

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J. D. ROBB

MARY BLAYNEY
PATRICIA GAITNEY
RUFUS HATHAN
MARY KAY McCOMAS

**Chaos
in Death**

FIVE from Anthology **TORIES**...

**THE
UNQUIET**

FIRST TIME IN PRINT

Chaos in Death

from **Anthology**

THE UNQUIET



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#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

J. D. ROBB

“Eve is a wonderful heroine—feisty, fresh, and oh-so-sure of herself.”

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CHAOS IN DEATH

J. D. ROBB

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?

THE SHADOW

Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together
almost inseparably.

JOHN MILTON

ONE



He found life in death. And delight in the whirlwind of fear and fright. To hunt, to steal the light, the life, the blood, the soul. Well, he'd been born for it.

It made him laugh to dance around the madness of his creating, cape swirling—and wasn't *that* a wonderful touch—legs kicking in a joyful jig.

Even the sound of his own laughter, deep and rich and free, thrilled him, made him laugh all the harder.

He was *alive*.

“And you're not!”

He hopped, skipped, leaped over the three bodies he'd arranged on the floor. Tilting his head, he grinned at his handiwork. He'd laid them out so they sat—well, slumped, but that was dead for you—in a line against the wall.

Pitiful specimens, really, this trio of junkies who'd barely had the wit or the will to put up a fight. But God knew a man had to start somewhere. Still, their fear was his now, and their tears, their cries and pleas—all his.

It tasted so delicious.

He needed more, of course, so many more. But he'd made a most excellent start. No more playing by the rules, no *sir!* No more Mr. Good Guy.

Boring guy.

He patted his own chest. “I feel like a whole new man.”

Chuckling, he stowed the bloody scalpel, the vials, all the lovely specimens in his kit. And inspiration struck.

Clichéd? he asked himself, his head tipping from side to side, his gleaming red eyes bulging with glee and madness as he scanned

the room, the bodies, the walls. Maybe, maybe, but irresistible!

After dipping a gloved finger into a pool of congealing blood, he composed his message on the dingy wall. He had to dip back into the well—ha-ha-ha—several times, but the time was well worth it.

To whom it may concern:

Please take out the trash. Don't forget to recycle properly!

Oh, his belly hurt from laughing. He pressed a hand to it, nearly snagging one of the long, pointed nails that stabbed through the glove. Then found himself hesitating before signing his name. He knew his name. Of course, of course he did. For a moment his glee teetered toward fury, his laughter toward guttural grunts.

Then all righted again. He did another quick jig, dipped his finger again.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Dr. Chaos.

Perfect. Absently, he sucked the blood and grime from his finger and read the message over twice.

Time to go, he decided. Things to do. And he was absolutely *famished*.

He picked up his kit, lifted an arm in salute.

"Adieu, mes amis!"

On a last cackle of laughter, he turned, swirling the cape—he just loved doing that—as he skipped to the back room and climbed out the window.

He couldn't remember ever having more fun.

And couldn't wait to do it all again.

Lieutenant Eve Dallas studied the scene. Cops saw it all, but there was always something new, some fresh brutality even in the dying summer of 2060 to stretch the boundaries of *all*.

The room stank of blood—so much blood—and death, of fresh puke and piss. Blood soaked into one of the board-thin mattresses shoved into a corner. One of the three victims had died there, she thought. The middle one, she concluded, the black male, age as yet undetermined, with multiple stab wounds and a missing left ear.

Beside Eve, her partner breathed slowly in and out through her teeth.

“If you’re going to hurl, Peabody, do it outside.”

“I’m not going to hurl.” But it came out as a plea rather than a statement.

Eve shifted her gaze, studied Peabody. The short, jaunty, flippy tail she’d pulled her dark hair into looked distinctly out of place now that her skin held a faint green cast. Peabody’s dark eyes, slightly unfocused, held their line of sight a few inches above the bodies.

“I just need a minute for everything to settle.”

“What was this place?” Eve asked.

“It used to be retail space.” Peabody still held her PPC, and her hand was steady enough. “Apartments above, three levels. Slated for rehab.” Peabody shut her eyes for a moment.

“Find out who owns it, how long it’s been shut down. Take it outside. We need the data,” Eve said before Peabody could object. “Get the data.”

With a nod, Peabody slipped out the door to where the uniforms responding to the nine-one-one had cordoned off the sidewalk.

With her hands and feet already sealed, her recorder engaged, Eve stepped around and over the debris of shattered bottles, scattered clothes, trash, a broken chair to the bodies.

Her golden brown eyes weren’t unfocused, but cop flat. “Three victims, two male, one female, carefully arranged to sit, backs against the front wall. Black male, center, multiple stab wounds, torso, shoulders, arms, legs, neck, and face. Left ear removed. Caucasian female on the left appears to have been strangled. Mixed-race male, right of center, bludgeoned. Left eye removed.”

Hell of a party, she thought, and let out a breath that fluttered the bangs on her short cap of brown hair.

“Three mattresses, some bedding, clothes, mini friggie, battery lamp, two chairs, two tables. It appears all three vics flopped here. Money scattered around, what shows looks to be about a grand. So robbery’s out. First on scene ascertained forced window, rear of building, street level. Probable point of entry.”

She took the female first, hunkered down on her long legs, opened her field kit. “Female also suffered blows to the face, knees. Hard blow to the knees,” she murmured. “Pipe, bat, board—take her down—a couple punches. Manual strangulation.”

She ran the victim’s prints.

“Female is identified as Jennifer Darnell, age twenty-four. Current address listed on West Sixteenth. Got a sheet, including juvie. Primarily illegals busts.”

Peabody came back in. “The Whitwood Group bought the property about seven months ago,” she said. “From what I can tell, the building was condemned a little over a year ago. Permits for rehab pending.”

“Okay. So the killer or killers took his ear, his eye. Isn’t there a saying—what is it? Hear no evil, see no evil . . .” Carefully, Eve opened Jennifer Darnell’s mouth. “Yeah, speak no evil. He cut out her tongue.”

“Jesus.”

“Work see-no guy, Peabody. I need ID, TOD.” Eve fit on microgoggles, engaged their light to peer into the victim’s mouth. “Clean cut, neat and tidy. She was either already dead or unconscious when he took her tongue, and he had a good, steady hand.”

Struggling to find her own good, steady hand, Peabody opened her kit. “Taking the body parts, those particular body parts, do you think ritual?”

“Possibly.” She looked up at the message on the wall. “Mostly, I think he likes to joke. Real funny guy. He did what he wanted, took what he wanted, now he’s telling us to clean up the mess. Dr. Chaos.”

Eve looked around the room. “That’s what this is. The middle guy? The killer took him out where he lay. Uses a knife, or a scalpel. But

he doesn't use it on the others, except for the removal. He switches to bludgeoning for the other male."

"Coby Vix, age twenty-six," Peabody told her. "There had to be two killers, maybe three. One for each vic?"

"Maybe. It's a lot of work for one man. But only one takes credit?"

As Eve had, Peabody studied the bloody message. "Dr. Chaos. It could be the name of a group."

Eve considered it while she used the gauges. "Yeah, it could. TOD on Darnell, two hundred thirty-eight."

"If there was only one, why didn't she run like hell when he's stabbing the bejesus out of that guy or beating the crap out of Vix?"

"Took her out, blows to the knees. Shattered kneecaps. But yeah, it could be more than one. Three distinct methods of killing."

"Vix, TOD two hundred twenty."

"So, he took some time with Darnell. Enough for rape." Eve lifted the hem of the short nightshirt. "No bruising, bleeding, tearing I can see, but the ME will determine sexual assault." Eve lifted the cheap, thin chain around Darnell's bruised neck. "She's wearing a ninety-day chip from Get Straight."

"Vix has sixty." Peabody held up the chip.

With a nod, Eve rose and moved to the middle victim. "Hear-no has thirty. Wilson Bickford," she said when she'd run his prints. "Age twenty-two. That same precision, surgical removal on the ear. Dr. Chaos may just be a doctor, or at least have medical training. Hmm, TOD two hundred thirty. Didn't die first."

She sat back on her heels, tried to see it.

"He's the biggest of the three. The killer went at him first," she continued. "I bet your ass he did."

"Hey, bet your own ass."

"Defensive wounds, hands, arms. Bickford put up a fight. Take it a couple ways. Say three killers, one for each vic. Teamwork. One stabs, one beats, one strangles. But this doesn't look like teamwork," Eve said, scanning the room again. "It looks like . . ." She gestured to the message on the wall.

"Chaos."

“Yeah. Could be the team just went to town on the place. But I’m only seeing one type of bloody footprint, and it’s too much to swallow they all wore the same size and type of shoe.”

“Missed that,” Peabody muttered.

“Maybe there’s more, and I’ve missed them. Or maybe the others were more careful.”

“But you don’t think so.”

“I think that’s an interesting gap of time between TODs. I think the same hand did the removals, an experienced hand, steady. We’ve got serious overkill on the two males, and manual strangulation—which is personal and intimate—on the female. The destruction of the scene is over the top, and that reads rage. But the message is jokey, which reads control and intellect. It could be more than one. One with a cool head, one just batshit crazy.

“Let’s get them bagged, tagged, and transported. I want to talk to the nine-one-one caller.”

Katrina Chu hunched in the back of the black-and-white, her face white as death, her eyes puffy from weeping. One of the uniforms had gotten her some water. Her throat clicked on every swallow. But to Eve’s relief, it looked like Katrina had cried herself out. Her puffy, pale green eyes stayed dry and focused on Eve.

“I need you to tell me what happened,” Eve began.

“Jen didn’t show up for work. She volunteers on the breakfast shift at Get Straight. The one off Canal. And she and Coby and Wil, they go to the meeting after.”

“You worked with her?”

“I’m her sponsor. I work at the free clinic on Canal.”

“Louise Dimatto’s clinic?”

“Yes. Do you know Dr. Dimatto?”

“Yeah.”

The connection seemed to steady her. “I’m an aide there. I’m studying to be a nurse. Jen came into Get Straight a couple months ago, and I offered to be her sponsor. We hit it off. She was really working it, you know? Really trying hard. She got Coby to come in. They wanted to turn their lives around.”

“I have her living on West Sixteenth.”

“They couldn’t pay the rent. They started squatting here a couple weeks ago. Maybe three, I guess. Nobody was using the place, and she said Dr. Rosenthal said it would be okay, for a few weeks.”

“Dr. Rosenthal?”

“He and Dr. Dimatto donate time to Get Straight. He and Arianna basically fund the organization.”

“Arianna.”

“Whitwood. They’re engaged. Arianna and Dr. Rosenthal. She’s a therapist. She donates her time, too. Jen, she wanted to get clean, stay clean. She never missed the morning meeting. And she started working at Slice—a pizza joint—about two months ago. She’d help serve breakfast, take in the meeting, then study for an hour or two—Arianna hooked her up with an online business course—then go to Slice if she had the lunch shift, go into the Center—the Whitwood Center—if she had the dinner shift. But she didn’t show up, not to serve breakfast, not for the meeting. She didn’t answer her ’link. Neither did Coby or Wil. I got worried.”

A tear leaked through after all. “I thought maybe they’d taken a slide. It happens. I didn’t want to think it. I really trusted she’d tag me if she got in a situation. But I did think it, so I came by on my way to work, to check on her. I knocked. I couldn’t see in the window. It’s boarded and grilled, but Jen gave me a key, so I opened it and . . . I saw.”

“Do you know anybody who’d want to hurt her, or Coby or Wil?”

“No.” Pressing her lips together, she shook her head. “I know some people think once a junkie, but they were trying. They were clean, and trying to stay that way.”

“What about people they associated with when they were using?”

“I don’t know. Jen never told me about any trouble, not this kind. She was happy. I went by Slice last night for takeout, and we talked

awhile. She was happy. Coby got a job there delivering, and Wil was working as a stock boy at the twenty-four/seven a couple blocks away. They were going to pool their money and rent a place. Last night she told me they had nearly two thousand in the rent kitty so they were going to start to look for one.

“She was happy.”

TWO



“Run Rosenthal and Whitwood,” Eve told Peabody. “And get what you can on the Canal Street Get Straight.”

“Already on it. And the sweepers are on their way.”

“Good.” Eve walked back into the building. “It’s going to take them a while to sort through this mess.” She poked through a bit. “Credits, cash, even loose change. I’m not finding any’links.”

“They probably had them—who doesn’t?—so the killer probably took them.”

“Takes the ’links but leaves the scratch. He, or they, didn’t care about the money. Just the kill. And if he took the ’links, he either had contact with them or thought they talked about him to each other, or someone else, via ’link.”

“It’s sad,” Peabody murmured. “They were young, and trying to reboot their lives. They had a good chance of making it, too. The floor’s clean.”

“Suddenly I question your cleanliness standards.”

“I mean if you overlook the blood and the mess. It’s not dusty or dirty. They kept the floor clean. And see, somebody repaired and painted this chair. They weren’t very good at it,” Peabody added as she picked up one of the broken legs. “But they tried. And when I checked out the bathroom, I guess it’s an employee’s restroom deal. Anyway, it was clean. The killers must not have used it. But the vics, they kept it clean.”

“Lieutenant?” One of the uniforms stepped in. “We found this in the recycler out back.”

He held up the clear protective coat, covered with blood, like the ones she’d seen countless doctors wearing. “Just one?”

“So far, sir.”

“Keep checking. Anything pop from the canvass?”

“Not yet.”

“Keep on that, too. Bag that for the sweepers. They’re on their way. Rosenthal, Peabody.”

“Dr. Justin Rosenthal, thirty-eight. He specializes in chemical addictions—and was given a grant by the Whitwood Group for same—cause, rehabilitation. He works primarily out of the Whitwood Center, a facility for the study of addiction, with a health center and visitor’s lodging attached. No criminal.”

“Let’s go see if the doctor’s in.”

“He’s very studly,” Peabody added and continued to work her handheld as they walked to the car. “Has numerous awards for service and innovations in his field. Donates time to the Canal Street Clinic, Get Straight, and others.”

Peabody slid into the car as Eve took the wheel. “I got lots of pops on gossip and society pages. He and Arianna are quite the item. She’s a looker. And really, really rich. Not Roarke rich,” Peabody said, referring to Eve’s husband, “but she’s up there. Or the Whitwood Group—headed by her parents—is. She’s thirty-four, a therapist, again specializing in addictions. From the fluff pieces I’m skimming, it looks like they met four years ago, and were engaged last fall. The wedding’s set for next month, billed as the wedding of the year. And . . . oh, she had a brother. Chase, died at the age of nineteen. OD’d. She was sixteen. The Whitwood Center opened three years later.

“Oh, listen to this. Rosenthal had a sister. She made it to twenty-two before she OD’d. He was on track to becoming a topflight cardiac surgeon. Switched his focus after his sister’s death.”

“A surgeon. Gave that up,” Eve commented, “to work with junkies. Like his sister, like his fiancée’s brother. Day in and day out, seeing them, listening to them, treating them, hearing bullshit out of them. Something could snap.”

“Cynic alert. Honest, Dallas, from what I’m reading here, the guy sounds like a saint. A studly saint. Saint Studly of Rosenthal.”

“Do you know why the saints are all dead?”

“Why?”

“Because dead’s the only way you can pull it off. Living’s messy, and everyone living has some dirty little secret. That’s why we have jobs.”

“A dirty little secret that has a renowned and studly doctor slaughtering three recovering addicts?”

“Somebody did it. He’s got the connection, he’s got the skill, and according to our source, he’s the one who gave them the green light to squat there. If he’s so saintly, why didn’t he float them a couple months’ rent?”

“That’s a good question.”

“It’s one I’m going to ask him.”

Old, time-faded brick housed the Whitwood Center. No flash, Eve noted, no gloss—at least not on the exterior—so the building sat comfortably in the old Meatpacking District.

With Peabody, she walked in the front entrance. The lobby area was large and quietly furnished. Comfortable chairs, simple art, some plants gave off the atmosphere of a living area rather than a waiting one despite the reception counter manned by two people.

The man, early thirties, continued to work on his comp while the woman, a few years younger with a pretty face and earnestly welcoming eyes, smiled in their direction.

“Good morning. How can we help you today?”

Eve approached the counter, laid her badge on it. “We need to speak with Dr. Rosenthal.”

“I see.” The woman didn’t so much as blink at the badge. “Is the doctor expecting you?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“His offices are on the second floor, east. One of his interns or his assistant should be able to help you.”

“Okay.”

“Stairs to the left, elevators to the right.”

As Eve angled left, the woman continued. “You’ll want to take the right corridor, go over the garden breezeway, then take the first turn to the left.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s nice work,” Peabody said as they started up. “The work they’ve done on the old building. Kept its character. It’s comfortable, and it doesn’t shout, ‘We’re really rich philanthropists.’ ”

On the second floor they walked by several doors, all discreetly shut, with their purposes or a doctor’s name on a plaque.

They passed people in lab coats, in street wear, in sharp suits, and in tattered pants. Eve noted the security cameras, and the card slots and palm plates on some of the doors. They passed a nurse’s station and the waiting area across from it.

Then they came to the garden breezeway. Below, through treated glass, a central fountain gurgled in a fantasy of flowering plants, shrubs, trees in riotous bloom. White stone benches offered seating, bricked paths wound in an invitation to stroll.

“That says, ‘We’re really rich philanthropists,’ ” Eve commented.

“But in a really pretty way.”

They made the left into a small blue and cream reception area. The woman behind the counter tapped her earpiece, turned away from the smart screen where, it looked to Eve, she’d been working on updating a complex schedule.

“Can I help you?”

“Lieutenant Dallas and Detective Peabody.” Eve held up her badge. “We need to speak with Dr. Rosenthal.”

“Is there a problem?”

“There almost always is.”

The woman didn’t look pleased by the answer, and reminded Eve of Dr. Mira’s admin. The dragon at the gates of the NYPSP’s shrink and top profiler.

