

WAS SHE DEAD?

She felt like a ghost, untethered and insubstantial. Was she floating?

Everything around her seemed blurred, faded, and unimportant. Maybe she was blurred, faded, and unimportant while the world moved around her full of color she couldn't see, sound she couldn't hear.

If so, death was the same as life. What difference did it make, really? Unless . . . unless. Could death be a kind of freedom?

But freedom from what?

Something, something scraped like tiny fingernails on the edges of her mind—a need to run, to hide. But why? *Why?*

What was the point of it all? What would death need to hide from? The dead could sleep, couldn't they? Just sleep, sleep, sleep.

And yet, she felt as if she'd just woken, still groggy and vague. She wandered. Puzzled, yes, but detached, and wondering if she'd reached heaven or hell. There was something oddly familiar about the faded colors and blurry shapes here. Colors suddenly so strong they hurt her eyes, shapes so sharp they might slice and gash.

Then they faded and blurred again, and there was comfort in that. Odd, quiet comfort.

But . . . she caught a scent, yes, yes, the rich and funereal scent of lilies. Blood. Lilies and blood, surely that meant death.

She should just lie down, lie down and sleep. Lie down and just go away. Surely someone would come tell her where to go next, what to do next. An angel. Or a devil.

Because the idea of either—the image that flashed in her mind that was somehow both—made her shudder, she didn't lie down. Could the dead fear?

She paused when she came to a door, stared at it. Out or in? In or out? Did it matter?

She saw a hand reach for the knob. Was it her hand? Something was wrong with it. Blood and lilies. Something was wrong with the knob. It moved, sneaking just out of reach, right, left, up, down.

A kind of game, she thought, smiling a little. She would play.

The hand reached for the knob, drew back. Reached again, swept right, then left. Then closed around the sneaky knob. So she laughed in a sound that was thin and tinny and very, very far away.

In or out, out or in.

The door opened; she walked through.

Bright and dark was the world of the dead. Surrendering, she walked into it.

All Eve wanted in the world of things to want was to get out of the excuse for a dress and the ankle-breaking heels she was wearing. She'd done her duty after all, and considered she'd earned a big red check mark on the plus side of the Marriage Rules column by decking herself out and painting herself up for an evening of playing wife of the business god.

Who'd invented the charity winter ball anyway? she wondered. Sane people wanted to stay home in warm, comfortable clothes when February reared its ugly frozen head. Even the not-so-sane were mostly huddled up somewhere at damn near two in the morning on a bitter night, which was why she'd had no excuse not to do her marital duty.

Maybe 2061 had started off with a bang—nearly literally—in the professional sense, and murder and mayhem had followed.

But murder had taken a breather, which had provided time and space for a really nice three days of hot beaches and hotter sex on Roarke's private island. And if that had to be followed up with a fancy ball with fancy clothes, well, it was checked off now.

But come Monday, she'd be back in the saddle, wearing boots and sensible clothes. Carrying badge and weapon.

Not that she didn't have the badge and weapon with her—stuffed into the silly, sparkly purse. Lieutenant Eve Dallas always had her badge and weapon.

At last she slid into the car—already cozily warm—and considered the elegant East Side hotel, its obsessively winter ballroom decor, and the crowd inside, all happily in the rear view.

Roarke leaned over, took her chin in his hand, brushing his thumb over the shallow dent as he kissed her. "Thank you."

Here she was, Eve thought, looking into the wild blue eyes of a man conjured by the gods on a particularly generous day, and she'd mostly griped internally for the bulk of the evening.

That, she decided, violated the spirit, if not the letter, of those Marriage Rules.

"It was okay."

He laughed, kissed her again before he slid away from the curb. "You hated nine out of every ten minutes in there."

Humor and echoes of Ireland wound through his voice, the perfect accompaniment to that gorgeous face framed by a mane of black hair.

The gods, she decided, had opted to mix together all the best elements of warrior, poet, angel—the fallen variety to add some spice— and then deemed he'd love an unsociable, badass murder cop.

Go figure.

"Maybe seven and a half out of every ten. It was nice seeing Charles and Louise and the Miras. I was okay, right?"

"Flawless."

"Flawless my ass." She snorted that away. "Maybe you didn't hear me tell that woman with the hair like a tower of whipped cream"—Eve demonstrated by swirling a finger over her own short, choppy brown hair—"that no, I didn't want to chair her committee for reintegrating rehabilitated offenders into society because I was too busy tossing offenders in prison."

"I heard you, and was grateful, when she went on to explain to you how the police were far too focused on punishment rather than reintegration, that you refrained from punching her."

