

CHAPTER

ONE

The room smelled of candle wax and death. In their fat, jewel-toned holders, the candles had pooled into dripping puddles. The body lay in a lake-sized bed canopied with silk, mounded with a multitude of pillows, and stained with blood.

She was young, blond, with a bright red dress rucked up to her waist. Her eyes, a crystal green, were open and staring.

As she studied the body of Tiara Kent, Lieutenant Eve Dallas wondered if the dead blonde had looked into her killer's eyes as she died.

She'd known him, in any case, almost certainly she'd known him. There was no sign of forced entry, and in fact, the security system had been shut down from the inside, by the victim. There was no sign of struggle. And though Eve was certain they'd find the victim had engaged in sexual intercourse, she didn't believe it would prove to be rape.

She hadn't fought him, Eve thought as she bent over the body. Even when he'd drained the blood out of her, she hadn't fought him.

"Two puncture wounds, left side of the throat," Eve stated for

the record. “The only visible injury.” She lifted one of Tiara’s hands, examined the perfectly shaped, fussily painted nails. “Bag the hands,” she told her partner. “Maybe she scratched him.”

“Not as much blood as you’d think there should be.” Detective Peabody cleared her throat. “Not nearly enough. You know what they look like, on her neck there? Bite marks. Like, ah, fangs.”

Eve spared Peabody a glance. “You think that ugly little dog the maid’s got in the kitchen bit her on the neck?”

“No.” Peabody angled her head, leaned down with her dark eyes wide and bright. “Come on, Dallas, you *know* what it looks like.”

“It looks like a DB. It looks like the vic had a date that went over the top. There’s going to be illegals in her system, something that dulled her down or hyped her up enough for her killer to jab something into her throat, or, yeah, sink his teeth into it if he had the incisors filed to points or was wearing an appliance. Then he bled her out, and she lay there and let him.”

“I’m just saying it looks like your classic vampire bite.”

“We’ll put out an APB on Dracula. Meanwhile, let’s find out if she was—just possibly—seeing someone with a heartbeat.”

“Just saying,” Peabody repeated, this time in a mumble.

Eve did another scan of the bedroom before stepping out and into the enormous dressing room area.

Bigger than a lot of apartments, she mused, and outfitted with a security screen, entertainment screen, full round of mirrors. The closet itself was a small department store, ruthlessly organized into categories.

For a moment, Eve stood with her hands on her hips and simply stared. One person, she thought, with enough clothes to outfit the Upper West Side, and more than enough shoes to shod every man, woman, and child in that sector. Even Roarke—and Eve knew her husband’s wardrobe was awesome—didn’t rate this high on the clothes-hog scale.

Then she just shook her head and focused on the job at hand.

Dressed for him, Eve thought. Slutty dress, fuck-me heels. So where was the jewelry? If a woman was going to deck herself out for a booty call, down to shoes, wouldn't she drape on some glitters?

If she had, her killer had helped himself there.

She studied the drawers, the cabinets that ran below the rungs and carousels and protective domes. All locked, she noted, all pass-coded, which meant valuables housed inside. There was no sign that she could see of any attempt to break in.

There were plenty of expensive bits and pieces sitting around in the penthouse: statuary, paintings, electronics. She'd seen nothing on her once-over of both levels that indicated anything had been disturbed.

If he was a thief, he was a lazy one, or a very picky one.

She stood for a moment, evaluating. Eve was a tall woman, slim in boots and trousers, with a short leather jacket over a white shirt. Her hair was short and brown, chopped around a lean face dominated by deep brown eyes. The eyes, as they studied, were all cop.

She didn't turn at Peabody's low whistle behind her. "Wow! This is like something out of a vid. I think she had all the clothes in all the land. And the *shoes*. Oooh, the shoes."

"A few hundred pair of shoes," Eve commented. "And she had the requisite two feet. People are screwy. Take head of building security, see if he's got any knowledge or documentation of who she's been seeing or entertaining in the last few weeks. I'll take the maid."

She moved through the apartment, down a level. The place was full of cops and crime-scene techs, of noise, of equipment. The busy business of murder.

In what she was told was the breakfast room, she found the maid with her red-rimmed eyes, clutching the small, ugly dog. Eve eyed the dog warily, then gestured for the uniforms to step out of the room.

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“Ms. Cruz?”

At the mention of her name, the woman burst into fresh sobs. This time Eve and the dog exchanged looks of mild annoyance.

Eve sat so she and the maid were on the same level, then said, firmly, “Stop it.”

Obviously used to following orders, the maid instantly snuffed back the sobs. “I’m so upset,” she told Eve. “Miss Tiara, poor Miss Tiara.”

“Yes, I’m very sorry. You’ve worked for her for a while?”

“Five years.”

“I know this is hard, but I need you to answer some questions now. To help me find who did this to Miss Tiara.”

“Yes.” The maid pressed a hand to her heart. “Anything. Anything.”

“You have keys and passcodes to the apartment?”

“Oh, yes. I come in every day to do for Miss Tiara when she’s in residence. And three times a week when she’s away.”

“Who else has access to the apartment?”

“No one. Well, maybe Miss Daffy. I’m not sure.”

“Miss Daffy.”

“Miss Tiara’s friend, Daffodil Wheats. Her very best friend, except when they’re fighting, then Miss Caramel is her best friend.”

“Are you putting me on with these names?”

The maid blinked her swollen, bloodshot eyes. “No, ma’am.”

“Lieutenant,” Eve corrected. “All right, this Daffodil and Caramel were friends of Miss Kent’s. What about men? What men was she seeing?”