“Dr. Rosenthal’s in his lab this morning.”

“Where’s his lab?”

“I really must insist you tell me your business before I disturb the doctor.”

“I really must insist you take us to his lab.” Eve tapped her badge. “And this has a lot more insistence than you because it can arrest you for interfering with a police investigation.”

“I’ll check with the doctor.” The words sounded as sour as the woman’s face looked. She tapped her earpiece again. “Yes, Pach, would you tell Dr. Rosenthal two police officers are here and insist on speaking with him. Yes. No, they won’t say. Thank you.” She waited a moment, staring holes through Eve. Then scowled. “Very well.”

After another tap, she spoke to Eve. “The doctor’s lab assistant will come out and take you back. The doctor will see you.”

She aimed her nose in the air before turning back to her screen.

Moments later a side door opened. The man who came out had deep brown skin and large, heavy-lidded eyes nearly as black as his crown of curly hair. He wore a standard white lab coat over jeans and a red T-shirt that asked, “My petri dish or yours?”

“Officers?”

“Lieutenant Dallas and Detective Peabody.”

“Oh. Um . . .” He flashed a very white smile. “If you’ll come this way?”

Through the door was a maze, a rabbit warren of rooms off angled corridors. The lab assistant negotiated them on flapping gel sandals. He paused at double steel doors, swiped his card, spoke his name. “Pachai Gupta.”

The security blinked green in acceptance, and the doors slid open into a large lab. Eve felt a weird juxtaposition as her friend Mavis’s voice wailed out about love on the wild side over the pristine red and white room. Strange equations and symbols held frozen on one of the wall screens while something bubbled blue in a heated beaker. A woman with short, sleek red hair hunched over a microscope while her foot tapped to Mavis’s grinding beat. Another lab coat diligently worked two comps at a long white counter. He sported a short stub of a ponytail and ragged skids.

In the center of it, amid the coils of tubing, the sparkling electronics, the busy screens, and the forest of test tubes, beakers, and specimen dishes, stood Justin Rosenthal.

He wore a lab coat like other men wore a tux, perfectly fitted and somehow elegant. His gilded mane of hair gleamed under the bright lights. Vid-star handsome, poetically pale, he removed a beaker from its heater with tongs and set it in a bath of water. Steam hissed and curled.

Through the thin curtain of it, Eve saw his eyes, tawny as a lion's, fix intently on some sort of gauge.

"What's he working on?" she asked their guide.

"An antidote."

"To what?"

"To evil." At her raised eyebrows, Pachai flushed, shrugged.

Eve heard a low beep. Justin lifted the beaker again, slid it into a container, sealed it, set another gauge.

Only then did he step back, look over.

"Sorry." There was an absent charm in his smile, in his movements as he crossed to them. "The timing's crucial. You're the police?"

"Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody, NYPSD."

"Dallas. Of course, you're Roarke's wife." His smile warmed as he extended a hand. "It's nice to finally meet you. How is Roarke? I haven't seen him in . . . it's probably been a year. More."

"He's good. This isn't a social call, Dr. Rosenthal."

"Justin. No, of course not. Sorry. How can I help you?"

"You know Jennifer Darnell, Coby Vix, Wilson Bickford."

"Yes." His smile faded. "Are they in trouble? I can assure you they've been working very hard against their addictions. It's a hard road, and there will be stumbles, but—"

"They were murdered early this morning."

Behind her, Pachai let out a strangled gasp as Justin just stared at her. "What? Sorry, what?"

"They were murdered between two and two-forty this morning in the building where they were squatting."

"Dead? Murdered? *All?*"

"How?" Pachai took Eve's arm, then quickly released it. His eyes were liquid onyx swimming under inky lashes. They only shimmered more intensely when Justin laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Pach, let's sit down."

“No. No. I’m sorry, but how can they be murdered? I saw them only yesterday.”

“When?”

“Pach,” Justin repeated, gently. “Music off,” he ordered. The redhead called out a protest when Mavis stopped wailing.

“Not now, Marti.” Justin rubbed his temple. “There’s no mistake?”

“No. When did you see them last?” she asked Pachai.

His lips trembled, and tears continued to swarm those heavy-lidded eyes. “Before Jen and Coby went to work, after Wil got off. We had coffee. We have coffee almost every day.”

“You were friends?”

“Yes. We—I—I don’t understand.”

“No, neither do I,” Justin said. “What happened?”

The lab rat with the stubby ponytail had turned and, like the redhead, watched.

“Early this morning Wilson Bickford was stabbed to death, Coby Vix was bludgeoned to death, and Jennifer Darnell was strangled.”

Pachai began to weep, and the harsh sobs bore him down to the floor, where he covered his face with his hands.

Justin turned ashen. At her station the redhead sat very still, staring at Eve as if she’d spoken in an ancient foreign language. The other man slumped back in his chair, shuddered, then closed his eyes, lowered his head.

No one spoke.

THREE



In the silence, Eve gave Peabody a signal, and responding, Peabody moved to Pachai. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she began in the comfort voice she used so well. “Let me help you. Let me help you up. Why don’t we go over here, sit down?”

“How could—was it—I’m sorry,” Justin said. “I just can’t think. They were attacked? In the building on West Twelfth?”

“Yes.”

“But why, for God’s sake? None of them belonged to a gang, none of them had any valuables to speak of. Was this just some random killings?”

“Do you know anyone who’d wish them—any one of them—harm?”

“No. No, I don’t. They were turning their lives around, and the three of them had formed a strong bond. Their own small support group.”

“They were addicts.”

“In recovery,” Justin said quickly.

“Was there anyone who they—again any one of them—used to associate with prior to their recovery who might have resented the fact that they were getting clean, staying clean?”

“I don’t know, but if so, they didn’t mention it to me. If there was someone, something, one of them might have told Arianna. Arianna Whitwood. She was the therapist of record for all three of them.”

“Your fiancée.”

“Yes.” He looked away, pressed his fingers to his eyes. “My God, they were so young, so hopeful.”

“You gave them permission to squat in that property.”

“Yes. They couldn’t make the rent on Jen’s apartment. She’d fallen behind before she’d made the commitment to recovery. Pachai told me they were sleeping on the street. I thought . . . it would be a roof over their heads until they found a place.”

“You formed an attachment to them?”

“To Jen, then through her to Coby and Wil. She was so determined, and you could see the light coming back into her. You could see her finding her quiet. It was gratifying. Even inspiring.”

“I guess I’m curious why you didn’t float them the rent.”

“I wish I had.” Mouth tight, he glanced over to where Peabody murmured to Pachai. “We have a policy not to lend money to anyone in the program, but to try to find another way to help, to guide them to help themselves. I never imagined . . . The three of them together should have been safe. God knows, each one of them had experience on the street, handling themselves.”

“I have to ask where you were between one and four this morning.”

“Yes. I . . . Well, here. I was here.”

“That’s a lot of midnight oil to burn.”

“What I’m working on, it’s—I believe—at its tipping point. I worked until after two, then bunked on the sofa in my office.”

“Did you see or speak with anyone during that time?”

“No. I sent Ken and Pachai home about eleven, I think it was. You can ask them, or check the log-outs. Marti left earlier. I spoke with Arianna . . . I’m not sure, I’d have to check the link log. Maybe ten or ten thirty before I sent the boys home.”

“What are you working on?”

“A serum to counteract deep and chronic addiction and substance abuse. It will treat the craving on both a physical and psychological level, quiet the violence of that need during withdrawal, and after.”

“There are medications for that already.”

“Medications that basically substitute one chemical for another. I’m attempting to work with natural ingredients that will trigger the chemistry in the brain and the body to return to the levels prior to the addiction. A rebalancing, we’ll say.”

He rubbed at his temple again, the same two fingers on the same spot in the same circular motion. “Is there anything I—we—can do for them now? Contacting family? I can’t remember the details of that, but Arianna will have it. With the burial, memorial? Anything?”

“We’ll be notifying next of kin. I’ll need to talk to Ms. Whitwood, and as soon as possible. First I’d like to speak with your other assistants.”

“Interns,” he corrected automatically. “Marti Frank and Ken Dickerson are here on intern scholarships. Sorry, it hardly matters. I want to tell Ari in person, face-to-face, not over the link. We lose patients, Lieutenant. To their addiction, to the violence it often generates, or the physical abuse it causes. But this? This comes very, very hard.”

“Is she in the Center now?”

“Yes, she should be in session now. I’ll go up, tell her.”

“If you’d tell her I want to speak with her before we leave, I’d appreciate it.”

“Yes. I’m sorry to meet you this way. I’m just . . . sorry.”

Eve let him go, and decided to take the redhead first.

“You got the picture,” Eve began.

“Yeah. It’s a really ugly picture.”

“Were you close to the victims?”

“I hate that word. Victim.” She folded her hands together on her lap as if she wanted to keep them still. “It’s overused.”

“It is in my line of work.”

“Yeah, I guess. Not especially close. I liked them. Jen in particular. She was just so damn likable.”

“You work in the lab. Do you get friendly with a lot of people in the program?”

“There’s interaction. It’s part of it. There’s a communal eatery on-site, so a lot of times staff’s eating with patients and recoverings. When work allows, we’re encouraged to attend sessions or lectures. It’s more than lab work, especially for Justin. It’s our whole life, and understanding who and what we’re working for. You’re going to find out,” she added. “I know how it works. My brother was a junkie, favored Jazz laced with Zeus. He favored it a lot right up until he

OD'd. He made my life, my mother's, my father's, hell. I hate the junk, and it took a long time before I stopped hating the junkie."

She glanced over her shoulder. "With Ken it was his father. Came into it late, you could say. Started with prescriptions after a car accident, escalated until he'd destroyed his marriage, did time for smacking his wife and Ken around, ended up on the street where he stabbed somebody to death for twelve dollars and a wrist unit. He died in prison when somebody returned the favor."

Eve connected the dots. "And Pachai?"

"Childhood friend. They were tight, like brothers. The friend played around with recreationals, liked them too much until he was flying on Ups and Bounce, crashing on Chill. Then he was just one more OD when Pachai found him dead—two days dead. Justin wants people invested who work for him, people who know all the sides, all the layers, and have a reason to be here."

"He wants it personal."

"Yeah, and it is." She looked over at Pachai, then down at her folded hands. "This happening to Jen and the others, people who had a real shot at redemption, who really put it all into kicking it? That's personal, too. For all of us."

"Understood. If you know how it works, you know I have to ask. Where were you between one and four this morning?"

"In bed." Her gaze tracked up, met Eve's. "Alone and asleep. I had a date, but it didn't go anywhere. I got home just after midnight. I've got a roommate, but she had a date and it did go somewhere. She didn't get home until six this morning."

She gave Eve a narrow look. "Anyway, from what you said, how they were killed? The three of us would've had to go batshit together, break in to that place, and kill them like a pack."

"That's a thought, isn't it? I appreciate the time. If you think of anything, contact me or my partner."

Eve moved on to the last.

"Ken Dickerson," he said. "Did they maybe get attacked on the street?" He watched Eve with horror and hope. His face, pale and thin, showed signs of fatigue. "Maybe they ran," he continued, in a

voice that hitched in a battle against tears. “And the people who attacked them went at them when they got to the building.”

“No.”

“It just doesn’t seem real,” he murmured, rubbing at his damp, tired eyes. “I feel like I’m going to wake up and none of this happened.”

“How well did you know the victims?”

“I . . . God. I don’t know. To talk to. Not like Pach, but we hung out a couple times. My uncle manages a Slice, and I helped Jen, then Coby, get jobs there. I mean, I asked my uncle if he could give them a try. He’s good about giving people a chance.”

“Did you ever go to the place they were staying?”

“Once. The restaurant’s close to where I live, so I go in a lot. I walked back with Jen and Coby one night. My uncle gave them some food. And we hung out.” He smiled a little. “It was nice.”

“Did they own ’links?”

He blinked in puzzlement. “Sure. Everybody has at least one ’link.”

“Do you know anyone who’d want to hurt them?”

“I don’t see why anyone would. They were harmless. They didn’t have anything, didn’t hurt anybody. Jen was studying so she could do secretarial work. She wanted to work in an office. That’s not much to ask.”

No, Eve thought. It wasn’t much to ask.

When Justin came back in, he looked drained. “If you could give Arianna a few minutes, she’ll meet you in the Meditation Garden.”

“All right.”

“Is there anything more we can do?”

“Not at this time.”

“Will you keep me—us—informed?”

“I can do that. If anything occurs to you, anything at all, let me know.” She signaled Peabody, who put her hand on Pachai’s shoulder before rising.

“Arianna Whitwood, down in the gardens,” Eve told her. “Did you get anything?”

“He was in love with Darnell,” Peabody said as they headed down again. “He didn’t hesitate to tell me, or that he thought maybe she

felt something back. No alibi, but he gives off this gentle, kind of sweet vibe. I can't see him slaughtering three people."

"On the other hand, he and everyone in that lab knew all three vics, and where they were squatting. At least two of them—and I'd add Rosenthal as a third—had been there, knew the setup. That weighs. There are going to be others who knew them and the setup from Get Straight, and Slice. This wasn't random."

"No. Random doesn't fit."

"Because?"

"Oh boy, a quiz. Deliberate break-in through the back, and the other killers—because I can't see it being one guy—got into the front, attacked them in a frenzied but systematic manner. Wrecked the place, but as far as we know took nothing but their 'links—and at least one of them had the protective gear, so no blood on his—or their—clothes. It's most probable they brought the weapons—a knife, scalpel, and some sort of bludgeoning tool—with them. Prepared, premeditated, and target specific."

"Did I pass?"

"Not bad." They passed through an atrium on the main level and into the burgeoning gardens. "Not bad at all," Eve said with a look around.

"Totally mag. Peaceful. Kind of Zen. Look, butterflies." A smile broke over Peabody's face. "Butterflies just make you happy."

"They've got that buggy body and those creepy little antennas. People don't think about that because they get distracted by the wings. I always wonder if they have teeth. They must have tiny, sharp little teeth."

"You're not spoiling my happy."

Eve took the path marked Meditation Garden, angled through blossoms and butterflies. She saw Arianna on one of the stone benches, the diamond on her left hand on fire in the streams of light. She wore a leaf-green suit with a foam of lace and high, razor-thin heels of the same color that showcased long legs. Her hair, a rich, nutty brown, was wound up in some complicated twist that left her exceptional face unframed. Everything about her said classic and class, and reminded Eve of Mira.

At their approach, Arianna turned her head. Her eyes, a color caught somewhere between green and brown, sparked with anger. She rose.

“Lieutenant Dallas. I’d hoped to meet you, but not like this. Detective Peabody. Can we sit?” She did so, folded her hands again. “I wanted to talk to you here. I’d hoped to find some quiet here. But not yet.”

“You were the therapist for all three victims,” Eve began.

“Yes. They would have made it. I believe that. On a professional and personal level, I believe Coby and Wil would have made it. I know Jen would have. She’d come so far in such a short time. She’d found the quiet.”

“Dr. Rosenthal used that term. *The quiet.*”

“Yes, I guess I picked it up from him.” Arianna laid a hand on her heart. “Addiction is never quiet. It’s violent or sly or seductive. Often all three. But Jen found her quiet and her strength, and was helping Coby and Wil find theirs.”

“Other addicts, not making such progress, might resent them for theirs.”

“That’s true. They would have told me if anyone was pressuring them, threatening them. Jen was addicted to heroin, preferred it in the mix they call Chill on the street. She often bartered her body for hits. Her mother was the same, her father was her mother’s dealer—she thinks.”

“She did some time in the system,” Eve put in. “Juvie, group homes, foster homes.”

“Yes. She had a troubled, difficult childhood. Jen ran off when she was sixteen, and continued that troubled, difficult life up until nearly four months ago when she woke up after a binge. She’d lost three days, and came back to herself covered in cuts, bruises, filth, her own vomit in some basement flop with no recollection of how she’d gotten there. She got out, began to walk. She thought of the next score, thought of just ending her life, and she came to Get Straight. Instead of walking on, trying for the next score, or ending her life, she went in.”

“This wasn’t her first try at rehab.”

“No.” Arianna turned her head to meet Eve’s eyes. “She’d had three court-assigned rehabilitations, and none of them took. This time, she chose. She walked in on her own. She was ready to be helped, and they helped her. Justin and I were there that day. She often said that was the beginning for her. When we met.”

Arianna looked away again as her voice roughened.

“Withdrawal is hard and painful, but she never gave up. She brought Coby in. We encourage recoverings to sever ties with people who are part of their addiction, but she wouldn’t listen. She saved Coby, simply because she wouldn’t give up on him either, and then Wil. They loved her, and their love for her and each other proved stronger than the addiction. That’s a kind of miracle. And now . . .”

“Did they tell you about anyone who concerned them, who gave them any grief, put any pressure on them to use again?”

“No. None of them had any family, no one they were close to or had contact with, not for a long time. They formed friendships, associations at the Center, and at Get Straight. They were still in the honeymoon stage, so happy to be where they were, so happy to have each other.”

“Were they intimate?”

“No, not sexually. Jen and Coby had been, if you can call it intimacy, when they were both using. What they’d formed now was a family, so they lived that way. For Jen, sex had been that bartering tool, or something to do with another addict. She’d become desensitized about sex. I think she was beginning to feel normal and natural urges. She was attracted to Pach—Pachai Gupta—and he to her. But neither of them moved on it.”

“How can you be sure?”

“She would have told me. Honesty had become a vital tool for her in recovery, and she trusted me. They’d made a vow—Jen, Coby, and Will—to abstain for six months, to focus on themselves as individuals. Coby joked about it. He was funny, sharp. He’d used that charm and wit to survive on the streets. Now he used it to keep himself and his friends steady. Wil went the more spiritual route. He’d lived with his great-grandmother until she died, and she’d taken him

to church. He'd started to go back. Jen and Coby went with him a few times, but more for friendship than interest."

"What church?"

"Ah . . . Chelsea Baptist."