"Thought about it. You can bet your fine ass that if one of her ROs—as she called them—walked up, conked her on her whipped-cream head, and ran off with the glitters she was dripping in, she wouldn't be lecturing me about how the law needs heart and compassion and forgiveness."

“She’s never stood over a body or had to tell someone the person they loved is gone. And so has no idea the heart and compassion those duties require.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t punch her—or anybody.” A little smug about it, she snuggled more comfortably in the seat. “Score for me. Now we can go home, get out of these duds.”

“I enjoyed seeing you in your duds almost as much as I’ll enjoy getting you out of them.”

“And we can sleep late tomorrow, right? Laze around like a couple of slugs and—”

She broke off as her habitual cop-scan of the street arrowed in. “Jesus! Stop!”

He’d seen for himself an instant before the woman stepped out into the street and into the glare of his headlights.

Naked, bloody, eyes wide and empty as moons, the woman continued to walk.

Eve leaped from the car, started to yank off her coat, but Roarke beat her to it, wrapped his own around the woman.

“She’s near to frozen,” he said to Eve. “You’ll be all right now,” he began, and the woman lifted an icy hand to his face, pressed.

“Are you an angel?” she asked. Then those wide eyes rolled up white as she crumpled.

“Get her into the car. Is there a blanket in the back?”

“In the boot.” He carried the woman to the car, laid her in the warmth as Eve grabbed a blanket.

“I’m back here with her. Toss me that stupid purse thing. Closest hospital is St. Andrew’s.”

“I know it.” He tossed Eve her bag, got behind the wheel, and floored it.

Eve pulled out her ’link, contacted the hospital. “This is Dallas, Lieutenant Eve.” She rattled off her badge number. “I’m bringing in an unidentified female, early to mid-twenties, injuries undetermined, but she’s unconscious, shocky, and likely heading into hypothermia. Five minutes out.” She judged Roarke’s speed. “Make that three.”

She used the ’link to take a photo of the woman’s face, of what she saw now were ligature marks around the neck.

“Someone tuned her up, choked her, and, odds are high, raped her. She’s got some cuts, plenty of abrasions, but I don’t think all this blood’s hers.”

“She can’t have been wandering around in that state very long. Not only because it’s barely into the single digits, but someone would have seen her.”

“Blood in her hair,” Eve murmured, probing. “She took a hit, back of the head.” Wishing she’d grabbed her field kit, she did a visual exam of the hands, the nails. Then glanced up when Roarke swung into the turn for the ER.

She hadn’t given them much notice, but two doctors or nurses— who could tell—stood outside with a gurney. Eve shoved the door open even as Roarke braked. “She’s back here. She’s been choked— rope, scarf—has a head wound, likely from a blunt object. She needs a rape kit.”

As she spoke, Eve moved out of the way while they transferred the woman to the gurney. They rolled her inside at a run, with the one who barely looked old enough to order a legal brew snapping out orders.

“Keep up.” He glanced back at Eve and Roarke. “I need any information you have.”

They banged through the doors of an exam room where more medicals waited. “On three!”

On three they lifted the unconscious woman from gurney to table. “Core temp’s ninety-one point four,” someone shouted over the rest. “I’ll get the car out of the way,” Roarke murmured to Eve. “And be back with you.”

IVs, warming blankets, poking, prodding.

God, she hated hospitals.

“Tell me what you know.” The doctor, Eve assumed, glanced briefly at Eve while he worked.

He didn’t appear to be much older than his current patient, with a mop of loosely curling brown hair around a pretty face roughened by a long-night’s scruff and fatigue shadows under his clear blue eyes.

“She stepped out into the street—Carnegie Hill. Just like you see her. Walking like she’d had a few too many, shocky, speech slurred. She asked my husband if he was an angel, then passed out.”

“Core temp’s ninety-three point two and rising.”

“I need you to bag her hands,” Eve said. “After I get her prints. Not all that blood’s hers.”

“Just let me finish saving her life first.”

Eve gave them room, kept her eyes on the woman’s face.

Young, very attractive under the bruising. Mixed race—some Asian, some black. Slight build, no more than a hundred and ten on a little over five feet. Manicured fingers—very pale pink nails, same for the toes. Pierced ears but no earrings. No tats she’d seen. Nearly waist-length black hair, in knots and tangles.

She stepped out, started running a facial recognition with the photo she’d taken in the car. Might not work, she knew, considering the battering that face had taken.

She looked up as Roarke walked toward her, with her field kit. “I thought you’d want it.”

