gone in, or I would’ve come out. Probably screaming if I saw blood all over the place. It doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” Eve agreed, “it doesn’t.”

“I didn’t hurt anyone. I wouldn’t.”

“I don’t think you hurt anyone.”

“An hour. I lost an hour. How can that be?”

“Have you ever lost time before?”

“No. Never. I mean, I’ve lost track of time, you know? But this is different.”

“Will, how about getting your mom a drink?” Steve sent his older son an easy smile. “I bet she’s a little dehydrated.”

“Actually—” Carolee laughed a little weakly. “I could really use the restroom.”

“Okay.” Eve watched Peabody come back in with a med kit. “Just a second.” She walked over to waylay her partner. “Go ahead and give the kit to Grogan, and take the woman to the john. Stick with her.”

“Sure. We’re on board, and we’ve got a deck-by-deck search going. I have to say, the natives are getting a little restless.”

“Right. They’ll have to hang on a little longer.”

“I wonder if maybe this whole thing isn’t some stupid prank. Somebody dumps a bunch of blood in that bathroom, hangs the sign, sits back and waits for somebody to go in.”

“Then why hang the sign?”

“Okay, a flaw in the scenario, but—”

“And how did they transport a couple quarts of human blood? And where did Mrs. Grogan go for an hour?”

“Several flaws.”

“Stick with her,” Eve repeated. “Get their New York address. Let’s arrange for them to be taken back so she can get a full check at a health center, and I want a watch on them.” She glanced back. “If she saw something,

someone, maybe whoever's responsible for the blood will start to worry about her."

"I'll make sure she's covered. Nice family," Peabody added, studying the group.

"Yeah. Welcome to New York."

Eve tracked down Jake.

"All emergency evac devices are accounted for." He passed her a file of security discs. "Those are from all cams on board. The list of employees, DOT officials, is labeled."

"Good. Where the hell did those fireworks come from?"

"Well." He scratched his head. "It looks like they were set off starboard side, probably the stern. That's from figuring the basic trajectory from witnesses. But we haven't got any physical evidence. No ash, no mechanism. Nothing so far, so I'm not sure they were set off from the boat."

"Hmm." Eve pondered and glanced out at the wide harbor.

"The NYPSP is crawling all over the place, and your CI team's covering the crime scene. If it is one," he added. "We've accounted for every DOT employee on board, and between your people and mine, we've been interviewing passengers, concentrating on those who are in the areas of the scene. So far, none of them saw anything. And you have to admit, hauling a body around would attract some attention."

"You'd think."

"What do we do now?"

As far as Eve could determine, there were two options. The killer—if indeed a murder had taken place—had somehow gotten off the ferry. Or the killer still needed to get off.

"Looks like we're going to Staten Island. Here's how we'll handle it."

It was going to take time, and a great deal of patience, but nearly four thousand passengers would be ID'd, searched and questioned before they were allowed to disembark at St. George terminal. Fortunately a good chunk of that number was kids. Eve didn't think—though kids were strange and often violent entities to her mind—that the pool of blood was the work of some maniac toddler.

"It's actually moving along okay," Peabody reported, and got a grunt from Eve.

"The search is ongoing," Peabody continued. "So far, no weapon, no body, no evil killer hiding in a storage closet."

Eve continued to review the security disc on boarding on her PPC. "The body's dumped by now."

"How?"

"I don't know how, but it's dumped or transported. Two searches, and this one with corpse detectors. He, or an accomplice, used the fireworks as a distraction. Get everyone's attention in one direction, do what you need to do in the other. Has to be."

"It doesn't explain how he got the DB out of the bathroom."

"No."

"Well, if it wasn't a prank, maybe it's a vortex."

Eve shifted her gaze up, gave Peabody a five-second pitiable stare.

"Free-A ger here, remember. I grew up on vortexes. It's a better theory than abracadabra." On a sigh, Peabody studied the bright, tropical fish swimming behind the glass of an enormous aquarium.

"He didn't toss the body overboard, then dive in and swim away," Peabody pointed out. "Like a fish." Noting Eve's considering expression, Peabody threw up her hands. "Come on, Dallas. There's no way out of the bathroom, not without walking in front of dozens and dozens of people."

“In back mostly, since they’d be looking out at the water. If the blood currently being rushed to the lab proves to have come from a warm body—one we hope to identify through DNA matching—there has to be a way out and a way off, because he used it.”

“Parallel universe. There are some scientific theories that support the possibility.”

“The same ones, I bet, that support sparkly winged fairies skipping around the woods.”

“A mocker.” Peabody wagged a finger. “That’s what you are, Dallas. A mocker.”

“In my world, we call it sane.”

Jake joined them. “We’re about halfway through. Maybe a little more.”

“Find any vortexes, parallel universes or sparkly winged fairies?” Eve asked him.

“Mocker,” Peabody repeated.

“Ah . . . not so far.” He offered them both a go-cup of coffee. “No weapons, no blood, no dead body either, and so far everyone who’s gone through the ticker and the interview station is alive.”

“I’m going back on board,” Eve told him. “If we get a hit—any kind of hit—contact me. Peabody, with me.”

“Hey.” Jake tapped Peabody’s arm when she started to move off with Eve. “We’re probably going to put in a long one here. Maybe we could get a drink after we’re clear. You know, decompress.”

Flustered, she felt heat rise to her cheeks that was a giddy mix of pleasure and embarrassment. “Oh, well. Um. That’s nice—it’s nice, I mean, to ask and all that. I live with somebody. A guy. An e-guy. We’re . . . you know. Together.”

“Lucky him,” Jake said, and had her blush deepening. “Maybe, sometime, we can grab a brew, just on the friendly side.”

“Sure. Maybe. Ah . . .” She flashed a smile, then shot off after Eve.

“Did you forget what ‘with’ means?”

“No. In fact, I remembered exactly, in that I’m with McNab. I remembered even when Jake hit on me.”

“Oh, that’s different.” Eve shot out a sunny smile that had Peabody’s stomach curdling. “Let me apologize for interrupting. Maybe the two of you want to take a break, go get a drink, get to know each other better. We can always puzzle out whether or not we have a missing DB and killer later. We wouldn’t want a potential murder investigation to get in the way of a potential romance, would we?”

“I speak sarcasm fluently. He did ask me out for a drink though.”

“Should I note that in my memo book, on today’s date?”

“Jeez.” Sulk warred with smug as Peabody boarded the ferry with Eve. “I’m just saying. Plus I get double credits. First I get the satisfaction credit of being hit on by the sexy DOT inspector, and second I get loyal and true credit for turning him down because I have my personal sexy nerd. I hardly ever get hit on, unless you count McNab—which really doesn’t since we cohab—so it is noteworthy.”

“Fine, so noted. Can we move on?”

“I should get at least five minutes of woo. Okay,” she mumbled under Eve’s withering stare. “I’ll put the rest of the woo time on my account.”

With a shake of her head, Eve crossed the deck, now empty but for cops and sweepers, to speak to a crime scene investigator.

“Schuman, what’ve you got?”

She knew him to be a hard-bitten, seen-i t-all type, as comfortable in the lab as on scene. He’d shed his protective suit and booties and stood

unfolding a piece of gum from its wrapper. "What we've got is about two quarts of blood and body fluids, plenty of spatter. Got some flesh and fibers, and a virtual shit load of prints. We're gonna want to get it in for a full workup and analysis, but with the on-scene exam, we got your blood type—A Neg, and spot samples indicate it's all from the same person. Whoever that is would be dead as my uncle Bob, whose demise went un lamented by all who knew him."

He popped the gum, chewed for a thoughtful moment. "I can tell you what we ain't got. That would be a body or a blood trail, or at this point one freaking notion how said body got the hell out of that john." He smiled. "It's interesting."

"How soon can you tell me if the blood came out of a warm body, or came out of a damn bucket?"

"We'll look at that. Wouldn't be as fun, but the bucket'd make more sense. Problem being, the spatter's consistent with on-scene injuries." Obviously intrigued, he chewed and smiled. "Looks like a damn slasher vid in there. Whoever walked in living got sliced and diced, stuck and gutted. Then, you gotta say it's interesting, went poof!"

"Interesting," Eve repeated. "Is it clear to go in?"

"All swept. Help yourself."

He went in with her where a couple of sweepers examined the sinks, the pipes.

"We're looking at everything," he told Eve. "But you'd have to have a magic shrinking pill to get out of here through the plumbing. We're gonna take the vents, the floors, walls, ceilings."

She tipped her face up, studied the ceiling herself. "The killer would have had to transport himself, the body, and a grown woman. Maybe more than one killer."

She shifted to study the spatter on the stalls, the walls. "The vic standing about there. Killer slices her throat first; that's what I'd do. She can't call

out. We get that major spatter from the jugular wound, partially blocked by the killer's body."

Eve turned, slapped her hand to her throat. "She grabs her throat, the blood pumps through her fingers, more spatter there, but she doesn't go down, not yet. She falls toward the wall—we get the smears of blood—tries to turn around, more smears. He cuts her again, so we have the spatter on the next stall there, and lower on the wall here, so he probably stuck her, and she stumbled back this way." Eve eased back. "Maybe tries to make it to the door, but he's on her. Slice and dice, and down she goes. Bleeds out where she falls."

"We'll run it, like I said, but that's how I read it."

"He'd be covered in blood."

"If he washed up at any of the sinks," Schuman put in, "he didn't leave any trace, not in the bowls, not in the traps."

"Protective clothes? Gloves?" Peabody suggested.

"Maybe. Probably. But if he can get a DB out of here, I guess he could walk out covered in blood. No trail," Eve repeated. "No drag marks. Even if he just hauled it up and carried it out, there'd be a blood trail. He had to wrap it up. If we go with protective gear and a body bag or something along the line, he planned it out, came prepared, and he damn well had an exit plan. Carolee was a variable, but he didn't have too much trouble there either. He dealt with it."

"But he didn't kill her. He didn't really hurt her," Peabody pointed out.

"Yeah." That point was something Eve had puzzled over. "And he could have, easily enough. The door doesn't lock. Safety regs outlaw locks on public restroom doors with multiple stalls. He makes do with a sign, even though this had to take several minutes. The kill, the cleanup, the transport. And Carolee was missing for over an hour, so wherever he went, wherever he took her, he needed time."

“A lot of places on this boat. Vents, infrastructure, storage. You got big-ass ducts for heating and cooling the inside cabin deals,” Schuman told her. “You got your sanitary tanks, your equipment storage, maintenance areas. We’re going through here, but it doesn’t show how the hell he got out of this room.”

“So, let’s find out where he went and work backward. And we need to find out who the vic was, and why she got sliced on the Staten Island Ferry. It had to be specific, or Carolee Grogan’s blood would be all over this room, too.”

For the moment, Eve thought, the best she could do was leave it to the sweepers.

Four

“Why didn’t he kill Carolee?” Peabody wondered when they were back on deck. “It would’ve been easier. Just cut her throat, and get back to business. It wasn’t as if he worried about covering up a crime. All the blood was a pretty big clue one had been committed.”

Eve walked toward the stern, trying to reconstruct a scene that made no sense. “I’m looking forward to asking him. I don’t think it’s just his good luck she can’t remember. Let’s see what the medical exam concludes after she’s done there. But the bigger question is, yeah, why bother to suppress her memory? And why would the killer have something on him that could?”

“Hypnosis?”

“I’m not ruling it out.” She leaned back against the rail, looked up at the twin smokestacks. “They’re not real. They’re show. Just to keep the ferry looking old-timey. Big. Way big enough for somebody to hide a body and an unconscious woman.”

“Sure, if he had sparkly fairy wings and an invisibility shield.”

Eve had to laugh. “Point. Regardless, let’s make sure they get checked out.” She turned when Jake walked toward them.

“We let the last of the passengers through the ticker. Two short. We’ve accounted for everyone, passengers, crew, concession. Two people who got on didn’t get off.”

“They just got off before we made port,” Eve corrected. “This ferry is out of service until further notice. It’s sealed by order of the NYPSP. Guards on twenty-four/seven. Crime Scene hasn’t finished, and will continue until they’ve covered every inch, including those,” she added, pointing at the smokestacks.

Jake lifted his gaze to follow the gesture. “Well. That should be fun.”

“Something this size, with this layout? There are places to hide, to conceal. He had to know the boat, the layout, at least to some extent.”

“Having a place to hide doesn’t explain getting out of that bathroom without anyone seeing him. Unless he has the cloak of invisibility.”

Jake’s remark got a quick laugh from Peabody and a cool stare from Eve.

“We work the wit and the evidence. We’ll be in touch, Inspector.”

“You’re leaving?”