"Where else did they go routinely, do routinely?"

"They liked to hang out at the Twelfth Street Diner, drink coffee, and talk. They all put in time at Get Straight, attending meetings, taking on chores—cleaning, organizing donations—that's part of the program. They attended group there, too, as well as here. They'd see a vid now and then, but primarily they worked—saved their money toward finding a place to live—concentrated on the program, studied. Or Jen did. She was taking a business class."

"You gave them permission to live in the building?"

"Yes. Justin asked me, and we thought it would give them a breather, allow them to live on their own, save, stay close to the Center. The stipulation was they had to keep the place, and themselves, clean. They did."

"You visited them there?"

"Either Justin or I would drop by once a week. Spot-check," she said with the first hint of a smile. "We trusted them. But you can't trust the addiction."

"Arianna!"

The sharp call sliced through the quiet garden. A man, tall, his dark hair cropped close to a tanned face, hurried toward them. His eyes, a green as sharp as his voice, were all for Arianna. Ignoring Eve and Peabody, he grabbed her hands, got to his knees.

"I heard what happened. What can I do for you?"

"Eton." Tears shimmered in her eyes. Eve saw her bear down against them. "I was going to tell you myself, but I needed to speak with the police. Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody, my associate, Eton Billingsly."

"The police." He shot Eve a disgusted look. "At a time like this?"

"Murder usually brings the cops."

"It's hardly necessary to interrogate Arianna at all, and particularly before she's had time to process."

“Okay. Let’s interrogate you. Where were you between one and four a.m. this morning?”

He blustered. Eve couldn’t think of another word for the sounds he made or the look on his face as he sprang to his feet. “I’m not answering any of your insulting questions, and neither is Arianna.”

“Oh yeah, you are,” Eve corrected, “here or at Cop Central. Your choice.”

“Eton.” Arianna rose. “Stop now. You’re upset. The police are trying to find out who hurt Jen and the boys, and why.”

“They’ll hardly find out here, with you.” He took her hands again. “Justin should never have allowed it.”

“Justin doesn’t *allow* anything.” Gently, but deliberately, Arianna drew her hands away.

“You’re right, of course. But it’s natural to want to shield you from this kind of ordeal. I know how much you’d invested in these recoverings.”

“I haven’t heard an answer yet, Mr. Billingsly.”

“*Dr.* Billingsly,” he snapped at Eve. “And at that time of the morning, I was home in bed.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“What was your relationship with the victims?”

Perhaps due to the fact that his face went red, Arianna answered for him. “Eton is one of our psychologists. He specializes in hypnotherapy. The process can help them through withdrawal, give them focus, and can often help them bring the root of their addiction to the surface.”

“So, did you do the ‘you’re getting sleepy’ with the victims?” Eve asked him.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“As Arianna can tell you, they were making excellent, even exceptional, progress.”

“When’s the last time you had contact with them—each of them?”

“I’d have to check my book. I can hardly remember off the top of my head.”

“Do that. Did you ever visit the building where they were living?”

His lips thinned. “No. Why would I? Instead of wasting time here, you should be out on the street, looking for the maniacs who did this. It’s obviously the result of violent addicts, people they associated with before they began the program.”

“Nothing’s obvious at this point. You’ve been very helpful,” she said to Arianna.

“Can you let us know when . . . Justin and I would like to arrange a memorial. We’d like to arrange for their remains.”

“Arianna,” Billingsly began.

“Eton, please. It’s little enough.”

“I’m required to inform the next of kin,” Eve told her. “I’ll be in touch once I have. You have transcripts of your sessions with them. They could help me. Doctor-patient privilege doesn’t apply when the patients are dead.”

“I’ll have them sent to you this afternoon. I’ll show you the way out.”

“We’ve got it, thanks.”

As they walked away, Eve glanced back. Eton had her hands again, his head bent toward hers as he talked rapidly.

“Asshole,” was Peabody’s opinion.

“Big, flaming asshole with a big, flaming temper. Looks like he keeps in good shape. Bet he puts in plenty of gym time. And he wants Arianna Whitwood for his own.”

“Oh yeah, and she doesn’t want him for hers.”

“That’s a pisser for him. I bet she gave the vics a lot more of her time, attention, and affection than she gives Billingsly, which is another pisser for him.”

“Killing the hell out of them doesn’t change that. Would be a pretty murky motive.”

“Maybe, but I really hate him already. Plus, hypnotherapy. Who knows what he’s up to with that?”

“Why didn’t you ask for his transcripts?”

“Because he wouldn’t give them up, not without a warrant, which you’re going to put in the works while we head over to Get Straight.”

“Oooh, that’s going to be another pisser for Billingsly.”

“I can only hope it’s not the last.”

FOUR



They got little more from Get Straight but confirmation of everything they'd heard before, and more grief. Even as they stepped out into the air holding the first faint hint of fall, Eve's com signaled. She recognized the first on scene on her screen.

"Officer Slovic."

"Sir, we dug up a wit claims she saw someone near the rear of the crime scene, and observed him stuffing something in the recycler where we found the bloody protective gear."

"That's a break. How good a look?"

"She claims a good, solid one. There's a streetlight, and she states she saw him clearly, and he was dancing."

"Sorry?"

"That's her statement, Lieutenant." Eve heard the shrug in his voice. "Her description's pretty strange, but she's sticking to it, and doesn't strike me as a whack job. Her apartment's got a good view of the area, and she was up walking her kid—kid's teething. She's a short-order cook on parental leave. We got her on the canvass."

"What did she see?"

He cleared his throat. "A monster. Possibly a demon."

"Officer Slovic, are you actually wasting my time on this?"

"Sir, I wouldn't, but she gave details, she had the time down, and she admits it sounds crazy."

"Give me the details."

"Male, medium build—she thinks—dark hair, wild and stringy." He made the throat-clearing sound again. "Greenish skin, red, bulging eyes, contorted features, and prominent teeth, wearing a black cape and carrying a black satchel."

"And this green, red-eyed monster was dancing in the streetlight."

“And laughing, sir, in what the wit describes as a wild, guttural laugh. I believe her, Lieutenant, I mean about what she saw. It could be the subject was wearing a mask or a disguise.”

“Yeah.” Eve heaved out a sigh. “Will she work with an artist?”

“She’s anxious to.”

“Contact Detective Yancy at Central, and get her to him.”

“Yes, sir.”

She shoved the com into her pocket. “A green, red-eyed, cape-wearing monster.”

“Or possibly demon,” Peabody put in and earned a sneer. “I’m not saying I believe in monsters and demons, but somebody hyped up on Zeus, say, convinced he is one, gets in the gear to top it off. Since the wit only saw one man, and the evidence leans toward one man—he’d have to be hyped on something. Zeus not only makes you crazy, but it deadens you to pain, pumps the adrenaline.”

“Maybe. We’ll see it through.” She checked the time. “I want you to go by Slice, talk to the boss, the coworkers, and do the same at the twenty-four/seven. You can round it off with the diner they used as a hang spot. Maybe they had some trouble last night, or somebody followed them home. I’m going to swing by the morgue, see what Morris can give us. We’ll hook up back at Central.”

“I’d sure as hell rather go to a pizza joint than the morgue. Want me to bring you a slice?”

“No . . . maybe. Yeah.”

Eve slid behind the wheel and headed for the morgue.

Zeus was a good fit, she thought, but not a perfect one. It fit the violence, the frenzy of it. But not the calculation. Still, a blend . . . and some enterprising soul was always coming up with a new and improved in the illegals game.

Flying on Zeus, a man could hack, beat, choke—and laugh his ass off while doing it. But he couldn’t plan—costume, satchel with weapons and protective gear, gloved or sealed hands. She didn’t expect the sweepers to gift wrap the killer’s prints for her.

He’d broken in through the back window, Eve thought, bringing the scene back into her head. Need a tool for that, in the satchel. Climb in, nice and quiet—something else that didn’t fit the Zeus, not pure

Zeus. Bathroom, back room all neat and tidy, so the killer had moved straight into the front of the shop and the vics.

Target specific, premeditated, planned. She was sure of it.

Motive was a murky area.

She considered, rejected, fiddled with various theories through downtown traffic, then let them simmer as she walked into the white tunnel of the morgue.

Morris wore a gray suit and a strong red tie. The choice cheered her a little. His wardrobe rarely varied from black since the murder of his lover. The band twined through his braid of dark hair matched the tie.

His long, clever eyes met hers over the open body of Jennifer Darnell. Through the speakers, a sax wailed out a jazzy riff.

“I see you got me a triple-header.”

“The monster did it.”

“Not difficult to believe, given the condition of these young people. There’s internal abuse, self-inflicted from years of illegals ingestion, poor diet. They lived hard for their short time. I found signs of recovery and reversal. If they’d lived and kept clean, they should have done well enough.”

“Were they keeping clean?”

“Knowing you’d ask, I ran and rushed the tox screen first, and they were. Their last meal, which I assume they shared about midnight, was pizza, a diet cola for the girl, straight cola for the boys.”

“Sexual activity, consensual or forced?”

“No. Victim one—in order of TOD—suffered multiple broken bones and ribs, some of them postmortem. COD would be a fractured skull. He’d literally had his brains bashed in. By a bat or pipe, some three inches in diameter, and extreme force. I found some paint flakes in the wounds. I’ve sent them to the lab.”

“Head blow first?” Eve speculated.

“From my reconstruction, which is still preliminary, yes. A blow here.” Morris tapped the side of his hand diagonally over his right temple. “It would have knocked him out cold. It’s unlikely he felt the rest.”

“Small favor.”

“Victim two, multiple stab wounds inflicted with a jagged-edged blade, some four inches in length. Not a hunting or carving knife. More likely an inexpensive meat knife. The tip broke on bone, and that’s at the lab as well. He was stabbed first center of the chest, two strikes, and once in the abdomen. Again, from my prelim, the rest of the wounds came several minutes later.”

“Incapacitate both males.”

“And her. As in your notes, she was struck with the same bat as killed her friend, across the knees, shattering her kneecaps. The ear, eye, and tongue were removed postmortem, and with a smooth, sharp blade—a scalpel would be my opinion. And it was done with precision. Do you know how many are responsible for this?”

“One.”

Morris’s eyebrows shot up. “One? You never fail to intrigue.” He looked over the bodies again. “The damage here, the strength, the sheer energy it took to beat the first vic was considerable. On the second, the stab wounds are very deep, very forceful, and there are eighty-five holes in that unfortunate boy. That also takes strength and energy. Considerable endurance.”

“And when he’d finished there, he still had enough to manually strangle—correct?”

“Yes,” Morris confirmed, “he used his own hands.”

“To manually strangle the third, which also takes strength. And still after that, he had it in him to break chairs, tables, basically wreak havoc. He ended it, according to the wit we’re working with, by dancing down the sidewalk.”

“Then he has a powerful constitution, probably chemically enhanced. He enjoyed this.” Morris laid a gentle hand on Jennifer Darnell’s head. “I’m not Mira, so that’s simply a dead doctor’s take. But you and I see, every day, what one human being is capable of doing to another. This one enjoyed himself.”

“Yeah, and when they have that much fun, they want to do it again.”

She headed to Central. She needed to review her notes, write an initial report—harass the sweepers and the lab for theirs—start her murder board and book. And she wanted a look at the wit, or at least Yancy’s sketch.

Somewhere in there she wanted to carve out some time to do a good, solid run on Eton Asshole Billingsly.

She smelled cookies the minute she stepped into the bullpen, caught the scatter of crumbs on Jenkinson’s shirt, watched Baxter stuff the remains of one in his mouth before he offered her a big smile.

“Nadine’s in your office, LT.”

“Pathetic. Pathetic that a bunch of cops, fat-assing at their desks instead of out taking down bad guys, can be bribed with cookies.”

Jenkinson shot up a hand. “We got one, Dallas. Reineke’s walking him down to lockup. I’m doing the fives.”

“With cookie crumbs on your shirt.”

He brushed at them hastily as she turned away to stride to her office. Where Nadine Furst, reporter extraordinaire, lounged in her visitor’s chair, nibbling on a cookie and working on her PPC.

Saying nothing, Eve lifted the lid of the bakery box on her desk, took out a fat chocolate chip. “What do you want?”

“A man of amazing sexual prowess, great sensitivity, stupendous abs, and the face of an angel. Toss in a wicked sense of humor and stupendous wealth, who adores the very ground I walk on. Oh wait, you already have him.”

Eve bit into the cookie.

“Second choice?”

Nadine fluffed back her streaky blond hair, smiled her feline smile with her cat’s eyes glinting. “I heard you caught a messy one.”

“That’s right. I don’t have anything to give you. I haven’t put it together yet.”

“Three victims, beaten, stabbed, and strangled, recovering addicts with a connection to the Whitwood Group—killed, in fact, on property owned by same. The Whitwoods are always a strong story.”

“The victims are the story.”

“I know.” Nadine’s smile faded. “They were young, trying to turn things around. Are you looking at gang and/or illegals-related murders?”

“I’m looking at everything, everyone.”

“Including the Whitwoods, and the very dreamy Justin Rosenthal.”

“Including.” Nadine, Eve calculated, was always a good source.

“What do you know about Eton Billingsly?”

“He’s a dick.”

“I got that much.”

“Is he a suspect?”

“Nadine, it’s too early.”

“Well, I hope he is, because he’s, as I said, a dick. Comes from money. Not quite on the Whitwood level, but he’s got a fat portfolio. He also seriously courted the lovely Arianna, who fell head over skirt for Rosenthal—who is not a dick. I don’t know much about him, but I can find out.”

“I’m working on it.” Eve took another bite of cookie. Damn fine cookie. “What else do you want?”

“You’re just back from closing a big one in Dallas. Isaac McQueen—the second time you took him down. It’s a hot story, Dallas. Him coming after you, abducting one of his former victims. I want you to come on *Now* and talk about it.”

Eve set the cookie aside. Damn fine or not, her appetite dried up. “I’m not going to do that.”

Before she could say anything else, Nadine held up a hand. “And I’m not going to press you. I had to ask.”

“It’s not like you to give up so easy.”

Nadine recrossed her legs. “A couple of years ago when you and I hooked up over the DeBlass case, I did a little research. I like to know who I’m working with.”

Eve said nothing.

“It’s not easy getting much background on you, but I know you were found in Dallas when you were a child, and you’d been . . . hurt. The reporter wants an interview, Dallas, but the friend won’t push. Friendship’s stronger than a story.”

“Okay.” And it was.

“When you get something on this new case, maybe you can give me a heads-up.”

“Maybe I could. You should contact Bree and Melinda Jones,” Eve said as Nadine rose. “You should go to Dallas, where it happened, talk to them there.”

“I intended to contact them.” Nadine angled her head. “An on-location special? That’s not bad. Some of it in the apartment where he kept Melinda Jones and the girl, some in the hotel suite where he came after you. No, that’s not half-bad. I’ve got to go.”

At the door, Nadine paused, glanced back. “Dallas, anytime you want to talk to the friend, about any of it, the reporter will step back.”

“I appreciate it.”

Alone, Eve turned to her ’link and contacted another friend. She was shuffled directly to Dr. Louise Dimatto’s v-mail, left a message asking for a meeting.

Rising, she programmed coffee, then began to set up her board. She’d work better with the visuals.

When she finished, she started her report.

“That’s particularly gruesome,” Roarke said from her doorway.

Nadine had been right, Eve thought, in her summary of him. Oh, she’d left a few things out, but all in all. He did have the face of an angel, a fallen one, with the wings well-singed, but that only made him more compelling. That and those wildly blue eyes, the silky black hair. He wore one of his sharp business suits, but there was no asshole vibe here as with Billingsly.

This was power, success, sex, and danger all rolled into one streamlined package with Ireland gilding his voice.

Still.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“I had business nearby, and took a chance I’d see my wife. And here she is. This is new,” he said, looking at her board again.

“Caught it this morning. Oh, Justin Rosenthal and Arianna Whitwood say hi.”

“Is that so?” He shifted his gaze back to her. “What would they have to do with this?”

“That’s a question. How well do you know them?”

“Not that well.” He ran a hand absently over Eve’s shoulder as he moved closer to the board. “Surface, socially, charitable foundation events sort of knowing. He’s intense without being preachy, and she’s dedicated without being tiresome. And they both put their time and effort into their particular cause.”

“Eton Billingsly.”

“Git,” Roarke said, using his childhood slang in insult.

“Maybe you can elaborate on that later, but right now I have to—” She broke off, answered her ’link.

“Dallas.”

“I’ve got the sketch, Lieutenant,” Yancy told her. “I think you’re going to want to see it.”

“On my way.”

She clicked off, rose.

“Why not have it sent to your comp?”

“Because he’s going to want to explain it to me.” She thought of the description. “You can tag along.”

“Why not, since it’s unlikely I can talk you into a late lunch or early dinner.” He flipped open the bakery box, helped himself to a cookie. “This will have to do. I haven’t had time to monitor the police reports,” he added as they walked. “Tell me about the case.”

She did as they used the glides to get to Yancy’s level.

“A strong Whitwood-Rosenthal connection,” he commented. “As I said, I don’t know them well, but I can’t see them involved in that. Unfortunately, I can’t see Billingsly involved either. Certainly he wouldn’t stoop to getting his hands dirty.”

“People who work with addicts, day in, day out, sometimes end up using themselves. Maybe one, or more than one of them, gets in too deep. Newly recoverings can be like converts. Fervent. One of them finds out, threatens to spill it. Reputation’s ruined, the Center blackened, blah, blah.

“Whoever did it had some medical training,” she added. “Morris confirms the amputations weren’t the work of an amateur.”

“Any number of people at the Center and Get Straight would have medical training.”

“Yeah, and I’m going to look at all of them.”

She moved through Yancy's division, straight to the glass cube where she saw him and a woman in her early thirties with a baby on her lap.

Yancy gave Eve a nod.

"Cynthia, this is Lieutenant Dallas. LT, Cynthia Kopel—and Lilian."