“I do, thanks. If she doesn’t come to by the time they’ve finished, I need her prints for ID. She’s going to be from that general area. She’s got the hands and skin of somebody with enough money to pay for good care, and no way she was walking for blocks. So she lives or works in the Carnegie Hill area, or was there when she was attacked.”

She looked back at the exam room doors. “From the blood on her you’d say she put up a fight, but I don’t see any defensive wounds. No blood or skin under her nails—at least not that shows on a visual.” “You’re worried someone was with her, someone else was attacked.”

“I’ve got to put it as a possibility. If this one got away, the other—”

She broke off when the doors opened and the doctor stepped out. “Her vitals are stabilizing, and her core temperature’s up to ninety-six plus. The head wound’s the most severe of her injuries—which include multiple facial contusions and lacerations, abdominal bruising, some cuts that look like shallow knife wounds. She has a concussion. She was raped, more than once, and violently. You’ll have your kit there. The drunken walking and the slurred words are likely from the hypothermia and shock. We’re running a tox, but that’s most likely.”

“I need her prints. Not all her blood,” Eve reminded him before he could object. “Someone else might be out there in the same condition as she is. I ID her, maybe it leads us to saving another life tonight.”

“Sorry, didn’t think of it.” He rubbed at his eyes. “Double shift.”

"I hear that."

"Sorry again. You probably saved her life getting her here so fast. Sure as hell saved her from brain damage. Dr. Nobel. Del Nobel."

Eve accepted his hand. "Dallas. Lieutenant Dallas. Roarke."

"Yeah, that got through about two minutes ago." He shook Roarke's hand in turn. "Nice dress," he said to Eve.

"We were at a thing."

"Hope your cleaners can get the blood out of it. Let's get your ID. Somebody's probably worried about her."

They stepped back inside. "I want pictures of the injuries," Eve said. But ID came first.

She moved to the side of the table, took her pad out of her kit, gently pressed the woman's fingers to it.

"Okay. Strazza, Daphne, age twenty-four. Got an address about two blocks from where we found her. Married to . . ."

She glanced up, saw Del's face. "You know her."

"No, never met her. But I know her husband. Everybody in this hospital knows Anthony Strazza. Jesus. She's Strazza's wife?"

"Let's keep that under wraps until I can . . . She's waking up." Eve saw the long, dark lashes flutter. Then the eyes—almond shaped and strikingly, softly green—opened. Stared blindly.

Del held up a hand to stop Eve as he leaned over Daphne. "You're okay. You're in the hospital. Nobody's going to hurt you. You're safe now."

Those eyes darted around the room. As her breathing began to rush and hitch, Del took her hand. "You're okay," he repeated. "I'm a doctor. You're safe. I'm going to give you something for the pain."

"No, no, no."

"Okay, okay, we'll wait on that." His voice stayed calm, stayed easy. And though the monitors charted her vitals, Eve noted he laid his fingers on her wrist, taking her pulse the old-fashioned way. "I just want you to relax," he continued, "to breathe slow. Can you tell us what happened to you?"

"I was dead. I think I was dead."

Her gaze landed on Eve. "Were you there?"

Eve moved forward. "What do you remember?" "I . . . went away. Or the world did."

"Before that. Can you remember before that?"

"We had dinner, a dinner party. Dinner for fifty at eight, with cocktails beginning at seven-thirty. I wore the Dior with the crusted pearl trim. We had lobster medallions, seared scallop salad and winter squash soup, prime rib and fingerlings roasted with rosemary, with white and green asparagus. Croquebouche and coffee. The wines were—"

"That's okay, what happened after dinner?"

"Our guests left at eleven-thirty. If I'd planned better, they'd have left at eleven. My husband has rounds in the morning. He's very busy. He's a surgeon, so respected, so talented. We'd normally go to bed after the guests left, and the house droids cleared up. We'd go to bed, and—"

Her breathing shortened again. This time Eve gripped her hand before Del could interfere. "You're safe, but you need to tell me what happened when you went up to bed."

“Someone in the house.” She whispered it, like a secret. “Not a guest. Not. Waiting. A devil, it’s a devil! His face is a devil. My husband . . . He fell. He fell and the devil laughed. I don’t know. I don’t know. Please. I don’t know.”

She began to sob, tried to curl up into herself.

“That’s it,” Del snapped at Eve. “She needs to rest. Give her some time.”

“I’m going to check under her nails. If she got a piece of who did this, I need it.”

“Make it fast.”

The visual with microgoggles showed nothing, but she got her tools, gently scraped. Nothing.