“We’ll be following up with the security discs, Carolee Grogan, and the lab. The sooner we identify the victim, if a victim there is, the sooner we can move on the killer. You may want some of your men backing up mine on guard duty. I don’t want anyone on that ferry without authorization.”

“All right.”

“Let’s move, Peabody.”

“Ah, Detective? Should your situation change . . .”

Peabody felt the heat rise to her cheeks again. “It isn’t likely to, but thanks.” She scrambled to keep up with Eve’s long strides. “He hit on me

again.”

“I’ll mark it down, first chance.”

“It’s markable,” Peabody mumbled. “Really.” She risked a look over her shoulder before they boarded the turbo. “I figured we’d be staying, going over the boat again.”

“We have enough people on that.” Eve braced herself as the turbo shot across the water. “Here’s a question—or a few. Why kill in a public restroom on a ferry in the middle of the water? No easy way off. Why not leave the body? Why, if interrupted by a bystander, spare that bystander’s life? And go to the trouble, apparently, to secret her away for an hour?”

“Okay, but even if we find the answer to any of the whys, we don’t answer the hows.”

“Next column. How was the victim selected? How was the method of killing selected? How was Carolee Grogan moved from the crime scene to another location? And straddling columns, why doesn’t she remember? How was the body—if there was one—removed? All of it comes back to one question. Who was the victim? That’s the center. The rest rays out from there.”

“The victim’s probably female. Or the killer. One of them, at least, is probably female. It makes more sense, given the location of the murder.”

“Agreed, and the computer agrees. I ran probability. Mid-eighties for female vic or killer.” She pulled out her ‘link when it signaled, saw Roarke’s personal code on the readout. “Hey.”

“Hey back.” His face—that fallen-angel beauty—filled the screen as dark brows lifted over bold blue eyes. “You’re out in the harbor? The ferry incident?”

“Shit. How much has leaked?”

“Not a great deal. Certainly nothing that speaks of murder.” His voice, Irish whispering through, cruised over the words as she rocketed back toward

Manhattan. “Who’s dead, then?”

“That’s a question. I’m hoping the lab can tell me. I’m heading there, and depending on the answer, I might be late getting home.”

“As it happens I’m downtown, and was hoping to ask my wife out to dinner. Why don’t I meet you at the lab, then depending on the answer you get, we’ll go from there?”

She couldn’t think of a reason against it, and in fact, calculated the opportunity to run it all by him. A fresh perspective might give her some new angles. “Okay. It’ll be handy to have you right there if I have to bribe Dickhead to push on the ID.”

“Always happy to bribe local officials. I’ll see you soon.”

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Peabody asked when Eve stuck her ’link back in her pocket. “Having a guy.”

Eve started to shrug it off, then decided the turbo pilot couldn’t hear them. Besides, there was no reason not to take a few minutes for nonsense. “It doesn’t suck.”

“It really doesn’t. Having a really cute guy like Jake flirt with me has some frost, but knowing I’m going to be snuggled up with McNab tonight? That’s the ice.”

“Why do you always have to put you and McNab and sex in my head? It brings pain no blocker can cure.”

“Snuggling isn’t sex. It’s before or after sex. I especially like the after-sex snuggle when you’re all warm and loose like a couple of sleepy puppies.” She cocked her head. “I’m getting horny.”

“So glad you shared that with me. Let’s try to get this pesky investigation out of the way so you can go get your puppy snuggles.”

“You know, I’ve got this new outfit I’ve been saving for a night when—”

“Do not go there. Do not,” Eve warned. “I swear by all that’s holy, I’ll chuck you overboard, then order the turbo to run over you while you sputter in the water.”

“Harsh. Anyway, maybe that’s what the killers did, just chucked the victim in the water, then jumped in after the body wearing SCUBA gear.”

“If he was going to chuck the body in, why move it in the first place? He didn’t just want the kill, he wanted the body.”

“Ewww. I know, a police detective’s not supposed to say ‘ewww.’ But why would he want the body?”

“A trophy.” Eve narrowed her eyes.

“I’m not saying ‘ewww.’ ”

“You’re thinking it. Proof,” she added, “which strikes me as more likely than trophy. A body’s unassailable proof of death. Which, at this point, we don’t have. He does. Which brings us to another why. Why would he need proof?”

“Payment?” At Eve’s nod, Peabody lifted her hands. “But for a hit, it was messy and complicated. It doesn’t smell like a pro.”

“No, it doesn’t. Unless you add in the rest. Missing body, public arena, two people vanishing like smoke. That strikes me as very professional.”

It kept her mind occupied on the drive to the lab. And at least she was navigating on solid ground instead of water. New York appeared to have burst open for summer, and out of its nooks and crannies poured tourists and the street thieves who depended on them. Glida carts did brisk business with cold drinks and ice pops, while portable knock-off vendors raked it in with cheap souvenirs, wrist units that might function until the buyer got back to his hotel, colorful “silk” scarves, fashion shades and handbags that could be mistaken for their designer counterparts if you were a half block away and had one eye closed.

But it also brought out the sidewalk florists with their bounty of color and scent and the alfresco diners taking in the sun over glasses of wine or thimbles of espresso.

It added to the street and air traffic, jammed the glides and sidewalks, and yet, Eve thought, it all rushed and roared exactly as it was meant to.

She spotted Roarke before she parked, standing outside the drab edifice that housed the busy hive of the lab and forensics. The dark charcoal suit fit the lean length of him perfectly, and showed a subtle flare with a tie nearly as bold a blue as his eyes.

Black hair fell in a mane around that striking face, shades shielded those stunning eyes as he slipped the PPC he'd been working on into a pocket and started toward her.

She thought he looked like some elegantly urban vid star with just a hit of edge. And she supposed it suited him as one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the world—and on its satellites—who'd pulled himself by hook or—haha—crook out of the grime of the Dublin alleyways.

“Check on Carolee,” she told Peabody. “See if they’ve finished the medical, have any results.”

She watched Roarke’s lips curve as they walked toward each other. She didn’t need to see his eyes to know they mirrored that smile. And her heart gave a quick, giddy jump. She had to admit Peabody was right. It was nice to have a guy.

“Lieutenant.” He took her hand and, though she lowered her eyebrows to discourage him, bent to brush those curved lips lightly over hers. “Hello, Peabody. You look fetchingly windblown.”

“Yeah.” She brushed ineffectually at her hair. “Boat ride.”

“So I hear.”

“Check on the wit, Peabody,” Eve repeated as she led the way inside.

“What was witnessed?” Roarke wondered.

“Tell me what the media’s saying. I haven’t bothered to tune in.”

“I caught bits and pieces on my way downtown to my meeting, then a bit more after. A woman apparently lost on the ferry, then found. Or not, depending on the report. A possibility someone was injured or fell overboard.”

He continued as Eve led them through the maze, signed and badged them through security.

“The main thrust seems to be that DOT and NYPSD officials held up the ferry for over two hours, then additional time with a security search of passengers as they disembarked. A few of the passengers sent various media outlets some vids or statements. So, you can imagine, it’s all over the board.”

“Fine.” Eve opted for a down glide rather than an elevator. “Better that way.”

“Is someone missing? Or dead?”

“Someone was missing, but now she’s not. Someone might be dead, but there’s no body. Passenger count is off by two on disembarking.”

“Which might equal victim and killer. How’d they get off the ferry?”

“That’s another question.” She stepped off the glide. “First, I’ve got a couple quarts of blood in a public restroom on the ferry. I need to find out who it belonged to.”

Five

She wound through the labyrinth bisected by glass walls. Behind them techs worked with scopes and holos, forensic droids, tiny vials and mysterious solutions.

The air hummed in a blend of machine and human into a single voice Eve found just slightly creepy. She would never understand how people worked, day after day, in a vast space without a single window.

She found the chief lab tech, Dick Berenski, sliding his stool soundlessly along his long white counter as he commanded various comps. Dickhead was an irritant, a pebble in the shoe on a personal level, but she couldn't deny his almost preternatural skill with evidence.

He looked up, cocking his egg-shaped head as she approached, and she didn't miss the light in his eyes when he recognized Roarke.

"Got yourself an entourage today, Dallas."

"Don't think about trying to hit up the civilian for liquor, tickets to sporting events or cash."

"Hey." Dickhead couldn't quite pull off offended.

"Let's talk blood."

"Got enough of it. I got the initial sample a couple hours ago, and they're bringing in the rest. We'll run tests on samples of that, too. Could be more than one source. Got my blood guy reconstructing the scene, pool and spatter, from the record. That's a fucking *beaucoup* of blood."

"Fresh or frozen?"

He honked out a little laugh. "Fresh." He tapped some keys and had squiggles and swirls in bold reds, yellows, blues, filling a comp screen. "No indication the sample had been stored, cold-boxed, flash-frozen, thawed or rehydrated."

He tapped again, brought up another screen of shapes and colors. "Coagulation rate and temp says it hit the air about two hours—maybe a little more—before I tested it. That's consistent with the time it took to get here."

“Concluding the sample came out of a live human, and came out of said human between one and two this afternoon.”

“What I said. A Neg, human blood, healthy platelets, cholesterol, no STD. We filtered out trace portions of other body fluid and flesh. Double X chromosomes.”

“Female.”

“You bet. We’ll keep separating other body fluids when we have the larger samples, and the sweepers tell me they’ve got some hair in there. We’ll be able to tell you pretty much everything. Fluids, flesh and hair.” He grinned widely. “I could freaking rebuild her with samples like that.”

“Nice thought. DNA.”

“I’m running it through. Takes some time, and there’s no guarantee she’s on the grid. Might get a relative. I programmed for full match and blood relations.”

Thorough, Eve thought. When Dickhead got his weird little teeth into something, he was thorough. “There were fibers.”

“Like I said, we’ll separate and filter. I’ll give hair and fiber to Harpo. She’s the queen. But I can’t pull the vic’s ID out of my ass. She’s either on the grid or—Hey!” He swiveled, scooted as the far comp beeped. “Son of a bitch, we got a match. I am so freaking good.”

Eve came around the counter to study the ID photo and data herself. “Copy to my unit,” she ordered. “And I want a printout. Dana Buckley, age forty-one, born in Sioux City, why are you dead?”

“Nice-looking skirt,” Berenski commented, and Eve ignored him.

Blue-eyed blonde, she thought, pale skin, pretty in a corn-fed sort of way. Five-six, a hundred thirty-eight, parents deceased, no sibs, no offspring, no marriage or cohab on record. “Current employment, freelance consultant. What does this personal data tell us smart investigators, Detective?”

“That the deceased has no family ties, no employer to verify identification or give further data on said deceased. Which makes a smart investigator go hmmm.”

“It does indeed. She lists a home and office address here in New York. Park Avenue. Peabody, run this down.”

“It’s the Waldorf,” Roarke said from behind her.

“As in Astoria?” Eve glanced back, caught his nod, and the look in his eyes when they met hers.

She thought, Crap, but said nothing. Not yet.

“Check and see if they have her registered,” she told Peabody. “And get a copy of the ID print, show it to the desk staff to see if they make her. Quick work, Berenski.”

“After quick work, I like to relax with a good bottle or two of wine.”

She took the printout and walked away without a second glance.

“Worth the shot,” Berenski said at her back.

“There’s nobody by the name of Dana Buckley registered at the Waldorf,” Peabody told her as she caught up to Eve. “No make from the desk staff. This new data rates a second hmmm.”

“Go back to Central, do a full run on her. You can start on the security discs. Send copies to my home unit. I’m going to swing by, reinterview Carolee, show her the printout. Maybe she’ll remember seeing the vic.”

“We were lucky to get a DNA match that fast. I’ll tag you if I dig up anything on her.” She sent a quick smile to Roarke. “See you later.”

Eve waited until she and Roarke were in her vehicle, with her taking the wheel. “You knew her.”

“Not really. Of her, certainly. It’s complicated.”

“Is there any way you could be connected to this?”

“No. That is, I have no connection to her.”

Eve felt the knot in her stomach begin to loosen. “How do you know her, or of her?”

“I first heard of her some years ago. We were working on a prototype for some—at the time—new holo technology. It was very nearly stolen, or would have been if we hadn’t implemented multiple layers of security. As it was, she got through several before the red flag.”

“Corporate and/or technological espionage.”

“Yes. I didn’t know her as Dana Buckley, but as Catherine Delauter. I expect you’ll find any number of IDs before you’re done.”

“Who does she work for?”

He lifted a shoulder in a dismissive if elegant shrug. “The highest bidder. She thought I might be interested in her services, and arranged to meet me. That’s seven or eight years ago.”

“Did you hire her?”

He glanced at Eve with mild exasperation. “Why would I? I don’t need to steal—and if I did, I could do it myself, after all. I wasn’t interested in her services, and made it plain. Not only because I don’t—never did—steal ideas. It’s low and common.”