"Thanks for coming in Ms. Kopel."

"I'm happy to. I only wish I'd contacted the police last night, when I saw him. But I just thought it was some crazy. I didn't know about those people until Officer Slovic knocked on the door today."

As she spoke, the baby sucked heroically on one of the plugs parents used to keep babies from screaming—as far as Eve knew.

"We appreciate your cooperation and information. Can I see the sketch?"

Yancy exchanged a look with the witness, and Cynthia sighed. "It's what I saw. I know how it looks, but it's what I saw."

Eve held out a hand for the printout. And when Yancy gave it to her, looked at the face of a monster.

FIVE



The crooked jaw accented a twisted mouth with teeth long, sharp, and prominent. A thin nose hooked over it. The eyes bulged and gleamed red against skin of pale, sickly green. Hair fell in oily twists over a wide forehead, over ears with a defined point, nearly to the shoulders of a swirled black cape.

“I know how it looks,” Cynthia repeated, bouncing the baby on her knee either out of nerves or habit. “I know I sound like a nutcase, but I’m not. I got a good look because he was dancing around in the streetlight, like it was a spotlight on a stage. Just weird. Well, I thought—after it scared the hell out of me for a second—just some weird guy. But then when the police came and said those three people had been murdered right across the street . . .”

“Maybe he dressed up for it,” Eve considered. “Theatrics.”

“I know he was creepy. And that laugh.” Cynthia shuddered. “It was this maniacal laugh, but low and deep—and kind of raw. Like he had something stuck in his throat. After he stuffed something in the recycler, he bent over, his hands on his knees, laughing and laughing. I started to go wake up Reed—Lilian’s daddy—but then he—this guy—left. He went up the street—spinning around so the cape he was wearing twirled.”

She let out a sigh. “You see all kinds of strange stuff and people in the city, and half the time you barely notice or get a kick out of it, you know? But this was . . . Well, it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.”

“When you see something like this in the middle of the night outside your window, it would spook you,” Eve commented.

The tension in Cynthia’s face eased. “I didn’t think anyone would believe me. I felt stupid, but then those three people, I had to report it

once I knew. However he looked, how could he be laughing and dancing around after killing them? He is a monster.” She drew the baby closer. “On the inside, he’s exactly how he looked. Evil.”

“I know how it looks, too,” Yancy said after he’d walked Cynthia out. “But she was solid, Dallas.”

“Yeah, I got that. I don’t think we’ll be issuing a BOLO on this face at this time, but she saw what she saw. The attitude fits—the laughing, dancing around, the theatrics. There was definite glee in the killings. So he dresses up for it, adds some punch.” She frowned over the sketch. “He strangled Darnell face-to-face. Is this what he wanted her to see? Adds more fear, but it’s not as personal if she’s seeing this mask, this disguise, and not him.”

“Are you certain she knew him?” Roarke asked.

“Oh yeah. They knew each other. He knew all of them. Ear, eyes, tongue. What did they hear, see? What was he afraid they’d say? So . . . send me the file copy,” she said to Yancy. “We’ll start checking costume shops, theaters.”

“If it’s makeup,” Yancy told her, “he’s a pro *and* an expert. If it’s a mask of some kind, it’s damn good, so it’d cost large.”

“Yeah. And that should help. Nice job, Yancy.”

“Here to serve. Strangest sketch I’ve ever done, and I’ve done some strange.”

“Have you considered a combination?” Roarke asked as they walked back. “That he has some sort of deformity and played it up. The jaw—if your witness has it right—it looks severely dislocated.”

“I’m going to be working that angle, but nobody I’ve interviewed so far has any kind of facial deformity. You can’t hide something like that. If it’s a medical condition . . . I’m waiting for Louise to tag me back. Maybe she’d have some ideas on that. Or Mira. I need to walk this through with Mira.”

When they stepped back into the bullpen, Peabody hailed her. “Not much to add from Slice or the twenty-four/seven or the diner. I’m writing it up. Hey, Roarke. Lucky I brought back a personal pie. Maybe Dallas will share with you.”

Eve picked up the takeout, passed it to Roarke. “Maybe she will. Did you see anybody like this?” She offered Peabody the sketch.

“Whoa. Seriously?”

“Yancy thinks the wit’s solid, and as I talked to her myself, I agree.”

“Part demon, part monster, part human. He’s like a mutant.”

“He’s like somebody in costume,” Eve corrected. “Start running down this look. Theaters, costume outlets. See if you can find anything that fits.” She started to dig out money for the pizza.

“You got the last one,” Peabody told her.

“I probably did. And let’s see if we can find anyone connected to the center or Get Straight who’s involved in theater or theatrical makeup. Costume parties,” she added. “Places like the Center have fund-raisers like that, right? Where they make people dress up like idiots, then squeeze them for donations.”

“I doubt they think of it in quite those terms,” Roarke considered. “But, yes.”

“We’ll look at that. If you get anything close to a hit,” she told Peabody, “let me know.”

She went back in her office with Roarke. “Go ahead,” she said, gesturing at the take-out box. “I want to try to get a meet with Mira.”

She sat and began chipping away at the scales of the dragon at Mira’s gates. “Ten minutes,” Eve insisted. “I’ve got three DBs.”

“And Dr. Mira has a full schedule today.”

“Ten minutes,” Eve said again. “For this.” She angled so her link captured the murder board.

“In thirty minutes,” the admin told her. “Don’t be late.”

“I won’t.”

Sampling the pizza, Roarke wandered over to her board. “You know, you could contact Mira directly.”

“Yeah, but it’s not right. Channels are channels for a reason, even when they’re annoying.”

“I suppose. You’ve discounted this being done by someone from their past? An addict, a dealer.”

“Not discounted.” She tried the pizza herself. “But the probability’s low any of them knew someone back then who had the skill to surgically remove body parts. I think he was on something when he did—the frenzy, the strength and endurance, then laughing and dancing. So even flying he had skill, a steady hand. Add to it,

Darnell's been out of that for nearly four months and wouldn't be tough to track down. If she'd known something that threatened someone with this skill, wouldn't he have dealt with her before? For four months she's been immersed in the Center and the program. It's somebody attached to that."

"I can't fault your logic. I rarely can."

Her link signaled. "Dallas."

"Dallas, I was in surgery." Louise, still in scrubs, mask dangling, came on screen. "I just heard. I can't quite believe it."

"You knew them."

"Yes. I'm actually Jen Darnell's physician of record. I do her monthly exams. Did," she corrected. "I'd see her often when I did a rotation at either the Center or Get Straight. And Coby, too, in the last few months. I met Wil recently. He hasn't been in the program as long."

"How well do you know Rosenthal and Arianna Whitwood?"

"Very well. They were in Haiti helping to set up a new clinic when Charles and I got married or they'd have been at the wedding."

"Eton Billingsly."

Louise's pretty face pruned. "He's an excellent therapist and a complete jerk."

"I need to talk to you about this."

"I've got another surgery scheduled. It's minor, but they're already prepping the patient."

"Have her and Charles meet us for drinks," Roarke suggested and got a blank look from Eve.

"Here." He simply nudged her aside. "Hello, Louise."

"Roarke. I didn't realize you were there."

"Why don't you and Charles meet us for drinks after work? You and Eve can discuss what needs to be discussed."

"Yes, I think that would work."

While Roarke set it up, Eve turned back to her board. She liked Louise and Charles, but wasn't sure how she felt about her interview with a source turning into a social hour.

What the hell.

“Find somewhere to meet up near the crime scene,” Eve said, and gave Roarke the address. “I want to go back over it.”

“There.” Roarke turned away from the 'link when he'd finished. “Now you can talk to Louise, revisit your crime scene, and have a little time with friends. Interlude on West Eleventh, between Sixth and Seventh. At five, or as close as you can make it.”

He skimmed a fingertip down the dent in her chin. “It's efficient.”

“I guess it is.”

“I've got a meeting shortly, so I'll see you there.” Leaning down, he brushed his lips over hers. “Take care of my cop,” he told her, then left.

It should have weirded her out, Eve mused, sharing pizza and good-bye kisses, making dates for drinks in her office. It did, she admitted, but not as much as expected. Her gaze landed on the bakery box, narrowed.

She said, “Hmmm,” and, picking it up, walked out. She ignored the noses that came up sniffing as she passed through the bullpen, and caught a glide to Mira's office.

The admin, busy on her comp, glanced up with a stern frown. “You're early.”

“Then I'm not late.” Eve set the box on the desk. “Thanks for clearing time for me.”

Stern turned suspicious as the woman lifted the lid of the box a fraction, then more as she peered in. “Cookies? You brought me cookies?”

“They're good. I had one. Is she free now?”

Still eyeing Eve, she tapped her earpiece. “Lieutenant Dallas is here. Of course. You can go right in.”

“Thanks.”

“Are these a thank-you or a bribe?” the admin asked as Eve moved to the door.

“They're chocolate chip.” Pleased with herself, Eve stepped into the calm of Mira's office.

Mira smiled from behind her desk. Maybe it was a shrink thing, Eve considered, thinking of Arianna. The warm looks, the pretty, feminine suits, perfect blend of color and jewelry.

“I know you don’t have much time.”

“Enough, I hope. Have a seat.” As Eve took one of Mira’s blue scoop chairs, Mira came around the desk, took the one facing. “I looked over the data, the crime-scene photos. My first question is, how sure are you there’s only one killer?”

“Very. We have a wit who saw him at the rear of the building, where he broke in. She worked with Detective Yancy.” Eve took out the sketch, offered it.

“Well.” In her placid way, Mira studied the sketch. “Now I have to ask, how good is your witness?”

“Again, I have to say very. I figure he geared himself up for it, added the drama. The wit says he danced in the streetlight, laughed his ugly ass off. My sense of the scene is frenzied glee. He had to be on something because killing three people that dead takes endurance.”

“I agree.” Mira tucked a lock of sable-colored hair behind her ear as she continued to study the sketch. “Theatrical, confident, organized. He knew where to break in, came prepared, and was able to kill, with extreme violence, three people, alone, and in a relatively short amount of time. Endurance, yes, and rage.”

She shifted, met Eve’s eyes with her own quiet blue ones. “I agree with your assessment that he has some sort of medical training. The amputations were skillfully done. I believe he’ll keep these trophies, these symbols. His victims are no longer able to see, hear, or speak of him.”

“But they had, prior to their deaths.”

“Almost certainly. They knew each other. Dancing, laughing, so yes, he enjoyed himself. He can celebrate—and in the light, perhaps hoping he’d be seen. Spotlighting after his success.

“He envied their friendship,” Mira continued. “Their bond, and their happiness. He won’t make friends easily, won’t feel that bond. He most likely lives alone, feels underappreciated at his work. He’s skilled. The elaborate disguise tells me he wants to be noticed, and doesn’t feel he is, not enough. Nothing is enough. He wants what others have—friends, family, community—and at the same time feels superior to them. He’s better than they are. ‘Take out the trash,’ he

wrote, in their blood. That's what he made them. And it amused him. He's a series of contradictions, Eve. Two people—perhaps more—in one. You have a violent sociopath under the influence of a strong illegal. He's both controlled and out of control, canny and reckless. He has a god complex battling with low self-esteem, a bitter envy, and has found satisfaction and personal delight in killing.”

“He'll do it again.”

“As soon as he can.”

“This face. Under the makeup or the mask, whatever it is, could he have a deformity? The jaw's extreme.”

“Yes, I see that, but a deformity such as this? He'd be in constant pain. It would be all but impossible for him to eat. His speech would be garbled. As someone with medical training, and connections, he would certainly have had this repaired.”

“A recent injury, accident?”

“Possibly,” Mira considered. “But again, I can't think of any reason it wouldn't be treated. If, for some reason, he refused to have it treated and is dosing himself with painkillers and other drugs, it might explain the frenzy, the duality in his profile. But why would anyone endure the pain of this, the social stigma? And it contradicts, again, his confidence, his need to be seen as superior.”

“It must be faked. Peabody's running down costume shops, theaters.” Eve paused a moment, changed angles. “Do you know Justin Rosenthal and Arianna Whitwood?”

“Yes. Arianna's an excellent therapist. A bright, compassionate woman. She and her parents have done a great deal, not only in research and application on addictions and rehabilitation, but they built their Center with the purpose of treating the whole person. Physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. They turned a personal tragedy into a great gift.”

“And Rosenthal?”

“Very skilled, remarkably gifted. More intense than Arianna, I'd say. It seems to me—though I don't see or socialize with them often—she's softened that intensity. Before Arianna, he was much more of a loner, and rarely stepped away from his work. Not unlike someone else,” Mira said with a smile. “With her, he remains skilled, gifted,

dedicated to his work, but he's happier. And not capable of murdering three people like this."

"Everyone's capable," Eve stated.

"Yes, you're right. All of us are capable under certain circumstances of extreme and violent behavior. We control it, channel it—in some cases medicate it. Justin's a doctor, dedicated to healing, a scientist and man of reason. The person who did this rejects reason and humanity. He's given himself a monster's face. Humanity means little to him."

"Okay. How about Eton Billingsly?"

"A skilled therapist, and an enormous pain in the ass."

Eve had to grin. "I don't think I've ever heard you call anybody a pain in the ass."

"I don't like him so it's hard to be objective. He's a pompous snob who sees himself as perfect. He's rude, annoying, and full of himself."

"A god complex?"

Mira's eyebrows rose. "Yes, I'd say. You wonder if he's capable. I don't know him well enough. He's skilled—he has an MD, and would have done some time with a scalpel before he focused on his specialty."

"Hypno-oodoo."

Mira let out a quick, exasperated laugh. "I know you're suspicious of the technique, but it's valid, and can be very effective. Billingsly certainly wants to be noticed and rewarded and praised. But . . ."

She studied the sketch again. "It's very difficult for me to envision a man like him deliberately making himself hideous. He's also vain."

"Something to think about, though. I appreciate the time."

"I'm happy to give it. Tell me how you are."

"I'm fine."

"You haven't been back long. How's your arm?"

Eve started to dismiss it, then settled on the truth. "A little sore in the morning, and by the end of the day. Mostly good, though."

"That's to be expected with that kind of injury. Nightmares?"

"No. Maybe just being back in New York's enough. At least right now. Isaac McQueen's back in a cage where he belongs. That

doesn't suck. I'm not thinking about my mother, what happened there," she said before Mira could ask. "Not yet. It's done, and right now I'm okay with it."

"When and if it's not, you'll talk to me?"

"I know I can. That's a pretty big start, right?"

"Yes, it is."

Eve got up, started for the door. "Is she like you?" she asked. "Arianna Whitwood?"

"Like me?"

"That's the sense I got from her. She made me think of you. Not just because she's an attractive female shrink. It was . . . I don't know, a sense. If she is like you, then she's got no part in this. And thinking that, I hope to hell Justin Rosenthal doesn't, because you believe she loves him. I hope he's clear."

"So do I."

"I'll let you know," Eve said, and left.

SIX



Eve glanced over at Peabody as she walked back into the bullpen, got a shake of the head.

So no luck, yet, on masks or makeup. She went into her office, got coffee, then sat at her desk, put her boots up, and studied the board.

Everybody liked Rosenthal; nobody liked Billingsly. Instinct dictated a push on Billingsly—and she intended to listen. But she'd give a little push on the good doctor as well.

Arianna Whitwood. Beautiful, rich, smart, dedicated, caring. The good daughter, and again, the good doctor.

Didn't that make an interesting triangle? Billingsly wanted her—and didn't bother to (ha-ha) disguise it. Rosenthal had her.

And what did that have to do with the three vics?

They were Arianna's. Her patients, her investment, her success—at least so far. Rosenthal's, too.

Maybe Arianna had given them too much time, attention, made too big an investment. A man could resent that. She sometimes wondered why Roarke didn't resent all the time, the attention, the investment she put into the job.

But there weren't a lot of Roarkes in the world.

Maybe the three vics—or any one of them—overheard Arianna and the good doctor going at it over her work, that time and attention again. Hey, bitch, what about *me*? Shouldn't I be the center of your world? Maybe he'd lost his temper. Couldn't have the gossip mills grinding that one.

And no, just not enough for that kind of slaughter.

Maybe the vics, or one of them, overheard the two doctors-in-love arguing because Rosenthal was sampling product. Experimenting. That's what you did in a lab. You experimented. Maybe he'd

developed a problem of his own during those experiments. Now that, combined with being found out, could lead to bloody, vicious murder. Could be Arianna didn't know. Can't have her find out he's become what he's supposed to cure.

That could play.

Or, onto Billingsly. He pushed himself on his beautiful associate, and again one or all of them saw the incident. Possible.

Or the annoying doctor fooled around with a patient, maybe—hmm—maybe tried a move on Darnell. Rejected, humiliated, worried she'd tell Arianna. He'd lose any chance with the woman he wanted, and his license to practice.

That could play, too.

But none of it played very well. Maybe she just needed to fine-tune a little.

For now, she read over Peabody's notes on her interviews at Slice and the twenty-four/seven, the diner hangout. Nothing buzzing there, Eve thought, but continued as Peabody had started or completed a number of deeper runs on the players in those arenas.

Rising, Eve got another cup of coffee, then started deeper runs of her own on Rosenthal, Billingsly, Arianna, Marti Frank, Ken Dickerson, and Pachai Gupta.

Gupta came from some wealth, and an upper-class social strata, and she considered the fact that his parents, also doctors, had worked with Rosenthal years before.

Now Gupta had the plum position of the renowned doctor's lab assistant on a major project. Couldn't something like that make a career?

How would Gupta's upper-class parents feel about him pining for a recovering addict? Possibly he wanted to keep that on the down low, and possibly Darnell wanted to go public.

Possibly.

Both Marti Frank and Ken Dickerson came from the ordinary, and in Dickerson's case the rough, with his dead addict of an abusive father. Both had excelled in school, she noted. Frank top of her class in college—on a full scholarship. Dickerson third—accelerated path.