“She saw a lot of men. She was so beautiful, so young, and so vibrant that—”

“Intimately, Ms. Cruz,” Eve interrupted to stop both the eulogy and the fresh tears. “And most recently.”

“Please call me Estella. She enjoyed men. She was young and

vibrant, as I said. I don't know them all—some were just a moment, others longer. But in the past week or two, I think there was just one.”

“Who would that be?”

“I don't know. I never saw him. But I could tell she was in love again—she laughed more, and danced around the apartment, and . . .” Estella seemed to struggle for a moment with her own code of discretion.

“Everything you tell me may help in the investigation,” Eve prompted.

“Yes. Well . . . when you take care of someone, you know when they've had a . . . an intimacy. She had a lover in her bed every night for a week or more.”

“But you never saw him.”

“Never. I come at eight every morning, and leave at six, unless she needs me to stay longer. He was never here when I was here.”

“Was it her habit to turn off her security system from in-house?”

“Never, never.” Dry-eyed now, Estella shook her head decisively from side to side. “It was never to be disengaged. I don't understand why she would have done that. I saw it was off when I came in this morning. I thought there must be a glitch in the system, and Miss Tiara would be angry. I called downstairs to report it even before I went up to the bedroom.”

“All right. You came in at eight, noted the security was off, reported it, then went upstairs. Is that your usual routine, to come in, go up to her bedroom?”

“Yes, to get Biddy.” Estella bent her head to nuzzle the dog. “To take him for his morning walk, then to feed him. Miss Tiara usually sleeps until about eleven.”

Estella's brow creased. “Later these last days, since—the new lover. Sometimes she didn't come downstairs until into the afternoon, and she ordered all the windows draped when she did. She

said she only wanted the night. It worried me because she looked so pale, and wouldn't eat. But I thought, well, she's in love, that's all."

After a long, long sigh, Estella continued. "Then this morning, Biddy wasn't waiting by the bedroom door. He always waits there for me in the morning. I went in, very quietly. He was coming to the door, but he wasn't walking right."

Eve frowned at the dog. "What do you mean?"

"It was . . . I thought: Biddy looks drunk, and I had to hold back a laugh because he looked so funny. I went in more, and I smelled . . . it was the candles at first. I could smell the candles, so I thought she'd had her lover in the night. But then there was another smell, a hard smell. It was the blood, I think," she said as her eyes welled again. "It must have been the blood and . . . her, I smelled her, and when I looked over at the bed, I saw her there. I saw my poor little girl there."

"Did you touch anything, Estella? Anything in the room?"

"No, no. Yes. Biddy. I grabbed Biddy. I don't know why exactly, I just grabbed little Biddy and I ran out. She was dead—the blood, her face, her eyes, everything. She couldn't be anything but dead. I ran out screaming, and I called security. Mr. Tripps came right up. Right away, and he went upstairs. He was only a minute, then he came down to contact the police."

"Could you tell if anything's missing?"

"I know her things. I didn't notice . . ." Distressed again, she glanced around the room. "I didn't look."

"I'm going to have you look through her jewelry first. You know her jewelry?"

"I do. Every piece. I clean it for Miss Tiara because she doesn't trust—"

"Okay. We'll start there."

She sent Estella to the dressing area with two cops and a recorder.

She was scribbling a few notes, adding time lines when Peabody tracked her down.

“Tripps reports that the maid contacted Security at eight-oh-two to report the system was down. She contacted them again at eight-oh-nine, hysterical. He came up personally, went upstairs, verified the death, contacted the police. Times jibe.”

“Yeah, they do. What did he say about the system being down?”

“He said—and documented—that Kent told him she would be shutting it down internally near midnight, and would re-engage it when she wanted. He advised against, she told him to mind his own. She did the same every night for the last eight days, though the time of shutdown varied. She’d re-engage before dawn.”

Thoughtfully, Eve tapped her fingers on her own notes. “So the boyfriend didn’t want to be on the security tapes. Got her to shut it down, came in her private entrance, left the same way. She must’ve been monumentally stupid.”

“Well, she wasn’t known for her brains.”

Eve slanted Peabody a look. If it was gossip or popular culture, Peabody usually had her finger on the pulse. “What was she known for?”

“Clubbing, shuttle-hopping, shopping, scandals. The usual, I guess, for a fourth-generation—I think it’s fourth—megarich kid. She got engaged a lot, broke up a lot—usually publicly and with a lot of passion. Went to premieres, shuttled off to wherever the current hot spot might be. Hobbed and nobbed. Usually something on her in the tabs or one of the gossip or society channels every day.”

“Who was she running with these days, and why did I feel I had to interview the maid about her lifestyle when I’ve got you?”

“Well, she’s tight with Daffy Wheats, and Caramel Lipton, recently disengaged to Roman Gramaldi, of Zurich. But she hangs with the sparkles of the young, rich, and looking-for-trouble club.”

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“Trouble she found,” Eve commented, then glanced up when Estella came rushing in.

“Her pendant, her blue diamond pendant, and the cuffs, her peacock earrings. Gone, all gone.” Her voice pitched up sharply enough to cut glass. “He robbed my poor little girl, robbed her and killed her.”

Eve held up a finger to stop the tirade. “Do you have photo documentation of the missing items?”

“Of course, of course. Insurance—”

“I’ll need those. You get me the insurance information of whatever’s missing. Go ahead.” She waited until Estella hurried out again, smiled grimly. “That was a mistake. Sooner or later some big, fat blue diamond’s going to show up. We’ll get the details, then inform next of kin. After that, I want to have a chat with Daffy.”