Eve shook her head. “Your moral compass continues to baffle me.”

“As yours does me. Aren’t we a pair? But I warned her off not only for that, but because she was known—and my own research confirmed—not only as a spy but an assassin.”

Eve glanced over quickly before she pushed through traffic. “A corporate assassin?”

“That would depend on the highest bidder, from what I learned. She’s for hire, or apparently was, and didn’t quibble at getting her hands bloody. Peabody won’t find any of this in her run. A large percentage of her work, if rumor holds, has been for various governments. The pay’s quite good, particularly if you don’t mind a bit of throat slitting.”

“A techno spy, heavy into wet work, takes a ride on the ferry. And ends up not just dead, but missing. A competitor? Another kill for hire? It struck me as a pro job, even—maybe because—it was so damn messy and complicated. It’s going to get buckets of media when the rest of the data leaks. Who would want that?”

“A point proven?” He shrugged again. “I couldn’t say. Was the body dumped off the ferry?”

“I don’t think so.” She filled him in as she wound and bullied her way to the East Side. “So, as far as I can tell, he moved the body and the wit, in full view of dozens, maybe hundreds of people. And nobody saw anything. The wit doesn’t remember anything.”

“I’ll have to ask the obvious. You’re sure there were no escape routes in the room?”

“Unless we’ve got a killer who can shrink to rat size and slither down a pipe, we didn’t find any. Maybe he popped into a vortex.”

Roarke turned, grinned. “Really?”

Eve waved it away. “Peabody’s Free-A gey suggestion. Hell, maybe he waved his magic wand and said, ‘Hocus pocus.’ What?” she said when Roarke frowned.

“Something . . . in the back of my mind. Let me think about it.”

“Before you think too hard?” She veered into the health center’s lot. “Just let me point out there is no magic wand, or rabbit in the hat, or alternate reality.”

“Well, in this reality, most people notice when a dead body’s paraded around under their noses.”

“Maybe it didn’t look like one. They have a couple of maintenance hampers on board. The killer dumps the body in, wheels it out like it’s just business as usual. And no, we haven’t found any missing hampers, or any trace in the couple on board. But it’s a logical angle.”

“True enough.” Once she’d parked, he got out of the car with her. “Then again, logic would say don’t kill in a room with only one out, and a public one, don’t take the body, and don’t leave a witness. So, it may be hard to hold to one logical line when the others are badly frayed.”

“They’re only frayed logic until you find the reason and motive.” Eve pulled out her badge as they walked into the health center.

The Grogans crowded into a tiny little room with Carolee sitting up in bed, a bouquet of cheerful flowers in her lap. She looked tired, Eve thought, and showed both strain and resignation when she saw Eve come in.

“Lieutenant. I’ve been poked and prodded, screened and scanned and scoped. All over a bump on the head. I know something bad happened, something awful, but it really doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“You still don’t remember anything?”

“No. Obviously I hit my head, and I must’ve been dazed for a while.” Her hand snuck from under the flowers to reach for her husband’s. “I’m fine now, really. I feel fine now. I don’t want the boys to spend their vacation in a hospital room.”

“It’s just a few hours,” Steve assured her. The youngest, whose name was Pete, Eve remembered, crawled onto the bed to sit at his mother’s side.

“Still. I’m sorry someone was hurt. Someone must’ve been hurt, from what Steve said. I wish I could help, I really do. But I don’t know anything.”

“How’s the head?”

“It pounds a little.”

“I have a photo I’d like to show you.” Eve offered the printout of Dana Buckley. “Do you recognize her? Someone you might’ve seen on the ferry.”

“I don’t think . . .” She lifted her hand to worry at the bandage on the forehead. “I don’t think . . .”

“There were a lot of people.” Steve angled his head to look at the photo. “We were looking out at the water most of the time.” He glanced with concern toward the monitor as his wife’s pulse rate jumped. “Okay, honey, take it easy.”

“I don’t remember. It scares me. Why does it scare me?”

“Don’t look at it anymore.” Will snatched the photo away. “Don’t look at it, Mom. Don’t scare her anymore.” He thrust the photo back at Eve. “She was in the picture.”

“Sorry?”

“The lady. Here.” He pulled a camera out of his pocket. “We took pictures. Dad let me take some. She’s in the picture.” He turned the camera on, scrolled back through the frames. “We took a lot. I looked through them when they had Mom away for tests. She’s in the picture. See?”

Eve took the camera and looked at a crowd shot, poorly cropped, with Dana Buckley sitting on a bench sipping from a go-cup. With a briefcase in her lap.

“Yeah, I see. I need to keep this for a while, okay? I’ll get it back to you.”

“You can keep it, I don’t care. Just don’t scare my mom.”

“I don’t want to scare your mother. That’s not why I’m here,” Eve said, directly to Carolee.

“I know. I know. She—that’s the one who was hurt?”

“Yes. It upsets you to see her photo.”

“Terrifies me. I don’t know why. There’s a light,” she said after a hesitation.

“A light?”

“A bright flash. White flash. After I see her picture, and I’m scared, so scared. There’s a white flash, and I can’t see anything. Blind, for a minute. I . . . It sounds crazy. I’m not crazy.”

“Shh.” Pete began to stroke her hair. “Shh.”

“I’m going to speak to the doctor. If Carolee’s clear, I want to get her and our boys back to the hotel. Away from this. We’ll get room service.” Steve winked over at Will. “In-room movies.”

“God, yes,” Carolee breathed. “I’ll feel better once we’re out of here.”

“Let’s go find the doctor,” Eve suggested and sent a glance at Roarke. He nodded, and moved to the foot of the bed as Steve went out with Eve.

“So, Mrs. Grogan, where would you be staying here in New York?”

It took another thirty minutes, but Roarke asked no questions until they were out of the health center. “And so, how is the lady?”

“I had the doctor dumb it down for me. He was giving it to the husband—he’s a doctor, too—in fancier terms.”

“You can keep it dumbed down for me.”

“She’s good,” Eve told him, “no serious or lasting damage. The contusion, mild concussion, and most interestingly what he dumbed down to a ‘smudge’ on her optic nerves—both eyes. He seemed to be pushing for another test, but he’d already done a recheck and as the smudge was already dissipating, I don’t think Steve’s going to go for it. Added to it, the brain scan showed something wonky in the memory section—a blip, but that’s resolved, too, on retest. Her tox is clear,” Eve added as she got back into the car. “No trace of anything, which is too damn bad, as that’s where logic was leading me.”

“A memory suppressor would’ve been logical. And may be yet.” He shook his head at her look. “We’ll have some things to check into when we get home. You’ll likely have to follow up with the Grogans?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’ll find them at the Palace. They’ll be moving there tonight.”

“Your hotel?”

“It seems they’re a bit squeezed into a room at the moment, and it struck me they could use a bit of an upgrade for their troubles. Plus the security’s better there. Considerably.”

“I’m putting a watch on them,” Eve began, then shrugged. “It is better.” She engaged the ‘link to update her men on the change. “Let’s go home and start ‘checking into.’ ”

Six

Summerset, Roarke’s man about everything, wasn’t lurking in the grand foyer when Eve walked in. She spied the fat cat, Galahad, perched on the newel post like a furry gargoyle. He blinked his bicolored eyes twice, then leaped down with a thud to saunter over and rub against her legs.

“Where’s Mr. Macabre?” Eve asked as she scratched the cat between the ears.

“Stop.” Roarke didn’t bother to sigh. The pinching and poking between his wife and his surrogate father were not likely to end anytime soon. “Summerset’s setting things up in my private office. We need to use the unregistered equipment,” he continued when she frowned. “Any serious digging on your victim is going to send up flags to certain parties. And there’s more.”

He took her hand to lead her up the steps.

“If I don’t dig into the vic through proper channels, it’s going to look very strange.”

“You have Peabody on that,” he reminded her. “And you can do some of your own, for form. But you won’t find what you’re after through legitimate channels. Set up your runs, on Buckley, the Grogans, the possible causes of this optic smudge. All the things you’d routinely do. Then come up and meet me.”

He lifted her hand to kiss her fingers. “And we’ll do the real excavating. She’s a freelance spy and assassin, Eve, who works for the highest bidder or on a whim. That work would definitely include certain areas of the U.S. government. You won’t get far your way.”

“What’s the ‘more’?” She hated the cloak-and-dagger crap. “You said there’s more?”

But he shook his head. “Start your runs. We’ll go over what I’ve heard, know, suspect.”

Since there was no point in wasting time, Eve walked into her home office to set up the multiple runs and searches. She sent an e-mail to Dr. Mira, the NYP’s top profiler and psychiatrist, to ask about the validity of mass hypnosis. It made her feel foolish, but she wanted a solid opinion from a source she respected.

Before compiling and updating her notes, she checked in with Peabody, and read over all the initial lab and sweepers’ reports. No witnesses had come forward to claim they’d seen anything unusual, including any individual transporting a dead body. Which was too bad, she mused. Also in the too-bad department was the report that the pipes and vents within the crime scene were just too damn small to have served as an escape route.

Solid walls, no windows, one door, she decided. And that meant, however improbably, both killer and victim had exited through the door.

He hadn't stepped into Peabody's vortex, hadn't employed an alien transporter beam or flourished a magic wand. He'd used the damn door. She just had to figure out how.

She made her way to Roarke's private office, used the palm pad and voice recognition to enter. He sat behind the U-shaped console with the jewel-toned buttons and controls winking over the slick black surface. The privacy screens shielded the windows and let the evening sunlight filter into the room in a pale gold wash. A small table stood by those windows, set with silver domed plates, an open bottle of wine, the sparkle of crystal.

His idea of a working dinner, she mused.

He'd already tied his hair back—serious work mode—and commanded keyboard and touch screens with rapid movements.

“What are you hacking into?” she asked.

“Various agencies. CIA, Homeland Security, Interpol, MI5, Global, EuroCom, and that sort.”

“Is that all?” She pressed her fingers to her eyes. “I was going to stick with coffee, but now I think I need a drink.”

“Pour me one. And after I get these to auto-search, I'll tell you a story over dinner.”

She poured two, pleased the wine was red, which lowered the chances of something healthy like fish with steamed vegetables on the plates. She peeked under the silver cover and was instantly cheered. “Hey, lasagna!” Then, on closer study. “What's this green stuff in there?”

“Good for you.”

“Why is good for you mostly green? Why can't they make it taste like candy or at least pizza?”

“I'm going to get my R and D right on that. And we're going to speak of R and D, as it happens. There now.” He sat back, nodded at his screens.

“We’ll see what we see.” He rose, crossed to her. Taking up his glass, he tapped it to hers, then smiled. “I think I’ll have another of these,” he decided, and cupped her chin before taking her mouth with his.

“No distracting with wine and lip-locks,” she ordered. “I want to get to the bottom of this. The whole thing is . . . irritating.”

“I imagine it is, to someone of your logical bent.” He gestured for her to sit, then settled across from her. “Your victim,” he began, “was a dangerous woman. Not in an admirable way. Not like you, for instance. She fought for nothing, stood for nothing, save her own gain.”

“You said you didn’t really know her.”

“This is what I know of her. It’s not the first time I’ve looked into her, which will make tonight’s work a bit easier on that score. Information on her is, naturally, sketchy, but I believe she was born in Albania, the result of a liaison between her American mother and an unknown father. Her mother served in the U.S. Diplomatic Corps. She traveled with her mother extensively, saw and learned quite a bit of the world. It seems she was recruited, at a young age, by a covert group, World Intelligence Network.”

“WIN?”

“Which was exactly their goal. To win data, funds, territories, political positions—however it was most expedient. They only lasted a decade. But in that decade, they trained her, and as she apparently showed considerable ability and no particular conscience, used her in their Black Moon sector.”

“Wet work.”

“Yes.” He broke a hunk of bread in two, passed her a share. “Somewhere along the line, she opted to freelance. It’s more lucrative, and she’d have seen WIN was fragmenting. She tends to take high-dollar jobs, private or government. As I said, I had a brush with her several years ago. I believe, two years after that, she killed three of my people in an attempt to acquire the data and research to new fusion fuel we had under development.”

Eve ate slowly. “Did she target you? Have you been a target?”

“No. It’s generally believed I’m more useful alive than dead, even to competitors or . . . interested parties. I’m able to fund the R and D, the science, the manufacturing, and others may hope to steal it. Nothing to steal if you cut off the head.”

“That’s a comfort.”

He reached across for her hand. “I watch out for myself, Lieutenant. Now, depending on the source, your victim is given credit, so to speak, for anywhere from fifty to two hundred and fifty deaths. Some were in the game, some were just in the way.”

“You couldn’t find her.” Eve watched him as she ate. “You thought she killed three of your people, so you’d have tried.”