He'd graduated high school at sixteen, college—again on scholarships—at nineteen, and straight into medical school.

And they were both still on scholarships, she noted, in the intern program at the Center.

She brought the lab setup back into her head. Working together on the project, she mused, but they'd seemed very separate, hadn't they? With Rosenthal center. Neither Dickerson nor Frank had gone to Gupta when he'd broken down.

So not friends—not especially.

Competitors? Didn't you have to have a competitive streak to come in first in your class, or in the top tier with acceleration?

And was it interesting, she wondered, or frustrating to learn that all six of them had sufficient medical training to have performed the amputations?

She'd eliminate the females, except one of them might have acted in collusion. Dead low on the list, she decided, but it felt too soon to eliminate.

All of them knew the vics' location. None of them had alibis for the time in question. All of them knew and/or interacted with the vics. All of them had access to drugs and could easily put their hands on the protective gear.

She picked her way through the data on each suspect, added to her notes, her board. When the sweepers' initial report came through, she pounced. More paint flakes, some black fibers from the window casing, some hairs—no roots. All sent to the lab.

None of the victims' 'links had been found on scene. So he'd taken them. Taken the 'links, she mused, but not the money. Fibers on the windowsill, footprints in blood. So he'd only sealed his hands, or worn gloves.

And walking through the blood, that was just stupid. Amateur hour. If they found the shoes, they had him.

First kill, she thought. She'd make book this had been his debut.

Time to circle back.

She walked out to Peabody. "I'm going back to the scene."

"Okay. I'm not getting anywhere anyway."

“No, you keep at it. I’m going to talk to Louise after, then work from home.”

“I’m serious about getting nowhere.” Peabody huffed out a breath, shoved at her hair. “I’ve talked to the top costume shops—and some costume and theatrical makeup designers in the city. What I get is, sure the skin color’s no problem; hair, no big; nose, teeth, you bet. But the eyes? Every one of them tells me if they used apparatus like that—to make them bulge out, or appear to, and turn that red—it would hamper vision. Same with the jaw.”

“It was dark, even with the streetlight. Middle of the night. Maybe the wit exaggerated some.”

“Maybe. A couple of the people I talked to were all juiced up about it, trying to figure out how to make it work. I’ve got them promising to experiment, see what they can do. But nobody’s got anything like this. Not in any sort of mask, or doable with makeup and prosthetics. Nothing that would allow the person wearing it to see clearly, speak, or laugh the way the wit described.”

“Keep at it anyway, because it is doable, as it was done.”

“What if he’s some kind of freak?”

“Peabody.”

“I didn’t say demon or monster. Like a circus freak, you know? A contortionist or a freak show type. He looks like this—or something like this and he just pumped it up.”

“Circus. That’s an angle. I’ll work that at home. Not bad, Peabody.”

“You’d kick my ass if I said monster.”

“Keep that in mind if you become tempted,” Eve warned, then headed out.

She thought of makeup, freaks, altered appearances as she drove—and had a brainstorm. “Contact Mavis Freestone, pocket ’link.”
Contact initiated.

“Hey, Dallas!” Mavis’s pretty, happy face filled the dash screen.
“Say hi to Dallas, Bellorama.”

Instantly, the baby’s chubby, grinning face replaced her mother’s.
“Das!” she cried with absolute joy, and pressed her wet lips to the

screen of the pocket 'link.

“Yeah, hi, kid. Kiss, kiss.”

“Slooch!”

“Right. Smooch.”

“Make the sound, Dallas,” Mavis said offscreen.

Eve rolled her eyes, but complied with a kissing sound. Bella squealed with yet more delight.

“Playtime.” There was some shifting, giggling, then Mavis came back on behind the film of Bella’s slobber. “Why didn’t you tell me you were going to Dallas?” Mavis demanded.

“I didn’t have time. It was—”

“We’re going to chit some serious chat about this.”

“Okay.” With Mavis, it would be okay. “But later. I need you to—can you wipe your screen off? You look like you’ve been licked by a Saint Bernard.”

“Oh, sorry. So what’s the up?” Mavis asked as she whipped out a cloth and polished the screen.

“I’m going to send you a sketch, and I need you to get in touch with Trina, show it to her.”

“Why don’t you just send it to her?”

“Because I’m busy.”

Mavis angled her head. Her hair, a curling mass of gold-streaked red today, bounced. “Coward.”

“I’m a busy coward. I don’t want her giving me grief because I didn’t rub some shit on my face, or in my hair. Or listen to her tell me I need my hair cut or whatever. I’ve got something hot, and she might be able to help.”

“Give me the goods. So I finished my gig on the vid,” she said as Eve ordered the sketch accessed and sent.

“What vid?”

“Nadine’s vid—your vid. *The Ilove Agenda*. It’s mag to the nth they wanted me to play myself. And the chick playing you? Man, they made her a ringer. I got wigged when I—Holy shit on a flaming stick!”

“Shit,” Bella echoed happily in the background.

“Oh hell—hello,” Mavis muttered. “I swore in front of the baby. But holy you know what, this is too totally scary. I’m scheduling my nightmare right now.”

“Sorry. I need to know what it takes to make somebody look like this.”

“A pact with Satan?”

“With makeup and prosthetics, and that stuff. Trina knows that crap.”

“I’ll be passing it on—and getting it off my ’link just in case it has the power to materialize.”

“Come on. Other angle. You did some carny work.”

“Back in the day, sure. Always plenty of marks at a carny.”

“Ever see anything like this? Freak show—wise.”

“I saw plenty of mega weird, but nothing like this. You wouldn’t ask unless it—he—whatever—killed somebody. He looks like he’s born to kill. Jes—jeeppers,” she corrected. “I got bumps of the goose all over. I’ll tag Trina now, so I don’t have to wig alone.”

“Thanks. Let me know.”

Eve pulled over at the curb in front of the crime scene.

She unsealed the door, used her master. And stood inside, left the lights off. Not as dark as it would’ve been, she thought. But there was a streetlight, enough for some backwash.

Still, he’d had to know which mattress each vic slept on. He’d moved with purpose, with a plan despite the ferocity.

She moved straight through to the back, opened the window, climbed out.

And yeah, the building across the street had a good view of the window, the sidewalk, the recycler. Eve imagined the killer dancing and spinning in the spot of the streetlight, laughing.

Spinning and dancing up the street, Cynthia had said. So he didn’t care about being seen. A vehicle nearby? Or a hole to crawl into. His own place?

If he’d taken a cab, the subway, a bus? Even in New York somebody would’ve reported it. All of the lab rats lived within blocks. Both of the doctors and Arianna had vehicles.

Eve turned back to the window. He jimmyes it, she thought—quiet now. No dancing and laughing, not yet. Climbs in.

She followed the steps, easing in, sliding down to her feet—left fibers behind. Opens the satchel for the protective coat.

Some boxes in here, she noted, and tidy piles of old materials—but he doesn't bump into them. He's been here before. And he walks right into the front.

As she did, the door started to open.

She had her weapon out, trained. Then hissed when Roarke stepped in.

“Damn it.”

“I'm the one with a stunner aimed at me. I get to say, 'Damn it.' ”

She shoved it back in the holster. “You're not supposed to pick the lock on a crime scene.”

“How else would I get in? Your vehicle's outside, and the seal's broken. I knocked like a good civilian, but you didn't answer.”

“I was out the back window.”

“Naturally.” He stood where he was, looking around. “What an unholy mess. The crime-scene records never have quite the same impact.”

Since he was here, she'd use him.

“He jimmyed the window, rear, quietly stepped around the stuff back there—in the dark or near dark. Not much would come through the window—it's grilled—from the streetlight. But he doesn't wake them.”

“He'd been in here, and back there, before.”

“Yeah. Knew just how to navigate, and knew where each one slept. Leads with the bat.” She swung. “Cracks Vix across the side of the head where he lay. He's the lucky one. I doubt he ever woke up. Changes to the knife.” She mimed switching hands. “Puts it into Bickford's chest—two blows, and another in the gut. Fast. Bickford might've made some sound, tried to call out, but his lung's punctured. Now it's time for Darnell.”

“She'd have woken, don't you think?”

“Bash, slice, movement. I think she woke up before he'd finished with Bickford. Got up, either tried to run or tried to fight. He uses the

bat, breaks her kneecaps. Maybe she screamed—nobody heard—or maybe she just passed out or went into shock. But he went back to Vix, beat him into jelly. Blood's flying everywhere, bones snapping, shattering. He put the protective gear on in the back room, but blood's on his face. It feels warm, tastes hot. He loves it. He wants more, so he goes back to Bickford with the knife and stabs and hacks. Over eighty times."

Eve shifted. "She tried to drag herself away. See, the blood's smeared on the floor there from her knees, from her trying to pull herself away. But she's in terrible pain, in shock, in hysterics. He's laughing now because this is so much fun. Just better than he'd ever imagined. And now it's her turn."

She could see it, all but smell the blood.

"He says her name. I bet he said her name, and his. He wanted her to know him. It's face-to-face, it's his hands on her throat so he can feel her pulse going wild, then slowing, slowing, slowing while her eyes bulge and her body beats itself against the floor. While that pulse stops, and her eyes fix, and her body goes limp."

"Christ Jesus, Eve."

"That's how it happened." Inside she was as cold as the images fixed in her head. "That's close, anyway. He's not done. It's too funny and thrilling. He doesn't use the knife. He takes a scalpel out of his satchel because he takes pride in the work. Now he makes a point. An ear, an eye, her tongue. They're a trio, aren't they, like the monkeys. Hear no, see no, speak no."

"Evil," Roarke finished. "Because he is. What you've just described is evil."

"Maybe, maybe even to him. But he likes it. Likes the taste of evil, the smell of it. He just can't get enough, so he breaks the place up, what little they had. Destroys it. He stages them against the wall. Then he uses their blood to leave us a message."

Roarke studied the wall. "It took time to do that. His letters so carefully formed. Not dashed off, but clearly printed. He gave it some thought."

"He's so clever, a real joker. Dr. Chaos. I bet he slapped his knees over it."

She paused a minute. “Arianna said something. How they’d found their quiet. Especially Darnell. That addiction steals the quiet. That’s what he brought back. The unquiet. The chaos. So that’s the name he picked.”

She walked away, into the back. “He takes off the protective gear. Turns it inside out to keep the blood off his clothes, and he climbs back out, shuts the window. He laughs, and he dances, just so full of the fun of it he can’t contain it. He stuffs the gear in the recycler, properly disposing of it like he tells us to do with the bodies. A little clue, so we’ll be sure to find it. And that has him doubled over with laughter. Then he dances away, high on the unquiet. Dr. Chaos had the time of his life.”

“Did you learn any more from this re-creation?”

“Maybe. Yeah.”

“Then you can tell me about it over the drink I find I want very much right now.”

SEVEN



Eve looked around the bar as they went in. Quiet and cozy, with a neighborhood feel, she observed. A couple of guys sat at the bar, deep in their brews and conversation. She bet they were regulars, bet the seats of the stools all but carried the imprint of their asses.

The bartender, bright, young, female, joined in with them, idly swiping the bar with a rag as she laughed at something they said. A couple sat at a table—had a first-date, drink-afterwork-to-see-how-it-goes look about them. Another four had a booth, scarfing down bar chips while they held one of those quick, coded conversations of intimate friends.

Roarke took a booth, smiled at her over the table. “Satisfied?”

“About what?”

“That you won’t have to arrest anyone in here.”

She smiled back. “You never know.”

She opted for a beer when the waitress came over, and Roarke held up two fingers. “Now, as we’re a bit early, tell me what you learned back there.”

“It was the girl. It was Jen. She was the primary motive. He wanted her to see what he did, how he killed the others, took away what mattered most to her in the cruelest way. She was the easiest kill of the three, but he saved her for last because she was the most important. Then he killed her with his hands, so she could see his face and he could see hers. The others didn’t matter as much, except for their connection to her. He wanted her, and she said no—or worse, didn’t see him as a man.”

“He didn’t rape her. I looked at your board.”

“It had gone past sex or rape as power and control, and he got off on the killing. But taking the body parts—they’d seen or heard

something he couldn't afford them to talk about. Whatever it was, it was recent."

She waited until the waitress served the beers. "See that group over there." She lifted her chin toward the booth of four. "Two guys, two girls. But they're not couples."

"Aren't they?" Roarke said, enjoying her.

"Look at the body language. They're tight, but it's not sexual. Pals. And they never run out of conversation. Blah, blah, blah. They talk all the time, hang all the time. When they're not together, they tag each other. He took their 'links because he got that, he knew they connected that way when they weren't together, and had to conclude they'd talked about whatever they'd seen or heard via 'link."

"All right."

"He worked alone. He doesn't connect, he doesn't have that closeness with anyone. So that bumps the two female suspects down the list for me. It wasn't Arianna Whitwood or Marti Frank. They may know something, may not know they know it, but this one had to have all the fun for himself. He's smug, and a show-off, which is why I like Billingsly just on principle."

"Arianna said no to him," Roarke pointed out.

"But he still believes he can get her. She's also on his level. How humiliating would it be for a man like that to want an addict, a squatter, a *nothing*, and be rejected by her?"

"That's a great deal for a second look at the crime scene."

"But not enough. Here's Louise and Charles."

Roarke stood, greeting Louise with a kiss, Charles with a handshake.

As Charles, former licensed companion turned sex therapist, slid in beside his wife, he grinned at Eve. "How's it going, Lieutenant Sugar?"

"I've got three bodies and a short list of suspects. It could be worse. Sorry," she said to Louise. "Insensitive."

"No. We both deal with death all too often, but at least I come into it when there's still a chance."

"You look tired," Roarke commented.

"Long day. Good day," she added, "as I didn't deal with death."

Both she and Charles ordered a glass of the house white.

“What can I tell you about your short list of suspects?”

Eve drew out the sketch, laid it on the table. Puzzled, Louise leaned closer. “We’ve still got a month till Halloween.”

“This is who the witness saw outside the crime scene.”

“It’s a hell of a disguise,” Charles commented. “Why would anyone want to dress up, be that noticeable when doing murder?”

“Maybe it added to the thrill. We’re not having any luck on replicating the disguise, and Mira says it’s unlikely he could tolerate the jaw—broken or dislocated that way.”

“Now you have two doctors telling you that. This is extreme.”

Louise tapped a finger, tipped in pearly pale pink, on the sketch.

“There would be airway blockage, difficulty breathing, speaking, eating. There should be considerable swelling, but I don’t see any in this sketch. The pain would be enormous. And the eyes certainly aren’t natural. Not just the color. Hyperthyroidism can cause the eyes to bulge, but I’ve never seen anything that severe. And the skin? I’d diagnose multiple organ failure at worst, anemia at best. He had to fake all this.”

“Hey, I saw that guy.” The waitress paused as she served the wine.

“When?” Eve demanded. “Where?”

“Last night. Well, this morning. You don’t forget a face like that,” she added with a laugh.

“Exactly what time? Exactly where?” Eve drew out her badge, laid it next to the sketch.

“Oh. I guess he wasn’t just a weirdo. I had the late shift last night, so I didn’t leave until after two. I live on Jane, right off Greenwich Street. I did some yoga when I got home. It relaxes me. I don’t know exactly, but it was probably about three fifteen, three thirty or thereabouts, when I finished. I heard this weird laughing, and went to the window. I had it open, and I saw this dude here sort of skipping down the sidewalk across the street. You see all kinds, you know, so I didn’t think anything of it. I saw him jump up, swing on the pole of the streetlight, waving this black bag. I just thought, weirdo, shut the window, and went to bed.”

“Which way was he going?”

“East, toward Eighth, it looked like. What’d he do?”

“Enough so if you see him again, contact the police.” She hitched up a hip, dug out a card. “Contact me.”

“Sure. Wow, a lieutenant. Homicide. Wow. He killed somebody?”

“Yeah. I’d like your name and address.”

“Sure. Sure.” Once she’d given it, the waitress hurried away.

“You scared the hell out of her,” Charles said.

“She’d be smart not to walk home alone, and to keep her windows closed.” She put the sketch away, sipped at her beer. “Do you know any of Rosenthal’s lab people?” she asked Louise.

“No.”

“Okay, we’ll set them aside for now. Did Rosenthal ever move on you?”

“No! He was with Arianna when we met, then I was with Charles not long after. He’s in love with Ari, and added to that, his work doesn’t give him a lot of time for moving on other women.”

“It doesn’t take that much time. She’s the one backing his research and work—or the Group is. If she cut him loose, it’d be a big loss.”

“She’s in love with him, and they’re bonded over the work,” Louise began. “If something went wrong between them, it would be a blow for both of them, personally and professionally.”

“But scientists are easier to find than backers like the Whitwood Group. If his work’s important to him.”

“Essential, I’d say.”

“Then he’d do a lot to protect it.”

“Not this, Dallas. Never this. Not Justin.”

“I’m going on the theory the three victims knew something about the killer. Something he killed to protect. Has Justin ever sampled product?”

“Absolutely not.”

Okay, Eve thought, as long as Louise spoke in absolutes they wouldn’t get anywhere on Rosenthal.

“How about Billingsly?”

“I can’t say. I’d certainly doubt it, but I don’t know him well.” Louise smiled a little over her wine. “That’s a deliberate choice.”

“He put moves on you.”

“He puts them on every female he finds attractive or believes can enhance his career. But Ari’s the gold ring.”

“How’d he react when you brushed him off?”

“Like it was my loss. He has a temper, but I’ve never seen anything to indicate he’s capable of murder or real violence. He’s rude and demanding, but from what I’ve heard, very good in therapy.”

“And if Arianna cut him off—from the Center?”

“He has money of his own, and should have a lot of contacts. But it would be humiliating, and he wouldn’t take it well. That’s just opinion, Dallas. I have as little to do with him as possible.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Not much help.”

“You confirmed and elaborated on Mira’s opinion on the killer’s face. You gave me a few more details on two of my suspects, and meeting you here gave me another wit who tells me the killer went up to Jane before heading toward Eighth. That’s pretty good over one drink.”

When they left, Roarke took her hand as she walked. “You did very well, managing nearly a half an hour on non-work-related topics after your interview with Louise.”

“I can talk about other stuff.”

“You can, yes, but I know it’s not easy when you’re steeped in a case.”

“The bar waitress was a stroke of luck. Heading toward Eighth. If it’s either of the doctors, he’s probably got a vehicle near there. If it’s Dickerson, he goes one crosstown block to home. Gupta, north on Eighth for a block and a half to home. Nobody at Slice or Get Straight lives in that direction—and they don’t fit anyway, but it’s another negative on that group.

“Where’s your car?” she asked when they reached the crime scene.

“I had it picked up so I could drive home with my adoring wife.”

“Good. You drive.” She took out her notebook, added the new information, new thoughts on the way home.

Roarke left her to it until she began to mutter.

“Is anybody really that good, the way everybody describes Rosenthal?”

“Some people have fewer shadows than others, fewer dark places. Others have more.”

“And illegals speak to those dark places, make more noise so they spread. Everyone on this list connects to illegals. Lost someone to them, works with them, lives with them. The killer’s a user—has to be. I don’t have enough on any of them to require a drug test. Yet. But if I asked each of them, and they’re clean, why wouldn’t they cooperate?”

“General principles,” he said as he drove through the gates of home. “But certainly worth a shot.”

“I’ll give it one tomorrow. Plus a scientist should be able to create an elaborate disguise.”

She chewed on it as they walked inside where Summerset and the cat waited in the foyer.

“A monumental day,” Summerset announced. “Home together, in a timely fashion, and unbloodied. Applause.”

“If he actually applauded, the bones in his skeletal hands would break and crumble to dust.”

Roarke just shook his head as Eve started upstairs. “The two of you really have to stop this love affair. I’m a jealous man. We’ll get dinner in the lieutenant’s office,” Roarke added to Summerset.

“I’m shocked beyond speech.”

“If only,” Eve muttered.

“But before.” Roarke took her hand again, turned her toward the bedroom. “Let’s deal with that arm.”

“It’s okay.”

“You’re starting to favor it.”

“It’s just a little sore.”

“Which means it’s time for some of the physical therapy and treatment. Don’t be such a baby.”

She jabbed him with a finger. “You just want to get my shirt off.”

“Always a bonus. Peel it off, Lieutenant.” To make her smile, he leered. “And take your time.”

So okay, it twinged a little when she took off her jacket, her weapon harness. Get it over with, she thought, and began the stretching exercises, working her range of motion as Roarke ditched his jacket and tie.

Her shoulder gave a couple of clicks as she stretched, punched out.

“It’s coming along.”

“So I see. Try to avoid actually punching someone for a few more days,” he suggested as he got the topical cream from a drawer. He rolled up his sleeves as he crossed to her, then started to unhook her trousers.

“I knew it. All you think about is getting in my pants.”

“With every breath I take. But for now, I just want a look at that hip. It was the worst of the cuts. Nearly healed,” he murmured, tracing a fingertip along the edges where McQueen’s knife had sliced. “Mira does good work.”

“We’ve both had worse.”

His eyes lifted to hers, held, and said a great deal. So she leaned into him a little, touched her lips to his.

“I’m okay.”

“Nearly. Lose the tank and sit down. I’ll finish you up.”

She did as he asked, thinking he needed the tending as much as, maybe more than, she. Then his hands—he had magic hands—smoothed the cream over the ache, and she closed her eyes.

“Feels good. Really good.”

“Mira credits your constitution, and your hard head, for the healing process. A couple more days, you’ll likely be good as new. Tell me if I hurt you.”

“You’re not.”

They hadn’t made love since she’d been hurt—and she realized she should have figured why he’d been so careful with her, hadn’t touched her that way, had avoiding being touched by her.

“You’re not,” she said again and, opening her eyes, turned to him. “You won’t.” And took his hand, laid it on her breast. “Feels good,” she repeated. “Really good.”

“I only want to give you time to heal. In every way.”

“I have it on good authority I have an excellent constitution. Let’s test it out.” Going with the instinct that told her they didn’t just need the physical intimacy, but the fun that could go along with it, she tossed her leg over his lap, straddled him. “Get it up, pal.”

Smoothing those magic hands down her sides, he smiled. “You’re very demanding.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” She took his mouth, gave it a nice little bite as she ground against him. “There you are,” she murmured.

“Well, you’ve left me no choice.”

“A cock’s always ready to crow.”

He laughed, wrapped his arms around her. “Crowing’s not what mine’s ready for.”

“Show me.” She went to work on his trousers.

Amused, aroused, he watched her. “In a bit of a hurry, are we?”

“I’ve got to use you and get back to work, so no dawdling.” Then she laid her hands on either side of his face. “Okay, maybe a little dawdling,” she said and brought her lips to his again.

“I’m okay.” She unbuttoned his shirt so she could press against him. Skin to skin, heart to heart. “I want you to touch me. I want you to be with me. I want you.”

He could drown in her, he thought, every minute of every day he could lose himself in what she was, what she gave him, what she took. Now, with her warm and eager against him, he could drown himself, lose himself, and set his worry for her aside.

She didn’t want him to be careful, but he would take care, of her injuries at least. He gave her the controls, took his pleasure from the rise of her passion, from the sprint of her heartbeat under his lips.

When she took him in, she laid her hands on his face again. Her eyes looked deep into his. “You’re holding back. Don’t. Don’t hold back.

So he gripped her hips, careful to avoid the healing wound. And drove her as she drove him. Over the edge of that drowning pool.

With her brow resting on his, she fought to get her breath back. If anything twinged or ached, she didn’t feel it. All she felt was peace.

“Did you really have business downtown today?”

“You’re my business.”

She lifted her head, looked at him again. “You have to stop worrying.”

“That’s never going to happen. But I will stop hovering, which I’ve been doing a bit of. I love you beyond the telling of it, Eve, and what you went through—”

“We. We went through it.”

“All right, that’s true enough. What we went through doesn’t heal as quickly as a cut or a bruise.”

“Working on it, though. Okay?”

“Yes.” He pressed his lips to her healing shoulder. “Yes.”

“Okay. Well, now that I’m done with you, I’m going back to work.”

He sat where he was a moment as she got up, pulled the tank back on. “I feel so used. I find I like it.”

She rolled her injured shoulder, nodded in satisfaction. “Always more where that came from, ace.”

EIGHT



In her office she set up a second murder board while the cat sat on her sleep chair and watched her. Through the adjoining door she heard Roarke talking on the 'link. Probably dealing with business he'd postponed during the hovering mode.

Better now, she decided. Both of them were better now. Not just the sex, but the understanding that came with it—or out of it. And the normalcy that went hand in hand.

"Nothing normal about that," she said as she studied the sketch. "Not a damn thing normal there."

She circled around to her desk, noticed that her message light was activated. She called up the message, and actually jolted when Trina's voice spiked into the room.

"Got the ugly bastard and the question. Could do the skin, hair, ears, nose, teeth, no prob. Could do the red eyes, but not so they look like red balloons coming out of the sockets. Couldn't do the jaw, not that crooked. The answer is I couldn't make anybody look like that, and I'm the best. You've got yourself a freakazoid, Dallas.

"You need a treatment—hair, face, body. The works. Mavis says she and Leonardo and Bella can come to your place for a visit on Saturday afternoon. I'll be with them, and bring my gear."

"Why," Roarke wondered, "do you look more horrified by that than by the face on your board?"

"She's coming. We have to stop her."

"Don't look at me. You could use a treatment."

"Hey." Though she was anything but vain, the careless comment gave her another jolt. "Insulting my hair, face, and body won't get you banged again anytime soon."

“You know very well I adore your hair, face, and body. You could use a massage, a relaxation treatment, and some downtime with good friends. In fact, so could I. I believe I’ll contact Trina and have her bring another operative. I’ll have a massage along with you.”

“Traitor.” She stomped to the kitchen for coffee, stomped back. “I’m not thinking about it. It’s not Saturday yet. Anything could happen.”

She wiped a hand through the air. “So. Everybody says it can’t be done. Not costuming, not physically. But it has to be one or the other. If it’s physical, maybe it’s long-term. Something he’s learned to live with. Peabody’s circus freak angle. And if that’s it, I eliminate everybody on my list.”

She scowled at her board. “Pisser.”

“Maybe one of your suspects hired the killings.”

“I’m going to run probabilities on that, but it rips up the theory—and it’s *more* than a theory—that the killer knew the vics. That it was personal.”

“Maybe he just takes pleasure in his work.”

“Crap. Crap. Crap. Somebody’s wrong. Either the medical experts or the cosmetic/costume experts. I like it better if the cosmetics are wrong, but I’ve got to work it both ways. I’ve got to go back to the beginning.”

“You can go back with me over a meal.”

It usually helped to do just that, talk it through with him, bounce theories and angles off him. But this time, she felt she only circled without getting any closer to the center.

“I don’t believe anyone looks like that,” she said. “And if I decided to believe somebody did, I can’t believe he’d stay off the grid. I ran that sketch through every program we’ve got and didn’t get a single hit.”

“Maybe it’s more recent.”

“The hypo-whatever, the multiple organ failure—and why isn’t he dead, if so—and whatever trauma would cause the lower part of his jaw to be so dislocated it’s nearly under his right ear? I don’t think so. If he was a hire, how did anybody know about him—because he’d have popped if he was a pro, even semipro. If he killed them for

himself, why doesn't anyone else know about him? Unless . . . maybe he's a patient at the Center. Maybe he's a kind of experiment they're keeping on the down low."

"As in botched?" Roarke twirled some seafood linguine on his fork. "As in mad science?"

"Mad, bad. Maybe. It's something to poke at. Maybe the vics knew him from before, and found out he was there, confronted the mad-bad scientist, or threatened to tell people on the outside."

"You don't like that very much."

"Not as much as one of them slapping gunk on their face, pumping themselves full of a Zeus cocktail, and whaling away, but it's another route to take."

She took it, working angles, running probabilities, reformulating, juggling through the pieces. When Roarke finally tugged her out of her chair hours later, she was more than ready to give it up for the night.

Clear her head, she decided. Let it simmer for a few hours.

Shortly after midnight, Eton Billingsly coded himself into Justin Rosenthal's lab using a cloned key card and a recording he'd made of Justin's voice.

He thought himself very clever.

It was time—past it—to prove to Arianna she was wasting her time and resources on Justin. The man was obsessed with this serum, and far too secretive about it in the last weeks.

Because he was getting nowhere, Billingsly concluded. The financial resources Justin wasted had become intolerable, particularly since they could and *should* be redirected to his own department. Once Arianna saw the truth, she'd rethink the relationship, and this wedding business.

He went directly to the main comp station, noted Justin had locked it down for the night.

But no problem, or very little of one. He'd worked with Justin long enough to know the man kept such things simple, so his assistant and interns could access data when needed.

Justin called it teamwork. Billingsly called it naivete. One day one of those underlings would steal data and take credit for whatever advance Justin managed to stumble onto.

But in this case, it simply made the job easier.

He tried various names as passwords, working patiently. At one point he thought he heard a sound, froze, turned to look around. Then shook his head at his own foolishness.

He continued until, inspired, he tried *Ari102260*. The date they'd chosen to be married. Sentimental fool, Billingsly thought as access was granted.

Quickly now, he scanned through file names.

UNQUIET. Justin's term for the core of addiction. Before he could call it up, something crashed behind him. "What the devil—?"

He whirled, then froze.

"Some might call me that," the voice ground out, like rocks beneath a boot heel. "But I prefer Chaos. Dr. Chaos." The creature issued a deep, cape-swishing bow. "At your service."

"What kind of sick joke is this?"

"My kind. Sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, aren't you, Billingsly? Well, we'll just have to take care of that."

"I have every right to . . ." But he backed up as he spoke, with his heart hammering in his dry throat. "I'm contacting Security."

"Wanna bet?"

As Billingsly began to run, the creature let out a delighted laugh. Strength, speed, excitement poured through him as he leaped. Billingsly went down under him, screaming.

Chaos used the knife. But before the knife, he used his teeth. And continued long after the screaming stopped.

The signal of her communicator pulled Eve out of a dream where she chased her killer while he danced down an empty street juggling an ear, an eye, and a tongue.

“Gross,” she mumbled, then called for the lights at ten percent before she answered. “Dallas.”

Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. Report to the Whitwood Center. See building security and officer on the door for access to Laboratory Six.

“Justin Rosenthal’s area.”
Affirmative. Possible homicide.

“Acknowledged. Inform Peabody, Detective Delia. Request that she meet me on scene as soon as possible. Has the victim been ID’d?”

Victim identification is not confirmed.

“I’m on my way. Dallas out.”

She shoved at her hair, saw Roarke was already up, getting dressed. “Shit. Shit. You don’t have to come. That’s hovering, isn’t it?”

“In this case it’s sheer curiosity. The likelihood is it’s your man, and since I’m awake now in any case, I’d like to see for myself.”

It was quicker not to argue. Besides, he had an eye as good as most cops she knew. And drove faster and better.

“Inside job, what did I tell you?” She watched buildings whiz by on the way downtown. “It’s one thing to break into the place on Twelfth, but it takes a lot more to get through the security they have at the Center.”

At his noncommittal sound, she gave Roarke a narrowed stare. “For most people. Rosenthal’s lab. He works late a lot. Shit, shit, *shit*.”

She was out of the car the instant Roarke parked, flashing her badge at the NYPSP uniform and the building security officer.

“Lieutenant. Security Officer Tweed will take you to the scene. My current orders are to remain on the door.”

“Has Detective Peabody arrived?”

“No, sir.”

“Send her in when she gets here. She knows the way. Tweed?”

“This way.”

“I know the way, too. Who found the body?”

“I did. I was doing a standard cam sweep, and I saw . . . a figure.”

“Green, deformed face, red eyes, wearing a cape?”

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself.”

“And you’ve got him on disc.”

“Yeah. He was heading down from the second level, east, moving fast in a kind of—boogie. Part of me was spooked, I admit. The other part figured somebody was playing a joke. But we have to check out any unauthorized activity. By the time I got to that sector—along with the other guard I’d alerted—he was gone. I went up, saw the lights were on in Dr. Rosenthal’s lab, so I keyed in, and I saw . . . The place is wrecked, Lieutenant, and there’s a body. It’s male, but I couldn’t tell who it was. The face, it’s, well, wrecked, too. And there’s blood everywhere.”

“Okay.” She nodded to the uniform outside the lab doors. “Key me in, Tweed, then I’m going to want those discs. The originals.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“And stand by,” she told him.

Wrecked was a mild word for it, Eve thought as she scanned the area. Smashed comps lay on the floor on a sea of broken beakers, dishes, specimen bowls. The body lay faceup—what was left of the face. Blood stained the hacked and ripped clothes, spread over the floor, left its obscene abstract art on the sides of a counter.

And on the top, in blood, his message.

Memo to: Lt. Dallas.

Nobody liked him anyway.

You’re welcome!

Sincerely, Dr. Chaos.

“It’s Billingsly.”

“How can you be sure?”

“That’s the suit he had on this morning.” She took a can of Seal-It out of her kit, used it, tossed it to Roarke. “This takes him off the suspect list.”

“I doubt he’d feel grateful.”

“What was he doing in here? He doesn’t strike me as the type who’d come by for a late-night visit with Rosenthal, and this isn’t his area. He’s another floor up, in the other wing.”

“He might have been lured here.”

“Yeah, maybe. But it’s late, way after hours. Why is he in the building, and where’s Rosenthal? I need to know who keyed in before Security.”

“Would you like me to see to that area?”

“Yeah, that would save time.”

“His nose is gone.”

“It sure is. What does that mean? Smell no evil? No, that’s just stupid. To me it says nosy. You’re nosy, Billingsly; now you’re dead.”

She turned as Peabody came in.

“Wow. Another day, another slaughter.” Peabody eased out a breath. “McNab’s with me. I had him start on Security. I thought maybe Roarke would be here, so we’d have two e-men on it.”

“Then I’ll go hook up with Ian.”

“What do you see?” Eve asked Peabody when they were alone.

“I see Billingsly’s off the suspect list.”

Despite the circumstances, Eve smiled a little. “And?”

“He’s been stabbed a whole bunch. It might even be more than Bickford, but it’s hard to tell. He’s missing his nose.”

“What does that say to you?”

“It’s another quiz. This time I want a grade. It says to me Billingsly won’t be sniffing around anymore. Maybe around Arianna, maybe around something else—something lab related. The note’s addressed directly to you this time, so he knows it’s our case—and that Billingsly wasn’t a popular guy around here.”

“I’d say A minus.”

“A minus?” Both insult and sulk piped through Peabody’s voice. “I want A plus.”

“For an A plus you’d need to observe, identify, and relate the teeth marks in the vic’s face and throat.”

“Teeth . . . oh jeez.” Observing and identifying them now, Peabody swallowed hard. “He *ate* him.”

“Just here and there. He’s accelerating,” Eve concluded. “This time blood wasn’t enough. He wanted a taste of flesh.” She scanned again, noted the open door on an empty cabinet. “Did the killer walk in on the vic, or the other way around?”

“If this is extra credit, I want a review of my earlier grade. Let me think.” To help herself do that, Peabody looked away from the body. “I can’t think why Billingsly would be here. He and Rosenthal aren’t pals, and this isn’t his area—not only sector-wise, but professionally. Maybe if Rosenthal asked him to come in—but I don’t buy it. He’s not going to do his competitor any favors. He’d come if Arianna asked him, but that puts her in this, and it just doesn’t fit well for me.”

Pausing, she made herself look at the body again. “If he came here—which, okay, obviously, he did—it was to get something on Justin, or screw with something, or poke around looking . . . Poke his nose in!”

Eve took the cloned key card and recorder out of Billingsly’s pocket. Hit Play.