“No, I couldn’t find her. She went under, considerably under. I thought she might be dead, having failed to secure what she was hired for.” He studied the wine in his glass. “Apparently I was wrong.”

“Until now. It’s unlikely she was on that ferry to sightsee.”

“Very. It might’ve been a meet or a target, but odds are it was business.”

“Double cross. But someone like this, experienced, how does she get caught off guard and taken out? Someone she knew? Someone she trusted or underestimated maybe? Another spook? Another assassin?” She felt the frustration rising again, like flood water behind a dam. “Why so freaking public?”

“I couldn’t begin to guess. Tell me what you think about this smudge, this flash of light.”

She blew out a breath. “I left a message for Mira, asking her about the possibility of mass hypnosis. And that sounds crazy when I hear myself say it out loud. Not as crazy as vortexes or invisibility cloaks, but in that mix of nuts. Still, we’ve dealt with mind manipulation before. The tiny burn in the

cortex found in autopsy after suicides, manipulated by your pal Reeanna Ott.”

“Hardly my pal, as it turned out.” But he nodded to show they were on the same page. “Manipulation, in that case, done through audio.”

“So, a possible manipulation done optically,” Eve finished. “One that affects memory. But it has to do more. I can almost swallow people wouldn’t remember seeing someone haul out a dead body, but I have to figure they wouldn’t just let him by in the first place. And Carolee, whether she was conscious or unconscious, her kid wouldn’t have just stood where he was, would he, if he saw her come out? So, maybe we’re dealing with a device that can manipulate behavior, or sight, and memory? That’s a big jump. Mass hypnosis suddenly doesn’t sound so crazy.”

“There have been rumors, underground and through the tech world, of a device in development. A kind of stunner.”

“Ah. Got one of those.” Eve tapped the weapon at her side she’d yet to take off.

“Not your conventional stunner, but one that renders the target incapacitated through an optical signal rather than the nervous system. It sends a signal, through light, that shuts down certain basic functions. Essentially, in a theory not that far from your mass hypnosis, it puts the target into a kind of trance. Hocus Pocus.” He lifted his wineglass in half salute. “It’s often referred to as that, which made me think of it when you used the term. The rumors are largely dismissed, but not entirely.”

“We’re talking dozens of people,” Eve argued. “Potentially hundreds.”

“And the idea this device exists, and has a possibility for that sort of range, is . . . fascinating. And used as a weapon? Devastating.”

Eve pushed up from the table to pace. “I hate this kind of shit. Why can’t it just be regular bad guy crap? You’ve got money, I want it, I kill you. You’ve been screwing my wife, it pisses me off, I cut out your heart. No, I’ve got to

worry about disappearing bodies and weapons designed to turn the lights out on masses of people. Crap.”

“It’s an ever-changing world,” Roarke said lightly.

She snorted. “How much credence do you and your R and D people put into this device?”

“Enough to be working on something similar—and a counter-device. Though both are still in the theoretical stages. I’m getting the data for you,” he added, gesturing toward the console.

She sat again, drummed her fingers on the table. “Okay, say this device exists, and was used today. Say its existence speaks to why Buckley was on that ferry, either with the device in her possession or with the hopes to make that so. It still doesn’t explain why she was murdered in the way she was, or why her body was taken off the ferry. Stealing or obtaining the device, even killing Buckley to get it, that’s business. Basically exsanguinating her and taking what’s left? That’s personal.”

“I wouldn’t argue, but business and personal often overlap.”

“Okay.” She lifted her hands and swiped them in the air as if clearing a board. “Why remove the body? Maybe to prove the hit, if it’s hired. Maybe because you’re a sick fuck. Or maybe to buy time. I like that one because it’s weirdly logical. It stalls the identification process. We have to depend on a DNA search and match. And then, we get what appears to be an innocuous vic, corn-fed Iowa-born female consultant. Maybe, given some time, we’d dig under that, have some questions. But the bigger puzzler would remain, at least initially, how rather than who, since we had the who.”

“But, because I wanted to spend a bit more time with my wife, I happened to be there when she was identified.”

“Yeah. You recognized her, and that’s a variable the killer couldn’t have factored in.”

“Logical enough,” Roarke agreed. “But buy time for what?”

“To get away, to deliver the device and/or the body. To destroy the body, certainly to get the hell away from the scene. This spy stuff doesn’t work like the job. It’s convoluted, covered with gray areas and underlying motivations. But when you wipe away all of that, you’ve still got a killer, a victim, a motive. We cross off random, because no possible way. It wasn’t impulse.”

“Because?” He knew the answer, or thought he did, but he loved watching her work.

“The sign on the door, the getaway. It was vicious—all that spatter. A pro wouldn’t have wasted time with that. Cut the throat, skewer the heart, hit the big artery in the thigh. Pick one and move on. But blood doesn’t lie, and the spatter clearly says this was slice, hack, rip.”

The light softened as they spoke, and he wondered how many couples might sit in the evening light over a meal and talk of blood spatter and exsanguination.

Precious few, he supposed.

“Are you sure none of the blood was the killer’s?”

She nodded. It was a good question, she thought, and only one of the reasons she liked bouncing a case around with him. “Reports just in, taking samples of every area of spatter, and several from the pool, confirm it all belonged to Buckley.”

“Then she was caught seriously off guard.”

“I’ll say. So, specific target, specific location and time, personal and professional connections. Add one more element, and I think it matters. Whoever killed Buckley didn’t kill Carolee Grogan when it would’ve been easier, more expedient and even to his or her advantage to do so.”

“Leaving her body behind. More confusion,” Roarke agreed. “A longer identification time on the blood pool. A killer with a heart?”

She tossed back the rest of her wine. "It's more that a lot of people with a heart kill."

"My cynical darling."

She rolled her eyes. "Let's see what we've got so far." She jerked a thumb toward the console.

Roarke walked back behind the command center, sat. Then, smiling at Eve, patted his knee.

"Please."

"And thank you," he said, grabbing her and tugging her down. "There now, this is cozy."

"It's murder."

"Yes, yes, on a daily basis. Now, see here, we're through several levels on HSO, but then, I've been through that door before." He brushed his lips over her cheek. "And making some progress on the others. They'll have done some code shifting and housekeeping since my last visits, but see there, we're rerouting with them."

"I see a bunch of gibberish, numbers and symbols flashing by."

"Exactly. Let's see if we can nudge it along." He reached around her, began tapping keys. "There are all sorts of tricks," he continued as the codes zipped by on the screens. "Realignments, firewalls, fail-safes, trapdoors and back-doors. But we keep updating along with them."

"Why? Seriously, why do you need access to this stuff?"

"Everyone needs a hobby. What we want here are eyes-only personnel files, their black ops consultants. And verification if the device rumored to exist does indeed exist. Eyes-only again, but the trick would be to find where it might be tucked and by whom. Ah well, bugger it. Let's try this way."

Assuming from the oath and his increased tapping that he'd hit a snag, Eve wiggled away. "I'm getting coffee, and I'm going to run some data of my own."

When his answer was a grunt, she knew playtime was over. It was time for serious work.

Seven

Using an auxiliary computer, Eve initiated her own search for any mention of a device such as Roarke had described. She found several articles on medical sites detailing the memory suppressive drugs and tools used during routine surgeries, others edging toward hypnotherapy in both medical studies and gaming.

She also found a scattering of fringe blogs raging about government mind control, enslaving of the masses and the ever-popular doomsday warnings. A nation of human droids, forced experimentation, personality theft and human breeding farms were on their top-ten list of predicted abominations. This led her to others claiming to have been abducted by aliens in league with the shadow forces of government.

"I'm surprised the government has time to, you know, govern, when they're so busy working with aliens and their anal probes or pursuing their mission to turn the global population into mindless sex droids."

"Hmm," Roarke said, "there's government, then there's government."

She glanced over to where he sat, fingers flying, eyes intent. "You don't actually believe this crap? Alien invasions, secret bunkers in Antarctica for experimentation on human guinea pigs."

He flicked his glance up. "Icove."

"That was . . . Okay." Hard to argue when they'd both nearly been killed when dismantling a subversive and illegal human cloning organization. "But aliens?"

“It’s a big universe. You should get out in it more often.”

“I like one planet just fine.”

“In any case, I have your victim. No, don’t get up.” He waved her back. “I’ll put it onscreen. Data, wall screen one. This is from HSO, but the data matches what I’ve got from the other sources.”

“Dana Buckley,” Eve read. “With her three most common aliases. Same age as her current ID. But with the biographical data you had.”

“Now it lists her assets. The languages she spoke, her e-skill level, the weaponry she was cleared for. Included in her dossier is this list.” He scrolled down. “Names, nationalities, ranks if applicable, dates.”

“Her hit list,” Eve mumbled. “They know or believe she’s killed these people, but they let her walk around.”

“Undoubtedly she killed some of those people for these agencies. They let her walk around until now because she’s useful to them.”

Eve dealt with murder every day, yet this offended and disturbed her on some core level she wasn’t sure she could articulate.

“That’s not how it’s supposed to be. You can’t just kill or order someone’s death because it’s expedient. We’ve managed to virtually outlaw torture and executions; if a cop terminates in the line, he has to go through testing to ensure it was ultimate force that was necessary. But there are still people, supposedly on our side, who would use someone like her to do their dirty work.”

“People who use someone like her rarely, if ever, get their hands dirty.”

“She was a psychopath. Look at her psych profile, for God’s sake.” Eve swung an arm at the screen. “She should’ve been put away, just like the person who did her needs to be put away.”

He watched her as she read the data onscreen. “You have less gray area than most.”

“You think this is acceptable? Jesus, read the list. Some of them are kids.”

“Collateral damage, I expect. And no,” he added as she swung around, her eyes firing. “I don’t think it’s acceptable to kill for money, for the thrill or for expedience. There may be more gray in my world than yours when it comes to killing for a cause, but that’s not what she did. It was profit and, I believe, for fun. And I suspect, if it had been Buckley standing in that room when Carolee walked in, those boys would be grieving for their mother tonight instead of cuddled up with her watching in-room movies.”

“Not all assassins are created equal?” Calmer, she angled her head as she studied the screen. “We need to look at this list, see if we can connect any of these names to someone in the same business. Someone skilled enough to get the drop on her.”

“I’ll set it up. Meanwhile, there’s interesting data on the device. This memo was issued two days ago.” Again, he ordered the data onscreen.

“ ‘The Lost delayed. Owl to commence new series of tests in Sector Twelve. Owl request for seventy-two and blackout approved.’ ” Eve puzzled over it a moment. “She’s not Owl. Who’d code-name a female assassin—a young, attractive one—Owl?”

“We can go over the earlier memos, but I’d say Owl would be in charge of the development of the device.”

“The Lost. You lose time, yourself, your memory of what happened when you’re . . . gone. So, if this Owl or someone under him/her had it, maybe it was an exchange. No, no, it was a setup. It was planned. He had to have a way off the damn ferry, so none of it was spontaneous. Delayed? But if it was used, it was complete.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time a member of the team decided to go free agent.”

“Fake a delay so you could sell it, but you don’t sell it. You walk away with whatever she had in that briefcase and the device. A twofer. If this is the last memo in the file, HSO isn’t yet aware they have a problem.”

“Still another reason to take the body,” Roarke pointed out. “Buys that time you spoke of. Maybe he had another offer. Or wants to renegotiate the fee, from a safe location.”

“It wasn’t about money,” Eve murmured. “not just about money. Buying time, yeah, that plays. She won’t be identified, officially, to the media until tomorrow.”

“There’s more. Photos of some of her work. Images onscreen, slide-show method,” he ordered.

She’d seen death, in all its forms, too many times to count. She watched it now, roll over the wall screen. Rent flesh, spilled blood, charred hulks.

“Some of these, of course, were very bad people. Others, very bad people wanted out of the way. It appears she didn’t discriminate. She followed the money. Some might argue whoever killed her did the world a favor.”

“And what makes him any better than her?” Eve demanded.

He only shrugged, knowing on some points they would never agree. “Some would argue otherwise.”

“Yeah, some would. Let’s find Owl.” She pushed her hands through her hair. “And I have to figure out a logical way to explain how I came by anything we get out of this tonight.”

“The ever-popular anonymous source.”

“Yeah, that’ll fool everybody who knows us.”

He initiated a series of searches, then studied her as she stood still watching death scroll by. “It’s harder when the victim is abhorrent to you.”

Eve shook her head. “I’m not allowed to decide if a murder victim is worth standing for. I stand for them.”

He rose, went to her. “But it’s harder when that victim has so many victims. So much blood on her hands.”

“It’s harder,” she admitted. “It can’t always be an easy choice. It’s just the only choice.”

“For you.” He kissed her brow, then cupped her face, lifted it and laid his lips gently, softly, over hers.

When she sighed and leaned into him, he hit the release on her weapon harness.

“Working,” she said against his mouth.

“I certainly hope so.”

She laughed when he tugged the harness off her shoulders. “No, I’ve got work.”

“Searches will take a while.” He circled her, reaching out to press a control on his console. The bed slid out of the panel in the wall.

“And you figure sex will cheer me up?”

“I’m hoping it’s a side benefit to cheering me up.”

He circled again, then launched them both toward the bed. She hit with a breathless thump, bounced and, what the hell, let herself be pinned under him.

“Rough stuff.”

He grinned. “If you like.”

He yanked her shirt over her head, let it fly as he lowered his mouth, with a hint of teeth to her breast.

She arched, urging him on. The violence here, so full of heat and hope, helped erase all those images of blood and loss. And helped her remember that no matter how they might differ on an issue, even an ideology, there was, always, love.

And lust.

She could take—a handful of that black silk hair, a ripple of muscle as she dragged at his shirt in turn. She could feel the pound of her heart and his as they rolled over the bed in a battle they would both win.

He made her laugh, made her breath catch. He made her skin shimmer and her blood swim. And when she wrapped around him, found his mouth with hers again, she could taste the flood of love and lust and longing.

So strong, so sweet. Her body moved under his, over his, agile and quick. The hum of the work that would draw them both back drowned under the thrum of his own pulse when his hands swept over her. Curve and angle, soft and firm. Wet and warm.

She arched again, rising up where he drove her, to break, then to gather again. Open for more, for him.

When he filled her, when they rose and fell, rose and fell, to break together, it gave her not only pleasure. It gave her peace.

Curled against him, warm and naked and replete, it occurred to her Peabody had been right again. After-sex snuggles were very, very good.

“You should sleep.” He spoke quietly, stroking her back. “It’s late, and there’s no urgency on this one.”

“I don’t know. Isn’t there?” She thought how lovely it would be to just close her eyes, to drift away with the scent of him all over her. “Closing the case, maybe that’s not so urgent on a technical level. But if the killer did have this thing, this weapon, and still has it, ready to sell it to God knows, doesn’t that make finding him, stopping him, part of the job, too?”

“Close the case, save the world?”

She tipped up her head until their eyes met. “You said you had people trying to develop this thing. Why?”

“Better you do it before the other one does. Self-preservation.”

“I get that. It’s always going to be that way. Bad guy has a stick, you get a knife. He has a knife, you get a stunner. The ante keeps going up. It’s the way it is. So, there have to be rules and laws, and even when the line blurs, we have to be able to know who the good guys are. If I have the chance to find this guy, stop him before he sells this thing, maybe we hold all of it back for another day.”

“The comp will signal when we have extrapolated data. Sleep awhile, then we’ll see about saving the world.”

It sounded reasonable.

The next thing she knew, the comp was beeping and she was springing up in bed—alone.

“What? Morning?”

“Nearly.” Roarke stood behind the command center, shirtless, his trousers riding low on his hips. “And your Owl’s come out.”

“You found him—her?”

“Him,” Roarke said as she leaped out of bed. He glanced over, smiled. “Come over here and I’ll show you.”

“I bet.” She snatched at her shirt, her pants.

“Killjoy. Well, at least get us both some coffee.”

“Who is he?” she demanded as she dragged on her clothes.

“That depends. He, like his victim, has gone by more than one name. This data claims him as Ivan Draski, age sixty-two, born in the Ukraine. Other data, which on the surface appears just as valid, has him as Javis Drinkle, age sixty, born in Poland. As Draski, he worked for the Freedom Republic, the underground, at the end of the Urbans, in communications and technological development. He’s a scientist.”

She brought the coffee, gulping some down as she read the data.

“Recruited by European Watch Network, techno research and development,” Eve continued. “A gadget guy.”

“An inventor, yes. He makes the toys.”

“An inside guy,” Eve mused. “Sure there’s some field time clocked here, but primarily during the Urbans. It’s primarily science during and after that era.”

“Nanotech,” Roarke began. “Hyperdimensional science, bionics, psionics and so on. He’s worked on all this. It looks to me, according to this data, you owe your stunner to his work, among other things. And yet I’ve never heard of him. They’ve kept him tightly wrapped for decades.”

“Maybe he decided it was time for a raise and some credit.” She tried to make sense of it. “So, he’s lured away from EWN to HSO nearly twenty years ago. And still, I’m not seeing wet work here. He’s a techno geek.”

“A brilliant one. No. No black ops or wet work listed. But look there, his wife and daughter were killed twenty years ago in a brutal slaying.”

“That’s interesting timing,” Eve said.

“Isn’t it? Officially a home invasion. Unofficially, a fringe wing of EWN who’d targeted him for his knowledge and accessibility to sensitive material.”

“They eat their own.” When he switched to the crime scene photos, Eve hissed out a breath. “Jesus.”

“Mutilated, hacked to pieces.” Roarke’s voice tightened in disgust. “The girl was just twelve. The wife was a low-level agent, hardly more than a clerk. You have higher clearance, I expect.”

“The writing on the wall there. Did you translate?”

“The computer recognizes it as Ukrainian for ‘traitor’ and ‘whore.’ Neither EWN nor any other official file on the matter claims credit or responsibility for the killings.”

“They were on her list. On Buckley’s list of hits in HSO’s data banks.” She called for the computer to run the list on another screen to verify. “They’re there, on her list, but no employer assigned. Nobody’s taken credit.”

“If there’s data on that, it’s in another area. If there’s any more data on this hit, it’s been wiped or boxed. Even I can’t get at it from here, or certainly not quickly. You’d have to be inside to get at it.”

“He’s inside; he found it.” There was motive, Eve thought. There was the personal. “Why the hell didn’t they destroy the file if they continued to use her, and had him on the payroll?”

“Somebody fucked up, I’d say, but at the core HSO is a bureaucracy, and bureaucracies love their paperwork.”

“Does he have a fixed address?”

“Right here in New York.”

She looked back over her shoulder at him. “That’s too fucking easy.”

“Upper East Side, in a town house he owns under the name of Frank Plutz.”

“Plutz? Seriously?”

“Frank J. Plutz, employed by HSO, who lists him as Supervisor, Tech R and D, U.S. Division, in their official file. Which of course is bollocks. He’s a hell of a lot more.”

Now Eve studied the ID shot of a middle-aged man with a thinning crop of gray hair, a round face, a bit heavy in the chin, and mild blue eyes who smiled soberly from the wall screen.

“God. He looks harmless.”

“He survived the Urban Wars in the underground, has worked for at least two intelligence organizations, neither of which worries overmuch about spilled blood. I’d say appearances are deceiving.”

“I need to put a team together and go visit the deceptively harmless Mr. Plutz.”

“I want to play. And I very much want to meet this man.”

“I guess you’ve earned it.”

His eyes gleamed. “If you don’t put him in a cage, I wonder what I can offer him to switch to the private sector.”

Eight

As taking down a spy wasn’t her usual job, Eve opted for a small, tight team. She had two officers in soft clothes stationed at the rear of the trim Upper East Side town house, McNab handling the com along with Roarke in the unmarked van. She, along with Peabody, would take the front.

It struck her as a bit of overkill for one man, but she had to factor in that one man had over forty years of espionage experience, and had managed to slip off a ferry of more than three thousand people with a dead body.

In the van, she cued up the security tape from the transpo station. “There he is, looking harmless. Computer, enhance segment six, thirty percent.”

The man currently known as Frank J. Plutz enlarged onscreen as he shuffled his way through the ticker. “Anonymous businessman, complete with what looks like a battered briefcase and a small overnight bag. Slightly overweight, slightly balding, a little saggy in the jowls.”

“And this is the guy who sliced up the high-level assassin, then poofed with her.” McNab, his sunny hair slicked back in a sleek tail, his earlobes weighted with a half dozen colorful studs each, shook his head. “He looks a little like my uncle Jacko. He’s famed in our family for growing enormous turnips.”

“He does!” Peabody gave the love of her life a slap on the shoulder. “I met him last Thanksgiving when we went to Scotland. He’s adorable.”

“Yeah, I’m sure this one’s just as adorable as Uncle Jacko. In a ‘leaving a big, messy pool of blood behind’ sort of way. He got a weapon—we assume—through the scanners without a hitch. Which, unfortunately, isn’t as tough as it should be. More important, from my source, he’s headed or been involved in the invention and development of all manner of high-tech gadgetry, weaponry and communications in particular.”

“Love to meet him,” McNab said and got a quick grin from Roarke.

“Right with you.”

“Hopefully you geeks can have a real nice chat soon.” Eve shifted her gaze to the other monitor. “I’m not seeing any heat source in there.”

“That would be because there isn’t.” Roarke continued the scan of the house. “I’ve done three scans each on heat, on movement. There’s no one in there.”

“Takes the fun out of it. Well, we’ve got the warrant. Let’s go, Peabody. McNab, keep your eye on the street. If he comes home, I want to know about it.”

“Mind your back, Lieutenant,” Roarke said as she climbed out. “They’re called spooks for a reason.”

“I don’t believe in spooks.”

“I bet they believe in you.” Peabody jumped down beside her.

Scanning the building, Eve pulled out her master as they approached the door. “We go in the way we would if we had a suspect inside. And we clear the area, room by room.”

Peabody nodded. “A guy who can disappear could probably beat a heat-and-motion sensor.”

Eve only shook her head, then pounded a fist on the door. “This is the police.” She used her master to unlock the door, noted the standard security went from locked red to open green. “He’s got cams out here. I

can't see them, but he's got them. Still, no backups set on the locks, and the palm plate's not activated."

"It's like an invitation."

"We're accepting. We're going in," Eve said to alert the rest of the team.

She pulled her weapon, nodded once to Peabody. They hit the door, Peabody high, Eve low. Swept the short foyer with its iron umbrella stand and coat tree, and the narrow hallway with its frayed blue runner. At Eve's gesture they peeled off, clearing the first floor, moving to the second, then the third.

"We're clear." Eve studied the data and communication equipment, the surveillance and security equipment ranged around the modest third-floor room. "Blue team, take the first floor. Roarke, McNab, we can use you on the third floor."

"Do you think he's coming back?" Peabody wondered.

"It's a lot to leave behind. I guarantee all this is unregistered, calibrated to duck under CompuGuard radar. But no, he's done here. He's finished."

"His wife and kid?" Peabody gestured to the framed photo on the console.

"Yeah." Eve moved over, opened a mini fridge. "Water and power drinks." She hit menu on the AutoChef. "Quick, easy meals." The sort, she thought, she'd have had in her own mini fridge—when she remembered to stock it—before she'd married Roarke. "Sofa, with a pillow, a blanket, wall screen, adjoining john. He spent most of his time up here. The rest of the house, it's just space."

"It all looks so tidy, kind of homey and neat."

Eve made a sound of agreement as she turned into the next room. "VirtualFit. It's a nice unit. He wanted to keep in shape. A weight machine, muscle balls, sparring droid. Female, and at a guess, just about the height and weight of Buckley."

Eve studied the attractive blonde droid currently disengaged and propped in a corner. "He practiced here." She moved across the room, opened the doors on a built-in cabinet. "Wow, toy chest."

"Holy shit." Peabody gaped at the display of weapons. "Not so much like Uncle Jacko after all."

Knives, bats, stunners, blasters, clubs, short swords, guns, throwing discs all gleamed in tidy formation.

"A couple missing," Eve noted, tapping empty holders. "From the shape, he took a couple of knives and a stunner. In one of his carry-ons, on his person."

"This is a lot to leave behind, too," Peabody commented.

"He did what he set out to do. He doesn't need them anymore." She turned as Roarke came in with McNab, and caught the gleam in Roarke's eyes as he crossed toward the weapons chest. "Don't touch."

The faintest line of irritation marred his brow, but he slipped his hands into his pockets. "A nice little collection."

"Don't get any ideas," she muttered under her breath. "It's next door you might be useful." She led the way and heard both Roarke and McNab hum in pleasure as some men would at the sight of a pretty woman.

"Geek heaven," she supposed. "Seal up, then see what you can find on all this. Peabody, let's take the second floor."

"Do you want me to get someone in to take over street surveillance?" McNab asked.

"He's not coming back. He hasn't been back since he took those weapons out of the chest. He doesn't need this place anymore."

"There are still clothes in the closet," Peabody pointed out when they started down. "I saw them when we cleared the bedroom."

“I’ll tell you what we won’t find. We won’t find any of his IDs, any of his emergency cash, any credit cards, passports.”

She moved into the bedroom where the decor managed to be spartan in neatness and homey in its fat pillows and frayed fabrics. She opened the closet.