“Justin Rosenthal.”

“Billingsly tried a little B&E,” Peabody commented.

“That’s an A plus.”

“Yay!”

“Billingsly keys in using the dummy card and the recorder. He’s poking around. The killer is already here—looking for something, doing something, waiting for something. Billingsly sees him, and that’s the end of Billingsly. The killer chews on him, stabs him, amputates his nose, wrecks the lab, takes time to leave the message, then boogies out. They’ve got him on disc, so we’ll be able to track his movements.”

“That’s a break.”

“For us, not for Billingsly.” Eve opened her field kit again, crouched by the body. “Let’s verify ID, get TOD.”

“If there are bite marks, they should get some saliva, and the impressions, too,” Peabody began.

“We got better.” Eve lifted Billingsly’s lifeless hand. “We got skin under the nails. Billingsly got some flesh, too.”

NINE



Eve put on microgoggles for a better look before she bagged the hand. “Tinted green flesh, so that’s our guy. We’ll get DNA.”

“And see if one of our main suspects shows some recent scratches.”

Eve looked up as Roarke came back in. “McNab’s working with Security,” he told her. “Everyone in the lab logged out, Rosenthal being the last at eleven twenty-six. The log shows Rosenthal swiping in again at twelve oh-seven, but the discs show Billingsly swiping in at that time, clearly entering alone.”

Eve held up an evidence bag. “Billingsly had a clone swipe and a recording of Rosenthal’s voice.”

“Nosy becomes very apt. No one else entered the lab after the last log-out at eleven twenty-six except Billingsly. No one exited until your Dr. Chaos at one fifteen.”

“Well, he didn’t just materialize.”

“TOD,” Peabody announced before Roarke could comment, “twelve fifty.”

“That’s a lot of time between when Billingsly entered and TOD. It didn’t take that long to kill him. Contact the sweepers, and the ME,” Eve ordered, then, avoiding blood and debris, did another long study of the room, walked over to the break room area.

“Peabody! Get us a warrant for these lockers. Six, digital locks.” Looking up, she studied the open ceiling vent. “There’s his access. It’s big enough for a man to get through.”

“Low tech,” Roarke commented. “But classic.”

“I need the ventilation layout. But for now . . . boost me up.”

Obliging, Roarke hooked his fingers together. With her foot in the hammock of his hands, Eve bounced up, gripped the edge of the

open vent. “Yeah, the grille’s in here. Maybe he initially planned to go back out this way.” She took a penlight out of her pocket, shined it in the skinny ventilation tunnel. “Tight squeeze. I see some scuff marks. So he logs out, comes back in somewhere else. Through the health center area, maybe the visitor’s lodging, pretty much anywhere. Scoots and crawls along. Pops out, then—”

“Are you going to solve the case while I’m holding you off the floor?” Roarke wondered.

“Hmm? Sorry.” She jumped down. “Pops out,” she continued. “Maybe gets into his gear here. Lockers, bathroom. Sweepers could find traces of the makeup. Would he be stupid enough to leave something in a locker?”

“Shall I open them?”

“When we get a warrant.”

“Stickler,” he said and made her smile.

“I could claim they’re part of the crime scene, which they are, so the PA could probably hold that line. But a defense attorney would make noises, so a warrant keeps it clean.”

She set her hands on her hips, turned a slow circle. “Was he meeting Billingsly here? In it together, there’s a disagreement, death ensues. I don’t like it. This guy works alone. Billingsly got nosy, then got dead. The killer wasn’t expecting company. He came in for the serum, and he got it. Billingsly’s a bonus round.”

“Why didn’t he go out the way he came in?”

“Too hyped up from the kill to care,” she concluded. “By then, leaving where he’d be caught on disc—if he thought of it—just added some fun. Look at me!”

Peabody came to the doorway. “I tagged Cher Reo,” she said, speaking of the APA. “She was about to call me a very bad name, but I showed her the body.”

“Good thinking,” Eve told her.

“She’s all over the warrant.”

“Okay. When the morgue gets here, I want the skin sent to the lab asap. I want that DNA the same way. I need something for a bribe. Something really good,” she told Roarke. “For Dickhead.”

Chief Lab Tech Dick Berenski wouldn't drag himself to work in the middle of the night for less than a first-class bribe.

"Two tickets, skybox, first game of the World Series, with locker-room passes."

"Excellent, but we're still in play-offs."

"Wherever it is—transpo included."

"Nice. I'll start with one, let him squeeze me for the second ticket—which he will. I'll tag him on the way to Security. I want to see those discs. Peabody, wait for the morgue and the sweepers. I want that skin hand-carried to the lab. And I want to know as soon as the warrant comes through."

In Security, Eve studied the screen, the movement, the face. She ordered magnification, ordered freeze, replay.

"Gotta be a new strain of Zeus, or something like it. Along with some serious prosthetics. Nothing's quite right about him. It's almost as if his whole body's disjointed."

She magnified again to study the hands. Gloved, she noted, with long, sharp nails slicing through the tips. Then went back to the face.

"He couldn't have taken those bites out of the vic wearing that gear. So he didn't put it on until after the kill. Or he can manipulate it, because the bites had puncture marks like those pointed incisors he's got. What is his deal?"

"Totally freak show," was McNab's opinion.

Eve glanced at the e-man, and Peabody's cohab. He wore his long blond hair in a tail secured with silver rings that matched the half dozen hanging from his earlobe. His skinny frame vibrated with color from the many pocketed baggies in Day-Glo orange that picked up the zigs in his shirt.

The zags were nuclear blue.

"You're wearing that getup and talking freak show."

He grinned. "Easy to find these pants in the dark."

“It’d be easy to spot them on Mars in the night sky with the naked eye.”

“They blind the bad guys,” he claimed, still grinning. “Anyway, Dallas, it looks real. This guy, I mean. He looks real.”

“Nothing about this guy looks real,” she corrected. “I want you to take this in to EDD for a full anal.”

She looked down at her com when it signaled. “Warrant’s in. Let’s open those lockers.”

“You’re not going to like this,” Roarke said as they walked back. “But I agree with McNab.”

“Yeah, I figure those pants could blind somebody if they stared at them too long.”

“Something I try to avoid. I also have to agree with him that your killer doesn’t look as if he’s wearing a disguise.”

“Because it’s a combination. Disguise and some kind of powerful drug.”

“How does he blink?”

That put a hitch in her stride. “What?”

“If his eyes aren’t real, if he’s using devices for the size, the shape, how does he blink? He looked directly at the security camera at several points, and his eyelids closed and opened. He smiled, if you can call it that. His jaw shifted, his mouth turned up. And we both saw him contort his body in impossible ways, and move at considerable speed.”

He did have a damn good eye, she thought.

“If he’s a scientist—and he damn well is—he’s figured out how to devise something, and he’s taking something that boosts his adrenaline. Monsters exist,” she added. “But they’re flesh and blood. They’re human, just like the rest of us. It’s what’s inside them that’s twisted. This guy isn’t some Frankenstein monster.”

“Actually, I was thinking of another classic. Mr. Hyde.”

“You’ve got to lay off those old vids,” she commented, and led the way to the lab.

“If you can believe a scientist can create devices and substances to disguise himself this way, why isn’t it possible for that scientist to create something that causes him to *be* this way?”

“Because,” she said as they approached the door, “appearing and being are different things.” She paused outside the door. “Maybe—*maybe*—there’s been something going on in this lab that’s whacked. Something botched. And we’re going to salvage Rosenthal’s records and find out. But for now, we’ve got a killer on a spree, and none of my suspects pop out as a fucked-up science experiment.”

“Maybe the more human face is the real disguise.”

With that thought planted in her head, she walked into the lab.

Police business moved forward, with sweepers and the dead crew already at work. With Roarke she headed straight back to the lockers.

She thought of the destruction of the lab and the open, unbroken door of the serum lockup.

“No point in busting them open since you’re here.”

“None at all,” Roarke agreed.

It didn’t take him long. As he moved down the line of lockers uncoding the locks, she called Peabody in for the search.

And hit pay dirt in Pachai Gupta’s.

Eve took out the silver pipe.

“Weighted it for extra punch. And he didn’t even clean it thoroughly,” Eve noted. “There’s still some blood, some matter. It shows some nicks and dents where it hit bone.”

“He loved her—Darnell.” Peabody shook her head. “It was all over him, Dallas. Love and grief, all over him.”

“He wouldn’t be the first to destroy what he loved. But this is so damn stupid, so careless. Steal the serum by unlocking the cabinet rather than busting it up. Then just leave one of the murder weapons in your work locker?”

“A frame-up? It makes more sense to me,” Peabody said. “I know I did the interview, and I hate thinking I missed anything, but a frame-up makes more sense.”

“He’s got this in the locker, but doesn’t use it. Kills Billingsly, and unless he’s really stupid, knows we’ll search the lockers, knows we’ll question the fact the serum cabinet was opened with its lock code. He’s unstable, and the drug makes him more so, but he’s organized. Takes care not to be seen coming in—but does murder, then shows himself.”

“Because he wanted us here,” Peabody concluded. “Following the bread crumbs to Gupta. No, not crumbs. Big, chunky hunks of bread.”

“Reads that way. Seal it up, get the weapon taken to the lab for processing. And let’s have all our players picked up, brought in.”

She walked out with Roarke. “A frame-up, if that’s what it is, that’s human. So’s screwing up and leaving evidence where it can be found, if that’s what it is. Either way, with the weapon, the DNA, we’ll lock it down.”

“I have every faith. I’m going into the office.”

“Now? It’s . . .” She checked the time as they stepped outside. “It’s shy of five a.m.”

“Should I point out you’ve been working since shortly after two? I’ll get my own jump on the day, and as I’m curious enough, I may come down to Central later, watch you lock it down.”

“If you need the car, I could—Guess you don’t,” she added when a dark limo glided smoothly to the curb. “I’m going to hit the lab first, give Dickhead a push. A DNA match will save the innocent bystanders from a round in the box. Thanks for the bribe.”

“Never a problem.” He touched her cheek. “Take care, will you? This one gives me a very uneasy feeling.”

“Too many old horror vids, and an Irish nature. I think I can handle some murderous scientist.”

“Try not to punch him. You’ll set the healing on that arm back.”

She watched him drive away, then went back in to talk to the head sweeper and get Peabody for the trip to the lab.

Dick Berenski's ink black hair was slicked back over his eggshaped head. Rather than his usual lab coat, he wore a multicolored floral shirt that would have made even McNab wince.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

"Clothes. It's five-fucking-a.m. I'm not officially on yet. And I want a bottle of single malt scotch for the game."

"We already agreed to terms."

"That was before." He shot her a sour look, and since the last time she'd seen him he'd been scarily sweet—and in love—she assumed there was trouble in paradise.

"Before what?"

"Before I got here and found Harpo pulling an all-nighter."

"Why is that my problem?"

"She's on your hair—first murder—and you're not going to like it." He played his spider fingers over his comp. "She'll come out here."

"What about my skin?"

"She goes first. And I want that scotch."

"Fine, fine, if you give me something I can use."

"Oh, I'll give you something."

Harpo, all spiky red hair and tired eyes, walked out from her section into Berenski's. "Yo," she said to Eve and Peabody, then dropped onto a stool. "You tell her?" she asked Berenski.

"I said you'd do it."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. So," she said, swiveling to Eve. "On one hand this is totally iced. On the other, it's majorly fucked."

"What is?"

"The hair. I'm the goddess of hair and fiber, and if I can't ID it, nobody can. And I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"Sorry, I've been at this all night. I'm a little wired on Boost." She gestured with the jumbo tube in her hand before she took a gulp.

"Have you tried the new black cherry flavor?" Peabody asked her.

"Yeah, but it's got an aftertaste. I'm pretty well hooked on the Lemon Zest. It's got a nice zing."

"I like Blue Lagoon. There's something about drinking blue that feels energizing."

“Excuse me,” Eve said, brutally polite. “This talk of flavors and favorites is fascinating, but maybe we could take a moment to discuss—oh, I don’t know—evidence?”

“Sure,” Harpo said as Peabody cleared her throat. “I got hair from your crime scene. ID’d some from each of your vics, no prob. Got some not theirs, but no roots. So no DNA for you on that, but I started a standard anal. You want to eliminate animal—like a rat, or a stray cat, whatever. And I could—I figured anyway—give you some basics. Synthetic, human, if it was treated, color, and like that. But I can’t, ’cause it’s not.”

“Not what, Harpo?”

“It’s not synthetic. That’s solid. But it’s not exactly human and not exactly animal. It’s sort of both.”

“It can’t be both.”

“That’s right.” Harpo pointed a finger tipped with a metallic purple nail. “But it is.” She glanced at Berenski for permission, then used one of the comps to call up her file. “What you have here,” she said, tapping that bright nail to the image, “is human hair, and this”—she split the screen with a second image—“is ape.”

“If you say so.”

“Science says. See, on the human hair the cuticle scales overlap smoothly. On the ape hair, they’re rough—they, like, protrude. Get it?”

“Okay, yeah. So?”

“So this—” Harpo added another image. “Okay, this is from your crime scene. It clearly shows characteristics of both—rough and smooth—on one strand. What you got here, Dallas, is mutant hair. It’s like somebody mated a human with an ape, and here’s the hair of the result.”

“Give me a break, Harpo.”

“Science doesn’t lie. It screws up sometimes, but it doesn’t lie. I ran this through everything I’ve got and did the same with the other strands the sweepers sent me. Same result. About two this morning, I gave up and tagged my old man—”

“Your—”

“My father’s head of forensics at Quantico. Look, Dallas, it’s not like I go running to Daddy whenever I hit a snag. In fact, this is the first time ever because it’s way out of orbit, and he’s the best there is—anywhere.”

“Okay, Harpo, okay. What was his take?”

“He’s stumped, just like me. This sort of mutation shouldn’t be possible. But I’ve got hair—five samples—that says it is.”

“So, you’re telling me I’m looking for an ape-man? Seriously?”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re looking for, is what I’m telling you. Come on, Dickie, give her yours so she stops looking at me like they let me out of the ward too early.”

Berenski folded his arms. “Harpo got what she got, and I got what I got. You got green skin.”

“I know that, goddamn it.”

“I mean green. Not makeup, not tinted. It’s green down through the subcutaneous tissue. Your vic got some blood along with the flesh, and that’s not right either.”

“Green blood?” Eve asked, ready to be annoyed all over again.

“It’s red enough, but it’s not human. Not all the way. I get what Harpo got on the hair. A combination of human and ape. DNA’s like nothing I’ve seen before, and I’ve seen it all. It is what it is,” he snapped out before Eve could protest. “You’ve got some mutant freak running around killing people. I want some fucking coffee.”

He shoved up, stomped away.

“His girlfriend dumped him a couple days ago,” Harpo said. “He hasn’t said it, but we figure. He’s been hell to be around since. But he’s right. It is what it is. My old man, he’d like to consult on this if you give him the nod.”

Eve squeezed the bridge of her nose. “I’m going to get DNA from the suspects. When I do, can you match it to this?”

“Dickie’s got DNA from the skin and blood the vic scraped off. He can match it if you get him the killer’s. You get hair, I can match it. But it shouldn’t be a problem to find some half-ape guy with green skin. Right?”

“Jesus,” was all Eve could think of.

Wisely Peabody kept her thoughts to herself. She managed to be wise until they'd gotten back in the car.

"You know Harpo's solid. And Dickhead's a dickhead, but he's one of the best there is. If they both come up with the same results, and really, when you look at the killer, he's just not . . ."

"Human? Bullshit. Bullshit. And one more bullshit. They're doing some sort of weird experiments in Rosenthal's lab. Something unauthorized and twisted."

"That's what I'm saying. They created a monster—a killer ape-man monster. And now it's broken out and wreaking havoc on the city. And—"

"Don't make me slap you. It's so damn girlie."

"Not when you're on the receiving end."

"Experiments," Eve continued. "The serum. It screws up the DNA, causes severe anemia. Louise said that could cause a green cast to the skin."

"All the way down?"

"Obviously."

"But the face, Dallas."

She wanted to believe it was prosthetics, a device, some sort of elaborate mask. But . . . "I don't know, but we're going to grill Rosenthal like a trout until he clears this up. Mr. Hyde," she muttered. "Maybe that's not so far off."

"Mr. Hyde?" Peabody scooted up and over in her seat. "Oh, oh, Rosenthal created the evil Dr. Jekyll. No wait, Dr. Jekyll's the good part. Hyde's the evil one. But they're the same person. Rosenthal's Mr. Hyde!"

"D minus, and only because you got the names right. Why would Rosenthal kill Jennifer Darnell—in that manner? That personal, intimate manner? The killer wanted her, and couldn't have her."

"Back to Pachai."

"Think about it. You said he loved her—and wit statements indicate she was interested. Now maybe he moved, she decided she wasn't interested after all. But who's the odd man out in this? Who got Darnell and her friend the jobs at Slice? Gets her and her friend work, but she's more interested in Gupta. And golly, where do we

find one of the murder weapons? In Gupta's locker—with blood and brain matter still on it.”

“Ken Dickerson. It is a frame-up.”

“Gupta's Rosenthal's assistant. Dickerson's still an intern. Gupta's caught the eye of Darnell, even though Dickerson went to his uncle and got her work—then did her another favor and got work for Vix. Gupta comes from a family of doctors, scientists, and had a leg up since his father knows Rosenthal. Dickerson had to work his way through, push for scholarships. And Gupta's still ahead of him.”

“Why not kill Pachai?”

“One of the first three vics got wind of something Dickerson was up to, so they had to go. What better way to destroy Gupta than by killing the girl he loved and pinning it on him? Whatever he's on makes him feel superior, but that was already in there. It makes him feel powerful, free. It makes him happy, and more, he's found out killing makes him even happier. He destroyed the lab, took the serum. He doesn't want anyone else to have what he's got. It's all his.”

“It plays, but it doesn't explain the mutations.”