“Three suits—black, gray, brown. See the way they’re arranged, spaces between? Probably had three more. Same with the shirts, the spare trousers. He took what he needed.” She crouched, picked up a pair of sturdy black shoes, turned them over to reveal the worn-down heels, scuffed soles. “Frugal. Lived carefully, comfortably, but without any excess. I bet the neighbors are going to say what a nice, pleasant man he was. Quiet, but friendly.”

“He’s got drawer dividers. Cubbies for socks, boxers, undershirts. And yeah,” Peabody added, “it looks like several pair are missing. Second drawer’s athletic wear. T-shirts, sweats, gym socks.”

“Keep at it. I’ll take the second bedroom.”

Across the hall in a smaller room fashioned into a kind of den, Eve opened another cabinet. She found wigs, trays of makeup, facial putty, clear boxes holding various styles of facial hair, body forms.

She saw herself reflected, front and back, in the mirror-backed doors.

She began a systematic search of the room, then the bathroom. He’d left plenty behind, she thought. Ordinary pieces of the man. Hairbrush, toothbrush, clothes, book and music discs, a pair of well-tended houseplants.

Everything well used, she thought, well tended. Very clean, ordered without being obsessive.

Food in the AutoChef, slippers by the bed. It all gave the appearance of a home someone would return to shortly. Until you noticed there was nothing important. Nothing that couldn’t be easily replaced.

Except the photo over his work area, she mused. But he'd have copies of that. Certainly he'd have copies of that image that drove him. She studied the wigs and other enhancements again.

He'd left all this, and the weapons, the electronics. Left what he'd been all these years? she wondered. He'd done what he'd set out to do, so none of it mattered to him now.

Peabody came in. "I found a lock box, open and empty."

"One in here, too."

"And bits of adhesive behind drawers, behind the headboard."

Eve nodded. "Under the bathroom sinks, behind the john. He's a careful guy. I'd say he kept weapons, escape documents, in several places around the house, in case he had to get out fast."

"We're not going to find him, Dallas. He's in the wind. It's what he does."

"What he did. I'd say he's finished, so it depends on what he's decided to do next. Check on the first floor, will you?"

Eve went upstairs to find both Roarke and McNab huddled with the electronics. On a quartet of small monitors she saw various spaces of the house—Peabody walking down the steps, her two men searching, an empty kitchen, the street view from the front of the house. Every ten seconds, the image changed to another location.

"Guy covered his ass double," McNab told her. "This place is hot-wired, not a trick missed. Motion, heat, light, weight. He's got bug sensors every fricking where. And check it."

He flipped a switch and a panel slid open in the wall beside her. She peered in, scanned the stairs and the weapon adhered to the wall. "Emergency evac."

"Icy. Plus, he could shut and bolt that door from right here."

“It’s blast-proof,” Roarke added. “He’s got his C and D buried on here, but we’re digging it out. I’d have to say it’s not as well covered as I’d expect when you consider the rest of the security.”

McNab shrugged. “Maybe he figured he didn’t have to worry about anyone getting this far in.”

“Or he didn’t care particularly what they found at this point.”

She glanced back up at the photo. “Possibly. It looks like he’s finished, and with or without the cloak of invisibility, gone. No reason to stay in New York. He eliminated his target. We dig here, hoping we find some link to where he might go. If we don’t find it, we’re going to have to contact HSO.”

Roarke gave her a long, cool look. “I don’t see the value of that.”

“It’s not a matter of value. It’s SOP. He’s their operative. If he’s gone rabbit or rogue, and has a device that’s as dangerous as this one might be, we’ll need their resources.”

“Give us a moment, would you, Ian?”

McNab glanced over at Roarke, then at Eve. He didn’t need a sensor to feel the blips of tension and trouble. “Ah, sure. I’ll . . . ah, see if I can give She-Body a hand.”

“This is my job,” she began as soon as they were alone. “When I report in with what we have here, Whitney’s going to order me to contact Homeland and give them what I have.”

“You have nothing,” he said evenly, “but the nebulous connection of one Frank Plutz, on the word of an ‘anony mous source’ connecting him to HSO and to Buckley.”

“I have him getting on the ferry, and not getting off, which secured the warrant more than the source did. I have what we found here.”

“And what have you found here that verifies he’s an operative for HSO, or that he targeted and killed Buckley?”

She felt her stomach muscles quiver even as her spine stiffened. “We know he has a potentially dangerous weapon. He may intend to sell that weapon. In the wrong hands—”

“Homeland’s aren’t the wrong hands?” Roarke demanded. “Can you stand there and tell me they aren’t every bit as ruthless and deadly as any foreign bogeyman you can name? After what they did to you? What they allowed to be done to you when you were a child? Standing by, listening, for Christ’s sake, while your father beat you and raped you, all in the hopes they could use him to catch a bigger monster?”

The quivering in her gut became a roil. “One has nothing to do with the other.”

“Bollocks. You tried to ‘work’ with them before, not so long ago. And when you found murder and corruption, they tried to ruin you. To kill you.”

“I know what they did. Damn it, that wasn’t the organization, as much as I despise it, but individuals inside it. Ivan Draski is probably thousands of miles away by now. I can’t chase him outside New York. I don’t know where he might try to sell this thing.”

“I’ll look into it.”

“Roarke—”

“Goddamn it, Eve, you’re not going to ask me to stand by a second time. I did what you asked before. I let it go. I let go the ones who’d had a part in letting you be abused and tormented.”

Now it was her heart, squeezing inside a fist of tension. “I know what you did for me. I know what it cost you to do it. I’m not going to have a choice. It’s national security. For God’s sake, Roarke, I don’t want to bring them in. I don’t want anything to do with them. It makes me sick. But it’s not about me, or you, or what happened when I was eight.”

“You’ll give me twenty-four hours. I’m not asking,” he said before she could speak. “Not this time. You’ll give me twenty-four hours to track him.”

Here was the cold and the ruthless that lurked under the civilized. She knew it, understood it, even accepted it. "I can stall that long. At twenty-four and one minute, I have to turn it over."

"Then I'll be in touch." He started to walk by her, stopped, looked into her eyes. "I'll be sorry if we're at odds on this."

"Me, too."

But when he walked out she knew sorry was sometimes all you could be.

Nine

When a trail went cold, Eve's rule of thumb was go back to the beginning. For a second time she stood on the deck of the ferry under a blue summer sky.

"According to the security discs, the victim boarded first." Eve studied the route from the transport station to the deck. "He was easily a hundred passengers behind her. Several minutes behind her."

"It doesn't seem like he could've kept her in view," Peabody commented. "And from the recording, it didn't look like he tried to."

"Two likely scenarios. He'd managed to get a tracker on her, or had set up this meet in advance. Since I can't think of any reason he'd take chances or play the odds, my money is he did both."

"We haven't turned up a thing that points to her meeting a third party on Staten Island."

Eve huffed out a breath. "I'd say we haven't turned up a lot of things. Yet." She started up to the second deck. "She went up here. We've got that from the Grogan kid's camera. The ride over takes less than a half hour, so if she had a meet, and if she planned to make an exchange, she wouldn't have waited too long once they left port. The best we can gauge, Carolee went into the restroom less than halfway through the trip. About ten minutes in."

“But since she doesn’t remember, and we’ve got no body to calculate TOD, we don’t know if Buckley was already dead when Carolee went in.”

“Odds are.” Eve stood at the rail, imagining the roll and hum of the ferry, the crowds, the view. “Lots of excitement as people are boarding, right? Crowds, happy tourists off on an adventure. People would be securing their places at the rails, grabbing a snack, taking pictures. If I’m Buckley, I take my position, scope it out.”

She took a seat on the bench. “Sitting here, and you can bet she sat here before or she’d never have picked or agreed to the location, she can judge the crowd, the traffic, the timing. If I’m Buckley, I move to the meet location as close as possible to leaving port.”

Rising, Eve strolled off in the direction of the restroom. “That’s around ten minutes before Grogan went in. Plenty of time for the kill. If Grogan had gone in before the attack, why not let her finish up, get out? If she’d gone in during, she should’ve been able to call out or get out and raise an alarm. She went down at the dividing point between stalls and sinks. That’s where the sweepers found trace of her blood and skin from her head hitting the floor. She’d just turned at the wall. And got an eyeful.”

“Do you think Mira can help her remember?”

“I think it’s worth a shot. Meanwhile . . .” Eve detoured toward concession. “Before the eyeful, Carolee and the kid—”

“Pete.”

“Right. They start toward the concession area, then swing to the restrooms.” Eve followed the most logical route. “Stand here, discuss. Wait for me, blah blah. Carolee watches the kid go in, then notices the sign on the door. Debates, then decides to give it a try after all. And after that, doesn’t remember. So we reconstruct. Going with the theory the meet was set in advance, and the murder was premeditation, Draski would go in first. It’s a women’s room; he’s a guy.”

“Right. Well, he might’ve slipped in when most people are focused on the view, but the Out of Order sign. He’d be smarter to go in looking like maintenance. A uniform.”

“Which he could’ve slipped into right next door.” Eve gestured toward the other restroom. “If we’re dealing with premeditated, and a need to hide or transport the body, he’d need means. No one would question a maintenance guy going into an out-of-order bathroom pushing a hamper.”

“None of the hampers were missing.”

“He had an hour to put it back. He comes out of there”—Eve pointed toward the men’s room—“goes in here. Who notices? Apparently nobody. Inside to wait for Buckley.”

Eve pushed open the door. “I doubt he wasted much time once she came in.”

“No way to lock the door from inside,” Peabody began, “and no way to rig it shut because he needed Buckley to get in.”

“Yeah, so he wouldn’t waste much time. He’d want to make sure she had the payment, she’d want to make sure he had the device. Just business.”

The congealed pool of blood, smeared now from several samplings, spoke to the nature of that business. As did the slight scent of chemicals, the faint layer of dust left by the sweepers spoke of the results of that business.

As did the long-bladed knife on the floor.

“Record on,” Eve ordered, then, avoiding the blood still on the floor, approached the knife.

“But . . . how the hell did that get here?” Peabody demanded. “We’ve got the entire ferry covered with guards.”

“Freaking invisibility cloak,” Eve muttered, “answers that. So the first question is, why is it here?” She studied it where it lay. “Dagger style, about a six-inch blade. It looks like bone. That would explain how he got it

through the security scanners. The natural material would pass, and it's likely he had a safe slot in that briefcase he carried on. Some protection against the scanner for shape, weight."

She coated her hands before lifting the knife. "Good weight. Good grip." Testing, she turned, swiped the air. "Good reach. You don't have to get close in. Arm's length plus six. Me, I'd use a wrist trigger. Click, it's in your hand, swipe, slice the throat."

Peabody rubbed her own. "Have you ever thought about going into the assassination game?"

"Killing for business, for profit, that was her line, not his. His was personal. Sure took him long enough though." She judged the spatter, the pool, swiped a second time, circled, jabbed, sliced.

"And now he goes to the trouble to put the weapon in our hand so we can see what and how."

"Bragging maybe."

Eve turned the blade, studied the blood smears. "It doesn't feel like bragging." She took out an evidence bag, sealed the weapon inside, tagged it. Holding it, she glanced toward the door. "If Carolee came in now, she'd see him, see the body as soon as she turned for the stalls. That puts, what, about ten feet between them, with her less than two from the door. What would most people do when they walk in on a murder?"

"Scream and run," Peabody provided. "And she should've made it, or at least gotten close. Plus, if he'd gone after her like that, you'd think he'd have stepped in some of the blood. She could've fainted. Just passed out cold. Smacked her head on the floor."

"Yeah, or he could've stunned her. Dropped her. A low setting. That would give him a little time to figure out how to handle the variable. He's got to get the body out, but he'd have prepped for that. Lined the hamper maybe, a body bag certainly. Load it up—along with the uniform. It had to be stained with blood."

“Then he’d use the memory blaster on Carolee as she came to.”

Eve cocked her eyebrows at the term “memory blaster.” “When she’s under, he tells her she’s going to give him a hand. He’d go out first.”

“Mojo the people on this sector of the deck. He could do that as he made his way to wherever he wanted to go. It’s one frosty toy.”

“It’s not a toy. It’s lethal. If it does what it purports, it strips you of your will. You lose who and what you are.” Worse than death to her mind was loss of self. “You’re nothing but a droid until the effects wear off.” She studied the knife again. “Sticks, stones, knives, guns, blasters, bombs. Somebody’s always looking for something a little juicier. This.” Through the evidence bag, she hefted the knife again. “It can take your life. This other thing, it takes your mind. I’d rather face the blade.”

She glanced at her wrist unit. Roarke’s twenty-four hours was down to twenty and counting. No matter what it cost her, she couldn’t give him a minute more.

The little bakery with its sunny two-tops and displays of glossy pastries might have seemed an odd place to meet with a weapons runner, but Roarke knew Julian Chamain’s proclivities.

He knew, too, that the bakery, run by Chamain’s niece, was swept twice daily for listening devices, and the walls and windows shielded against electronic eyes and ears.

What was said there, stayed there.

Chamain, a big man whose wide face and wide belly proclaimed his affection for his niece’s culinary skills, shook Roarke’s hand warmly, then gestured to the seat across the table.

“It’s been some time,” Chamain said, with a hint of his native country in the words. “Four, five years now.”

“Yes. You look well.”

Chamain laughed, a big, basso bark, as he patted his generous belly. “Well fed, indeed. Ah, here, my niece’s daughter, Marianna.” Chamain gave the young woman a smile as she served coffee and a plate of small pastries. “This is an old friend.”

“Pleased to meet you. Only two, Uncle Julian.” She wagged her finger. “Mama said. Enjoy,” she added to Roarke as she bustled away.

“Try the éclair,” Chamain told Roarke. “Simple, but exquisite. So, marriage is good?”

“Very. And your wife, your children?”

“Thriving. I have six grandchildren now. The reward for growing old. You should start a family. Children are a man’s truest legacy.”

“Eventually.” Understanding his role, Roarke sampled an éclair. “You’re right. Excellent. It’s a pretty space, Julian. Cheerful and well run. Another kind of legacy.”

“It pleases me. The tangible, the every day, a bit of the sweet.” Chamain popped a tiny cream puff in his mouth, closed his eyes in pleasure. “The love of a good woman. I think of retiring and enjoying it all more. You keep busy, I hear, but have also retired from some enterprises.”

“The love of a good woman,” Roarke repeated.

“So, we’ve both been lucky there. I wonder why you asked to meet me, and share pastries and coffee.”

“We were occasionally associates, or friendly competitors. We dealt honestly with each other either way. We were always able to discuss business, and important commodities. I feel we’ve lost time.”

He watched Chamain’s eyebrows raise before the man lifted his coffee for a long, slow sip. “Time is a valuable commodity. If it could be bought and sold, the bidding would be very steep. Time wins wars as much as blood. What man wouldn’t want his enemy to lose time?”

“If a weapon existed that could cause such a thing, it would be worth a great deal on the market.”

“A very great deal. Such a weapon, and the technology to create others like it, would command billions. Blood would be shed as well as fortunes spent to possess it. Dangerous games played.”

“How much might you be willing to pay, should such a thing exist?”

Chamain smiled, chose another pastry. “Me, I’m old-fashioned, and close to retirement. If I were younger, I would seek out partners, form alliances and enter the bidding. Perhaps a man of your age, of your position, has considered such a thing.”

“No. It isn’t a commodity that fits my current interests. In any case, I would think the bidding would be closed at this date.”

“The window closes at midnight. Games, mon ami, dangerous games.” He gave a long sigh. “It makes me wish I were younger, but some games are best watched from the sidelines, especially when the field is bloody.”

“I wonder if the people at home are aware of the game, its current status.”

“The people at home seem to have misjudged the game, and the players. Shortsighted, you could say, and their ears not as close to the ground as they might be. Women are ruthless creatures, and excellent in business. Persuasive.”

Roarke said nothing for a moment. “If I were a betting man, and on the sidelines, I’d be interested to know a key player has been eliminated, and she’s no longer on the field.”

“Is that so?” Chamain pursed his lips at the information, then nodded. “Ah, well, as I said, a dangerous game. Try a napoleon.”

Within the hour, armed with the cryptic pieces Chamain offered, Roarke sat in his private office. Clearly Buckley intended to make an exchange for the device—or more likely to kill the delivery boy and walk away with it. It was

greed and arrogance that killed as much as the blade. Had it been self-defense all along, or a setup for revenge?

That wasn't his problem, but Eve's, he thought. His would be to track down Ivan Draski and the device. She'd keep her word on the twenty-four hours, just as he had kept his in not seeking revenge on the operatives who'd been a part of allowing her to be tormented and raped as a child, who'd allowed that child to wander the streets, broken and dazed, after she'd killed to save herself.

He'd destroyed the data on those men, for her sake. But their names were etched in his mind. So, he began the process of hacking his way through the agency, and to those men. On a secondary search he began the hunt for Ivan Draski, and Lost Time.

Well into his tasks, he glanced at the display of his pocket 'link when it signaled.

"Yes, Ian."

"As promised, I'm tagging you first, and praying Dallas doesn't skin my ass for it."

"I wouldn't worry."

"Not your ass," McNab replied. "I got through the shields and fail-safes. This guy's mega—more mega because it barely shows that he took down some of those shields and fail-safes so somebody with solid skills could get through."

"Is that so?" Roarke commented.

"That's my take. I'm saying I've got serious skills, but it should've taken me a couple days to get through, not a couple hours."

"Which means he wanted the information to be found." Roarke scanned his own data, jumbled the information and the theories together. "Interesting. What did you find?"

“He’s got megabytes on this Dana Buckley, a massive file on her, complete with surveillance—eyes and ears. I did a skim, and if half this stuff is true, she was one bad bitch.”

“And he was following her, and documenting.”

“Keeping tabs for sure, back, it’s looking like, around six months. The thing is, the data goes back years and from a variety of sources. But he didn’t start to collect it here until about that six months ago. A lot of high-level stuff. I probably don’t have the security clearance to skim, but, hey, just doing my job. But here’s what’s really the frost on the ice.”

“He’s running an auction.”

“Shit.” Onscreen, McNab’s face fell. “Why have I worked my personal motherboard to the bone? But you only got it partly right. She’s running the auction, which is a hell of a trick, seeing she’s dead.”

“Ah.” Roarke sat back as it fell into place for him. “Yes, that’s clever.”

“It’s running out of a remote location. It bounces all over hell and back, scrambling the signal. I wouldn’t’ve found the source if I wasn’t right at ground zero. And, well, gotta be on the straight, if he hadn’t left the bread crumbs. Upper East Side address. Swank. When I run it, I get it’s owned by Dolores Gregory. That’s one of Buckley’s aliases.”

“So it is. That’s good data. Now you’d better call your lieutenant.”

Ten

Using her master, Eve opened the locks and shut down the security on the Upper East Side apartment. “That was too easy,” she told Peabody. “Just like the Plutz town house. We go in hot.”

She drew her weapon, went through the door for a first sweep.

Quiet, she thought as she worked right and Peabody left. A lot of expensive space filled with expensive things. The wall of windows led to a terrace

lofty enough to provide a river view. Inside, rich fabrics showcased gleaming wood, and art dominated the walls. The same held true in the master bedroom where the closet held a forest of clothes.

“Some digs,” Peabody commented. “I think some of those paintings are originals. I guess assassins rate a high pay grade.”

“It’s the opposite of Draski. She lived high, he lived low. Easy to underestimate somebody who lives the quiet life.”

“Easy to get cocky,” Peabody added, “when you live the high.”

“Yeah, it is.” Eve gestured to the security pad on the second bedroom doorway. It blinked an open green.

“Boy, that was careless of her.”

“Not her. He laid those bread crumbs, he lowered the security. We’re exactly where he wants us to be.” She pushed open the door, swept it, then holstered her weapon.

The room was cold, nearly frigid. A way to keep the body as fresh as possible, she thought as she studied Dana Buckley. He’d arranged the bloody shell of her in a chair angled to face a framed photo of his wife and daughter, and the single rose he’d placed by it.

“Well.” Peabody hissed out a breath. “She’s not lost anymore.”

“Call it in. You’d better go get the field kits.”

While she waited, Eve studied the room. Her lair, she thought. She expected they’d find the equipment unregistered, and much of the data on it illegally hacked. Not so different from her killer’s, she thought, right down to the photograph.

On the wall screen the current status of the bidding was displayed. Up to four-point-four billion, she mused, with several hours yet to go.

He hadn’t taken the body for proof. Not for a trophy, and only in part to gain that time. In the end he’d brought it here so while her greed ran

behind her back she would stare sightlessly at the innocents she'd killed.

He'd taken the body, she thought, to pay homage to his family.

"We've got an e-team and sweepers on the way." Peabody opened a field kit, passed Eve the Seal It.

Eve nodded and thought they'd find nothing he hadn't wanted them to find. "I want all the data found copied. We'll have to turn it over to whatever agency the commander orders, but we'll have backup." She turned to her partner. "I think we've just spearheaded a breakdown on a whole bunch of really bad guys. The sort of thing that leaks to the media."

"I don't know whether to be happy or scared."

"Be satisfied. Now let's do the job and deal with her. Record on."

Roarke sat back, absorbing the data he'd just uncovered. Odd, he thought, the world was a very odd and ironically small place. And the people in it were never completely predictable. He saved and copied the data, slipped the copy into his pocket.

He walked to the house monitor. "Where is Summerset?"

Summerset is in the parlor, main level.

"All right then, a fine place for a chat."

As he came downstairs he heard voices, and the roll of Summerset's amused laughter. It wasn't unprecedented for Summerset to have company in the house, but it certainly wasn't usual.

Curious, he stepped in. Then stopped and shook his head. "Aye, unpredictable."

"Roarke, I'm glad you've come down. I didn't want to disturb you, but I'm happy to introduce you to an old friend. Ivan Draski."

As the man rose, Roarke crossed the room to shake hands with his wife's current quarry.

“Ivan and I worked together in very dark times. He was hardly more than a boy, but made himself indispensable. We haven’t seen each other in years, so we’ve been catching up on old times, and new.”

“Really?” Roarke slid his hands into his pocket where the disc bumped up against the gray button he carried for luck, and for love. “How new?”

“We haven’t quite caught up to the present.” Ivan smiled a little. “I thought that should wait until your wife comes home. I believe she’ll have an interest.”

“I’ll fetch more cups for coffee.” Summerset laid a hand briefly on Ivan’s shoulder before leaving the room.

“Are you armed?” Roarke asked.

“No.” Ivan lifted his arms, inviting a search. “I’m not here to bring harm to anyone.”

“Have a seat then, and maybe you should bring Summerset and myself up-to-date.”

Ivan sat, and an instant later Galahad jumped into his lap. “He’s a nice cat.”

“We like him.”

“I don’t keep pets,” Ivan continued as he stroked Galahad’s length. “I couldn’t handle the idea of having a living thing depending on me again. And droids, well, it’s not the same, is it? I don’t want to bring trouble into your home, or cause my old friend distress. If it had been anyone but your wife involved in this, I believe I would be somewhere else.”

“Why my wife?”

“I’d like to tell her,” Ivan said as Summerset came back.

“The lieutenant’s come through the gate.” He set the cup down to pour.

“This should be interesting,” Roarke murmured. He waved off the coffee Summerset offered, deciding he might need both hands.

Eve walked into the house and frowned. It was rare not to find Summerset lurking in the foyer with the cat at his heels. She heard the rattle of china from the parlor, hesitated at the base of the stairs.

Roarke came to the doorway and said her name.

“Good, you’re here. We need to talk. The situation’s changed.”

“Oh, it has, yes.”

“We might as well have this out before I—” She broke off at the parlor doorway when she spotted the man she hunted sitting cozily in a chair with her cat on his lap. She drew her weapon. “Son of a bitch.”

“Have you lost your mind!” Summerset exploded as she stormed across the room.

“Get out of the way or I’ll stun you first.”

He stood his ground while shock and fury radiated from him. “I won’t have a guest, and a dear friend, threatened in our home.”

“Friend?” She flicked a glance toward Roarke, a heated one.

“Don’t waste your glares on me. I just got here myself.” But he touched a hand to her arm. “You don’t need that.”

“My prime suspect is sitting in my house, petting my cat, and you’re all having coffee? Move aside,” she said coldly to Summerset, “or I swear to God—”

Ivan spoke in a language she didn’t understand. Summerset turned sharply, stared. His answer was just as unintelligible, and with a tone of incredulity.

“I’m sorry, that’s rude.” Ivan kept his hands in plain sight. “I’ve just told my friend that I’ve killed a woman. He didn’t know. I hope there’s no trouble for him over this. I hope I can explain. Will you let me explain? Here, in an easy way, with a friend. After, I’ll go with you if that’s your decision.”

Eve skirted around Summerset. She lowered her weapon, but kept it drawn. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"For me?"

"I feel you need an explanation. You need information. I won't try to harm you, any of you. This man?" He gestured to Summerset. "I owe him my life. What belongs to him is sacred to me."

"Brandy, I think." Roarke handed Summerset a snifter he'd filled. "Instead of coffee." And gave another to Ivan.

"Thank you. You're very kind. I killed the woman calling herself Dana Buckley. You know this already, and, I think, some of the how. I read a great deal about you in the night, Lieutenant. You're smart and clever, good at your work. But the why matters, it must, when it's life and death. You know this," he said, searching her face. "I think you believe this."