“So Rosenthal better,” she said as she pulled into the garage at Central. “We'll take him first.”

TEN



As Eve headed down to Homicide, Arianna sprang up from a bench in the corridor and rushed toward her. “Lieutenant Dallas, please, can you tell me what’s happening? The police came to my home this morning. They said Eton’s been murdered.”

“That’s correct.”

“God. But when? How?”

“Shortly before one this morning, in Dr. Rosenthal’s lab.”

“In Justin’s lab? But I don’t . . .”

She closed her eyes a moment. “How can this be happening? They said we needed to come here—Justin and I. They took him somewhere else, wouldn’t let me stay with him. They just said I had to wait. It’s been more than an hour.”

“I’m sorry it’s taken so long. I’m going to be talking to Dr. Rosenthal shortly.”

“But what happened? My God, this is a nightmare. Eton murdered, and in Justin’s lab.”

“Do you know why Dr. Billingsly would have been in Dr. Rosenthal’s lab at that time of night?”

“No. No. He shouldn’t have been. He’s not involved in Justin’s work. The killer must have been after Justin. After Justin.” Arianna rubbed a hand between her breasts back and forth. “He was going to work late, stay in his office again last night, but I asked him not to. I asked him to come home with me, stay with me. I wanted him with me, and I was upset enough that he gave in.”

“You left the Center together?”

“Yes, about eleven thirty, I think. I had a fund-raiser, and called Justin from the car when I left.”

“Did anyone stay in the lab?”

“I don’t know. Justin met me out front. We were together all night. I swear it. You can’t believe Justin had anything to do with this. I know people talk about Eton being jealous of him.”

“Was he?”

“Yes, but Justin isn’t bothered by it. We—God, it seems cruel now—we’d joke about it sometimes. Can I see him now? Do we need a lawyer?”

“He’s not under arrest, but I need to ask him a few questions. If he wants a lawyer present he can have one. Peabody, why don’t you take Ms. Whitwood to the lounge? She can wait there while we talk to Dr. Rosenthal. It shouldn’t be long.”

As long as it takes, Eve thought as she headed toward the first interview room.

Justin straightened in his chair when Eve entered.

“So it’s true,” he said, “about Billingsly. He’s dead.”

“Yes. Record on, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve, in Interview with Dr. Justin Rosenthal on the matters of Darnell, Vix, and Bickford, case number H-45893, and Eton Billingsly, case number H-43898. I have to record this. Procedure.”

“I understand.”

“I’m also going to read you your rights.” As she did, Justin said nothing. “Do you understand your rights and obligations?”

“Yes. You think I killed them?”

She let the question hang a moment. He looked worn-out, she noted, as Arianna had.

“All the victims were connected to you and the Center. Billingsly was murdered in your lab.”

“In *my* lab?”

“Yes. There are questions that have to be asked, but first, I’d like a sample of your DNA.”

“My—all right, but it’s on file.”

“Just consider it a spot check.” She took out a swab.

When it was done, she went to the door, passed it off to the waiting uniform.

She sat at the table across from Justin. “What was Billingsly doing in your lab?”

“I have no idea. He shouldn’t have been there. He shouldn’t have been able to get in without my authorization. How did he?”

“He cloned your swipe card and had a recording of your voice.”

Justin simply stared at her. “He went that far? He disliked me—that’s not news—but I can’t believe he’d go as far as breaking into the lab. And for what?”

“Would he have business with your assistant or interns?”

“No, none I can think of. And he knew none of us were there. I saw him before I left, and he commented on the fact that I was actually going home.”

“You didn’t get along.”

“Not well.” Justin braced his elbows on the table, pushed his hands over his face, back into his hair. “That’s no secret, as he made it very clear he didn’t think I was good enough for Ari—and he was.”

“That must have pissed you off.”

“Some,” he admitted. “But frankly, I didn’t give Billingsly much thought. Arianna loves me; we’re about to be married. And my work occupies the rest of my thoughts at this stage.”

“What is this stage?”

“We’re about to begin the next round of testing.”

“Meaning?” Eve said as Peabody entered. “Peabody, Detective Delia, entering Interview. Go on, Doctor.”

“We’ve injected a test group of lab rats with specific addictive substances over a course of time.”

“You’ve made addicts out of rats?”

“Yes. We observe and monitor, chart, record. Now we’ll inject them with the serum, run them through tests. Once we—”

“You don’t test on human subjects.”

“No. That’s months off, maybe years. This isn’t a quick process. We can’t risk testing an unproven substance on a human being.”

“It must be tempting to push it some, to kick up the pace.”

“You don’t go into research to rush.”

“Do your assistants ever get antsy?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Maybe your assistants want to take it up a notch, show off some, impress you.”

“They’re young. Sure, there’s some frustration, impatience—competition from time to time. But we have a very strict protocol, a timetable, procedures that must be followed not only for success but for safety.”

“Who has access to the serum?”

“It’s locked in the lab, in an environmentally controlled case. No one but myself and Pachai have access. You don’t think Billingsly tried to—”

“The case was open,” Eve told him. “And empty.”

“Empty?” Looking stricken, Rosenthal rubbed at his temple. “The serum’s gone? God. *God!* We’re so close. A competing lab? Espionage? Would Billingsly have done that?”

“Your two interns can’t access the serum?”

“No. Well, that’s not completely accurate. Ken’s worked late with me several nights, and I gave him the code. I change it every three days. I’d have changed it this morning, in fact. We can re-create the serum. But the time lost . . .” He shook his head. “But I don’t understand what this has to do with the murders, with Jen and the boys. I can’t believe they’d be involved in some plot to steal or sell the work.”

“That’s okay. I understand. Interview end. If you’d just wait here a minute. Peabody?”

“You’re cutting him loose?” Peabody asked when they stepped out.

“I want you to take him to the lounge, ask him and Arianna to wait. I might need him to talk to Dickerson, interpret some of the science stuff when we get to it. Then do a round with Gupta. He may have something to add here, and he knows you now.”

“Okay. You’re taking Dickerson alone?”

“I’ll start on him. When you think you’ve got all you can get from Gupta, take him to the lounge, then come in to Interview.”

“Check.”

“And bring Dickerson a drink.”

Peabody sighed. “Because I’m good cop.”

“So far.” Eve walked down to the next interview room, entered.

“Dallas, Lieutenant Eve,” she began and completed the documentation. “Hey, Ken, you look a little wrung out.”

“I’ve been waiting a long time. Like two hours.”

A little sweaty, Eve observed. Hollow-eyed and very pale. “These things take time.” She read him his rights, watched those hollow eyes widen.

“I’m a suspect? Why are you saying all that?”

“For your protection, Ken. Just procedure. You know about procedure. Do you understand your rights, your obligations?”

“Yes, but I don’t understand why—”

“Four people are dead, Ken, and you knew all of them.”

“I’m not the only one who—”

“We’re talking to the others. So what did you think of Billingsly?” she continued, conversationally. “An asshole, right?”

“I don’t really have an opinion. I didn’t know him, really.”

“Take my word. Asshole. Anybody who tries to horn in on another man’s woman, especially when she’s not interested, is an asshole.”

She smiled when she said it, watched his eyes skitter away. “I nearly forgot.” She took out a swab. “I need some spit. DNA check.”

“I—I don’t have to do that.”

“Seriously? It’s just some spit, Ken.”

“I don’t have to do that unless you have a warrant. That’s my right.”

“Suit yourself.” She shrugged. “Now, about assholes.”

“Should I get a lawyer?”

“Do you want one? Fine with me. It’ll take more time. Probably a couple more hours.” She started to rise.

“It’s okay, for now. I just want to get out of here.”

“Can’t blame you. Like I said, you look wrung out. Up late?”

“I didn’t sleep well. It’s hard, with what happened.”

“I bet. You liked Jen.”

“Everybody liked Jen.”

“But you really liked her. You got her a job.”

“It was no big deal.”

“Come on, take some credit. An addict with barely a month’s recovery under her belt before you asked your uncle to give her a

break. Then you do her another solid and help her addict friend get a job. She owed you.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“Did she pay you back?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t think she did, not when she had her eye on Pachai—and he had his on her. That must’ve stung.”

He scratched at his arms as if something crawled along his skin. “She was just a friend.”

“Because that’s the way she wanted it. And Pachai, what did he do for her? He didn’t get her and her addict friend jobs. His uncle didn’t give her food to take home. He comes from money, though. Isn’t that always the way? Gets to be Rosenthal’s head guy—over you. You worked harder, I bet. Put in more hours. You’re smarter—I can tell. You’ve got ideas, don’t you, Ken? Ideas about the serum.”

She leaned forward. No visible scratches, she thought. But he’d left his hair down, over the back of his neck.

“I bet you put in lots of your own time on that project. Off the books, so to speak. Busting your ass. Rosenthal’s so conservative, such a stickler for protocol, procedure. But you’ve got balls. You’re willing to take some risks. Did Jen find out you were taking one?”

He kept scratching, swallowing, looking anywhere but at Eve. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“She came in the lab a lot, didn’t she? Making excuses to drop in so she could see Pachai. Flirted with him right in front of you. Did she come by when you were working alone one night? Off the books. Did you let her in?”

“We’re not allowed to work in the lab off hours unless Dr. Rosenthal’s there.”

“Rules.” Eve waved them away. “Real innovation says screw the rules. Real progress is risky, takes gambles. And Rosenthal’s poking along with his yes-man Gupta getting all the attention—and the girl. It’s not right. But you can show them you’re better, smarter. Did she catch you at it, or did you tell her? Had to brag about it. But she still didn’t want you. In fact, she threatened to tell on you if you didn’t

stop. To tell Rosenthal you were experimenting with his work, testing it, and not on rats.”

He began to shiver now, as if cold even while the sweat dribbled down his temples. “You’re making all this up.”

“Am I? Scientists keep records. We’re going to get a search warrant for your apartment, and we’re going to find yours. We’re going to find the pipe you used to beat Coby Vix to death with. Then —”

“You can’t find the pipe at my place because . . .”

“Why is that, Ken?”

“I’m not talking anymore.”

“Suit yourself.” Eve sat back, watched him sweat a few moments until Peabody came in with a tube of ginger ale.

“Peabody, Detective Delia, entering Interview. He could use that. Have a drink, Ken, take a little time to think. The way I look at it, things just got out of hand, out of your control. You had a really bad reaction to the serum.”

“I’m not saying anything else.” But he took the tube, cracked it, guzzled.

And when she came back in, Eve thought, she’d take the tube—and have his DNA.

“Think about it,” Eve suggested. “Interview pause. Dallas, Lieutenant Eve, and Peabody, Detective Delia, exiting the room.”

“He looks sweaty, shaky,” Peabody began outside the door. “He looks like—”

“An addict jonesing for a fix. He’s scared, too. He’s either going to crack or lawyer up—that could go either way. Let’s get a search warrant for his apartment. We’ve got enough for that. He’s got logs and records. That stupid cape, the gloves, the shoes, maybe the knife and scalpel.”

“Maybe we should have Rosenthal observe the next round. Like you said, if he gets into the science, Rosenthal could tell us what it means.”

“Good idea. Go get him, take him to an observation room. I’m going to give Dickerson another couple minutes.”

She could use a drink herself, Eve thought, and gave Vending a hard eye. The machines didn't always cooperate with her.

"Let me do that." Roarke plugged in credits, ordered her a tube of Pepsi.

"Thanks. Come to watch the show?"

"It's usually worth the price of admission."

"I've got Dickerson sweating in the box. Literally. I think he's been taking the serum—or a version of it. And I think he dosed himself real good two nights in a row. It's got him strung out. I'm about to go in for the second round. Peabody's bringing Rosenthal into Observation, in case we need an interpreter for the science."

"I'll go find them."

He gave her a tap on the chin, then strolled off—as at home in the cop shop as she was, she thought.

She cracked the tube, took a long drink, then walked back to the interview room. When she stepped in, Dickerson was standing in the far corner, facing the wall. His shoulders shook.

"Dallas, Lieutenant Eve, reentering Interview. Jesus, Ken, man up."

"That's Dr. Chaos to you."

She arched her eyebrows at the rough sound of his voice. "Now we're getting somewhere. Have a seat, Doc, and we'll—"

He turned. She'd thought little could genuinely surprise her at this stage of her life and career, but she froze in shock.

His face rippled in front of her eyes. Sickly green, it twisted itself until the jaw locked at a grotesque angle. His teeth sharpened; his eyes protruded and bulged in their sockets, and began to gleam red.

"And I'm not a man."

She heard the snap and crack of migrating bones as his spine seemed to warp. "I'm a god."

She pulled her weapon. "What you are is under arrest."

He leaped at her. She got a stream off, was sure she struck midbody, but he was so *fast*. She had a fraction of a second to prepare, and used the force of his body ramming hers to go down, kick up, and send him flying over her and into the wall.

He careened off, bloodied, and nimble as a spider. This time when she fired, he jerked. Then he smiled.

“Oooh, it tickles! I’m so much stronger now.”

“So I see. But not pretty. You’re smart.” He would attack again, she thought. There was too much animal in him not to. “You’re in the middle of Cop Central. Even if you get through me, you won’t get out. You’ll die here.”

“I can’t die. But you can. You’re an insect to me. All of you. Weak and breakable.”

“He’s still in you. The weak and breakable Dickerson.”

“Not for much longer. He cried over the girl, but he enjoyed killing Billingsly. He’ll enjoy killing you. We’re going to carve out your heart, and eat it.”

She fired again, kept firing. It slowed him, caused him to stumble, but he came on.

The door burst open. Roarke rushed in, steps ahead of Peabody and a swarm of cops. Chaos whirled, snarled—jittered from the stun streams.

“Go down, you fuck!” Eve shouted.

“Allow me.” Face cold and fierce, Roarke rammed his fists into the twisted face. Right, left, right again.

Blood streaming, body spasming, Chaos went down.

“Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ.” Eve muttered the oaths—prayers—as she snapped on restraints. “I want leg irons,” she called out. “Now. Peabody, keep your weapon on him.”

“Believe me,” her partner responded.

“I want him shackled, in a cage, before he comes to. Isolation. Let’s move!”

“Are you hurt?” Roarke gripped her hand as she rose.

“No. I’ve got to get him contained. I’ll be back. And hey, thanks for the assist,” she added as she moved aside to let some of the men lift Chaos.

Roarke watched her go, then glanced down at his raw knuckles. “Ah, well.”

EPILOGUE



Eve found him waiting in her office, settled in her ratty visitor's chair with his PPC. He set it aside when she came in, and with one look at her face, went to the AutoChef, programmed coffee for both of them.

"He's dying." Eve dropped down at her desk. "Multiple organ failure—Louise had that one. And he's got a brain tumor for good measure. They're not going to be able to save him."

"I'm trying to be sorry, as you seem to be."

"He was an idiot—Dickerson. Jealous, ambitious, reckless. But he wasn't a murderer. Or not until he started taking the serum. His version of it. He'd improved it, so he thought. He was going to impress the girl, his boss, the whole fucking world. Now he's dying because he unleashed something in himself that perverted what he was, what he wanted. Something he couldn't control."

Roarke sat on the corner of her desk, facing her. "He would have killed you."

"Yeah. What he became was as addicted to killing as Dickerson was to the serum. As the people Rosenthal's trying to help are to the illegals. Rosenthal's with him now—pretty much crushed.

Dickerson's barely able to talk, but we got all we need to close the cases."

"It's never just about closed cases for you."

"Four people slaughtered. And now we'll have five bodies. Dickerson was dead the first time he took the serum. He just didn't know it. He asked Darnell to come into the lab. He was so proud, had to show off. Had to hope she'd see how special he was, and want him the way he wanted her. Instead, she disapproved, told him he had to go to Rosenthal, had to stop."

"She would have recognized the addiction," Roarke concluded.

“Yeah, I’d say. She was black-and-white on it. If he didn’t tell his boss, she would, because he was making himself sick, she said.”

“And that only made him take more.”

“He promised he’d do what she said, then increased the dose. To prove to her he was better than Pachai, better even than Rosenthal.”

“And Chaos was born.”

“I guess that’s true enough. He says he thought the murders were a dream, a hallucination.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“No,” she confirmed. “I don’t. He knew what he’d done. He just couldn’t face it on one side, couldn’t give it up on the other. Dickerson told us Billingsly was trying to hack into Rosenthal’s computer when he got to the lab.”

“Jealousy again.”

“The green-skinned monster.”

Roarke started to correct her, then shrugged. “Well, in this case.”

“And this case is closed.” She finished off her coffee, set it and the sadness aside. “I need to write it up, and I promised Nadine I’d give her a head start. I don’t know why.”

“Friendship, and because you know she’ll be fair and accurate. I’ll leave you to it then, find myself a spot to finish a bit of business. Tag me when you’re done. We missed breakfast altogether. I’ll take you to lunch—whenever.”

“I can grab something. You don’t have to wait around.”

“Eve.” He touched the shaggy tips of her hair. “I’d just stepped into Observation when he turned around. I saw what he was, or what he was becoming. We never quite see everything there is, do we? What I did see was the delight—the murderous delight on his face. I didn’t know if I’d get there, get to you, in time.”

“I’d stunned the shit out of him,” she began. “And yeah, he might’ve gotten a piece of me anyway. You finished him off real nice.”

“Well then, you’d loosened the lid. I’ll wait for you.” He leaned forward, touched his lips to hers. “Always.”

“Sap.”

“Guilty. And when we get home tonight, we’ll take care of that arm.”

“I know what *that* means.”

He laughed, kissed her again. “You’ve had it cradled since you sat down.”

She glanced down, saw he was right. “I guess it took a knock in there.” She released it, took his hand to examine his knuckles. “You, too.”

“Then we’ll take care of each other.”

“Sounds good.”

And it did, she thought, when he’d left her to find his quiet spot. Before the work, she rose, walked to her skinny window. She looked out at New York—safe, for the moment, from one of the monsters who hunted.

And stood awhile, holding vigil for the dying.