"She killed your wife and daughter."

His eyes widened in surprise. "You work quickly. They were beautiful and innocent. I didn't protect them. I loved my work in my own homeland." He glanced at Summerset. "The purpose, the challenge, the deep belief in making a difference."

"You were—are—a scientist," Eve interrupted. "I read your file."

"Then you're very good indeed. Did you find the rest?"

"Yes. Just shortly ago," Roarke answered. "I'm very sorry. Homeland wanted to recruit him," he told Eve, "possibly use him as a mole or simply bring him over."

"I was happy where I was. I believed in what I was doing."

"They considered various options," Roarke continued. "Abducting him, torture, abducting his child, discrediting him. The decision was, as time was

of some essence, to strip him of his ties, and offer him not only asylum but revenge.”

“They sent that woman to murder my wife, my child, to make it seem like my own people had ordered it. They showed me documentation, gave me the name of the assassins, the orders to terminate me and my family. I should have been home, you see, but I had car trouble that delayed me. They’d rigged it, of course, but I believed them. I of all people should have known how these things can be faked, but I was grieving, I was wild with grief, and I believed. I betrayed good men and women because I believed the lie and was happy to take my pound of flesh. And I became one of them. Everything I’ve done for these twenty years has been on the blood of my wife and child. They killed them to use me.”

“Why now?” Eve demanded. “Why execute her now, and with such theatrics?”

“Six months ago I found the file. I was searching for some old data, and found it. The man who’d ordered the murders is long dead, so perhaps there was carelessness. Or perhaps someone wanted me to find it. It’s a slippery world we live in.”

He stroked the cat methodically. “I thought of many ways to kill her.” He sighed. “I’ve been one for the laboratory for a very long time, but I began to train. My body, with weapons. I trained every day, like the old days,” he said with a smile for Summerset. “I had purpose again. I found my way with Lost Time. So apt, isn’t it? All the time I’d lost. Time she’d cost me, had stolen from my wife, my baby.”

“I’m sorry, Ivan.” Summerset laid a comforting hand on his friend’s arm. “I know what it is to lose a child.”

“She was so bright, the light . . . the proof of light after all those dark times. And this woman snuffed her out, for money. If you’ve read her files, you know what she was.”

He paused, sipped brandy, settled himself again. “I formed the plan. I was always good at tactics and strategy, you remember.”

“Yes, I remember,” Summerset concurred.

“I had to move quickly, to leak the data to her, to paint the picture that I was dissatisfied with my position, my pay, and might be willing to bargain for better.”

“You let her make the approach, let her pick the time and the place so she believed she had the advantage.”

Now he smiled at Eve. “She wasn’t as smart as you. Once, perhaps, but she was arrogant and greedy. She never intended to pay me for the device and the files I’d stolen. She would kill me, have the device and all the records on it, while others competed. She had no allegiance, you see, to any person, agency, any cause. She liked to kill. It’s in her psych file.”

Eve nodded. “I’ve read it.”

Again his eyes widened before he glanced toward Roarke. “I think you may be better even than the rumors. How I’d enjoy talking with you.”

“I’ve thought the same.”

“In my business there’s no law, as in yours,” Ivan said to Eve. “No police, so to speak, where I could go and say this woman murdered my family. She was paid to do so. It’s . . . business, so there’s no punishment, no justice. I planned, I researched and I accessed her computers. I’m very good at my work, too. I knew before she arranged the meet what she intended. To take the money, disable or kill me, then—” He gestured to the case beside his chair. “May I?”

“No. She was carrying this,” Eve said as she rose to retrieve the case, “when she got on the ferry.”

“It’s a bomb. Disabled,” he said quickly. “It’s configured inside the computer. It’s rather small, but powerful. It would have done considerable damage to that section of the ferry. There were so many people there. Children. Their lives meant nothing to her. They would be a distraction.”

“Like fireworks?”

“Harmless.” He smiled again.

“Let me have that.” Roarke glanced at Summerset, got a nod, as he took the case from Eve. And opened it.

“Wait. Jesus!”

“Disabled,” he assured Eve after a glance. “I’ve seen this system before.

“You know, I think how we came to meet. The location was her choice,” Ivan added. “She thought of me as old, harmless, someone who creates gadgets, we’ll say, rather than one who would use them. But old skills can come back.”

“Six months to refine your skills,” Eve said, “and set the trap.”

“Maybe there was a cold madness in the planning, in my dedication to it. Even so, I don’t regret. I thought to do it quickly. Slit her throat. Put her in the hamper. I’d use the device to get away.”

“How?” Eve demanded. “How did you get off the damn ferry?”

“Oh. I had with me a motorized inflatable.” He shifted to Roarke as he spoke now, and his face became animated. “It’s much smaller than anything used, as yet, in the military or private sectors. Inactivated, it’s the size of a toiletry kit you might use for travel. And the motor itself—”

“Okay.” Eve cut him off. “I get it.”

“Yes, well.” Ivan drew in a long breath. “I had thought I’d do what I’d set out to do quickly, then I’d disappear. But I . . . I can’t even remember, not clearly, after I looked in her eyes, saw her shock, saw her death. I can’t remember. I think I will someday, and it will be very hard.”

Tears glinted in his eyes, and his hand trembled slightly as he drank more brandy. “But I looked down at what I’d done. So much blood. The way I’d found my wife and daughter, in so much blood. There was a stunner on the floor. She must have tried to stop me, I’m not sure. I picked it up. Then the woman came in.”

“You didn’t kill her when you had the chance.”

He shot Eve a shocked stare. “No. No, of course not. She’d done nothing. Still, I couldn’t let her just . . . It happened so quickly. I used the weapon on her, and she fell. I remember thinking, this is very unfortunate, a very unfortunate turn of events. In the old days, you thought on your feet or died. Or someone else did.”

“You used the device on her when she came around, and took her with you,” Eve supplied.

“Yes. I told her to hide. You can influence people when they’re under. She was to hide until she heard the alarm. I set it on her wrist unit. Then she was to go back where she came from. She wouldn’t remember. She looked so frightened when she came in and saw what I’d done. I didn’t want her to remember. I saw her with her children when we boarded. A lovely family. I hope she’s all right.”

“She’s fine. Why the fireworks?”

“A good distraction. You’d think I used them to get away, and I’d already be away. And my little girl loved fireworks. You know the rest, I think. You’ve hacked into my system at home, and into hers. You have a very good e-team.”

“Why did you come here?” Eve asked. “You could be thousands of miles away.”

“To see an old friend.” He glanced at Summerset. “Because you were involved.”

“What difference does it make who led the investigation?”

“All,” he said simply. “It was a kind of sign, a connection I couldn’t ignore.” He looked at Eve then with both understanding and sorrow. “I know what they did to you. They ignored the cries of a child being brutalized. They killed my child, who must have cried out for me in fear and pain. The same man ordered both. The slaughter of my family, and some years before the sacrifice of a child’s body and mind.”

He sighed when Eve said nothing. "I couldn't ignore that. It seemed too important. You and Mylia would be of an age now, had she lived. You lived, and you're part of the family of my old friend. How could I ignore that?"

"How did you come by that information?" Eve asked, her voice flat.

"I . . . accessed it when you married. Because of my friend. I couldn't contact you," he said to Summerset. "It might cause you trouble, but I wanted to know your family. So I looked, and I found. I'm sorry for what was done to you. He's dead, the one who ordered the listening post to do nothing to interfere. Years ago," Ivan added. "I don't know if that comforts you. It comforts me because I believe I would have killed him, killed again if he wasn't dead."

"It doesn't matter. It's done."

He nodded. "So is this. There are dirty pockets in the well of the organization. She, this woman, was one of the things that crawled around inside those pockets. But still, I took her life, and it doesn't, as I thought it would, balance the scales. Nothing can. These people shaped our lives, pieces of our lives, without giving us a choice. They took something deeply personal from us. So, when I learned it was you looking for me, I had to come. If I may?"

He held up two fingers, pointed them at his jacket pocket. At her nod, he reached in carefully and slid out what looked like an oversized 'link.

"It's only the casing," he said when both Eve and Roarke lunged for it. "I dismantled and destroyed the rest. And all the data pertaining to it."

Roarke let out a breath. "Well, bugger it."

Ivan laughed, then blinked in surprise at the sound. "It needed to be done, though I admit it was difficult. So much work." He sighed over it. "If I'm arrested, they'll come for me. Or others like them will come. I have knowledge and skill. Your law, your rules, even your diligence won't stop them. I don't say this to save myself," he said gently. "But because I know they'll find a way to make me use my knowledge and skill for them."

“He saved lives, innocent lives, on that ferry,” Summerset said. “He’s certainly saved others, perhaps scores of others, by destroying that thing.”

“That’s not why I went there. I went to kill. The lieutenant knows that. The rest is circumstance. I’m content to leave this in her hands. Content to face justice.”

“Justice?” Summerset snarled at the word. “How is this justice?” He rose, rounded on Eve. “How can you even consider—”

“Shut it down. Don’t,” she added to Roarke before he could speak. She paced away to stand at the window and wait for the war inside her to claim a victor.

“I saw her files, as I’m sure you wanted me to when we found her body. She kept reports and photos of her kills like a scrapbook. She’s what I work against every day. So is what you did on that ferry.”

“Yes,” Ivan said quietly. “I know.”

“They will come for you, and whatever obstacles I put in their way so you can face justice won’t be enough to stop them. I consider this matter out of my jurisdiction, and will certainly be told the same when I contact HSO to report what I’ve learned up to the time I walked into this house.”

She turned back, spoke briskly. “This is an internal HSO matter, involving one of their people and a freelance assassin they have previously employed. It’s possible this is a matter of national security, and I’d be derelict in my duty if I didn’t report what my investigation has turned up. I’m going to go up to my office, inform my commander of my findings and follow his directive. You’d better say good-bye to your friend,” she told Summerset.

She turned to Ivan, his pleasant face and mild eyes. “Disappear. You’ve probably got an hour, two at the outside, to get lost. Don’t come back here.”

“Lieutenant,” Ivan began, but she turned her back and walked out of the room.

Epilogue

Roarke found her in her office, pacing like a caged cat. “Eve.”

“I don’t want any damn coffee. I want a damn drink.”

“I’ll get us both one.” He touched the wall panel and chose a bottle of wine from inside. “He was telling the truth. I got deep enough to find considerable data on him, on his work prior to Homeland, on the decision to kill his family and plant evidence that led to his own organization.”

He drew the disc from his pocket. “I made you a copy.” He handed her the wine, set the disc on her desk. “And he was telling the truth when he said they, or others like them, would come for him. He would have self-terminated before he worked for anyone like them again.”

“I know that. I saw that.”

“I know a decision like this is difficult for you. Painfully. Just as you know I stand across the line so it wouldn’t be difficult for me. I’m sorry.”

“It shouldn’t be for me to decide. It’s not my place, it’s not my job. It’s why there’s a system, and mostly the system works.”

“This isn’t your system, Eve. These things have their own laws, their own system, and too many of those pockets inside them don’t quibble about letting a child be tortured, don’t lose sleep over ordering the death of a child to reach the goal of the moment.”

She took a long sip. “I can justify it. I can justify what I just did because I know that’s true. It’s not my system. I can justify it by knowing if Buckley had gotten the upper hand yesterday, Carolee Grogan would be dead, and that kid waiting for his mother outside the door would be blown to pieces along with dozens of others. I can justify it knowing if I arrested him, I would be killing him.”

She picked up the disc from her desk, and remembering what he'd once done for her, snapped it in two. "Don't let him come here again."

He shook his head, then framed her face and kissed her. "It takes more than skill and duty to make a good cop, to my way of thinking. It takes an unflinching sense of right and wrong."

"It's a hell of a lot easier when they don't overlap. I have to get my report together and contact the commander. And for God's sake, get that boomer out of the house. I don't care if it is diffused."

"I'll take care of it."

Alone, she sat down to organize her notes into a cohesive report. She glanced over when the cat padded in, with Summerset behind him.

"Working," she said briefly, then frowned when he set a plate with an enormous chocolate chip cookie on her desk. "What's this?"

"A cookie, as any fool could see. It'll spoil your dinner, but . . ." He shrugged, started out. He paused at the door without turning around. "He was a hero at a time when the world desperately needed them. He would be dead before the night was over if you'd taken him in. I want you to know that. To know you saved a life today."

She sat back, staring at the empty doorway, when he'd left her. Then she scanned her notes, the report on screen, the photographs of the dead. They were the lost, weren't they? All those lives taken. Maybe, in a way that nudged up against that line between right and wrong, she was standing for the lost.

She had to hope so.

Breaking off a hunk of cookie, she got back to work.