“Either she didn’t fight back, or didn’t get the chance.” Eve studied the ligature marks on the wrists. “If she tells you anything else, I need to hear about it. I’ll be back in a few hours, and I’ll be assigning a uniform to sit on her room.”

Eve stepped out with Roarke.

“Are you assigning a uniform to keep someone out, or to keep her in?”

“I don’t know yet.” She pulled out her link as they walked. “Let’s go check on Anthony Strazza.”

Not exactly the end-of-the-night plans they had expected, Eve thought as she did a quick run on the Strazzas during the short drive.

The surgeon had more than twenty years on his wife—his second wife, Eve noted. Wife number one—divorced five years ago—currently lived in Australia and had not remarried.

Current wife, of three years, had been a student and part-time event planner (or assistant planner) when they’d married. No updated employment listed.

As trophy wives went, Eve supposed Daphne fit the bill. Young, beautiful when her face hadn’t been pummeled. Probably an excellent hostess with the event-planning bent.

Eve wondered, though she was Roarke’s first and only spouse, if some considered her a trophy.

She glanced at him as he maneuvered into a street slot outside the double redbrick townhouse where the Strazzas lived.

“You didn’t get a shiny prize.”

“I’m fond of shiny prizes,” he said. “Why didn’t I get one?”

“Your own fault. As trophies go, I’d be in the dull-and-dented category.”

“Not in the least. But then again, you’re no trophy.”

She got out, navigating from curb to sidewalk in the stupid fancy- girl shoes. “That’s a compliment?”

“It’s truth. If I’d wanted a trophy, I’d have one, wouldn’t I?” He took her hand, rubbed his thumb over her wedding ring. “I much prefer my cop. You’re thinking of Daphne Strazza, and the generational difference in age with her husband.”

“How do you know? You haven’t had time to do a run.”

“Simple enough as Strazza’s a surgeon of some repute—and the name rings a dim bell. He’s bound to be twenty years or so older than she.”

“Twenty-six. Second wife. First, close to his age, divorced after about a dozen years. Lives in Australia, on a sheep ranch, which is a pretty far ways from New York and dinner parties in town mansions on the Upper East.”

She gave the house a study. Three stories of old elegance, New York style. Strazza had merged two townhomes into one, widening one entrance to highlight the main with carved double doors. Tall, slim windows, privacy screened for the night,

stood like blank eyes in their frames of dark wood. A pair of glass doors on the second floor led to a kind of Juliet balcony with a stylized S centered in the rail.

The same ironwork flanked the three steps leading from sidewalk to entrance.

And there, Eve noted, he had top-of-the-line security.

“Cam, palm plate, intercom, double swipe,” she said as they approached. “He paid for the dignified look, but he’s got a pair of high- end police locks on here. Audio, visual, and motion alarms.”

“Back in the day, this is just the sort of house in just the sort of neighborhood I’d have targeted.” The thought of those days as a master thief brought a nostalgic smile to his lips. “It’s quiet, settled, and inside? That’s where all the goodies are. Art, jewelry, cash as well.” “If we were back in the day, how long would it take you to compromise the security?”

His hair blowing in the wind, Roarke angled his head to study the locks. “With proper due diligence and preparation? Two or three, I’d say. Likely closer to two.”

“Minutes.”

“Of course.”

He wasn’t bragging, she mused. Just stating a fact.

Eve rang the bell. She expected an automated comp response, but got nothing at all.

She rang again. “I’d call that a security lapse. No warning, no response from the system, no attempt to scan.”

As they waited, Roarke took out his PPC, ran some sort of scan of his own. “The system’s down,” he told Eve. “Deactivated, and the door, Lieutenant, is unlocked.”

“Shit.” She took her weapon and badge out of her bag, tossed the bag on the stoop, clipped the badge to her coat. And wasn’t surprised, as she also clipped a recorder to her coat, when Roarke took a clutch piece out of an ankle holster.

“Hold it. Record on. Dallas, Lieutenant Eve, and expert civilian consultant Roarke entering unsecured residence of Anthony Strazza. Two attempts at contact elicited no response. There is reason to believe Strazza is injured or under duress. I have armed the civilian.”

She shoved open the door, went in low. Roarke went in high.

She swept the foyer. Overhead a silver-and-white free-form chandelier dripped dim light, and illuminated drops and smears of blood on the white marble floors.

“We’ve got blood—and footprints through it. Bare feet—probably Daphne Strazza’s.”

She gestured him one way, went the other, each calling out “Clear!” when they’d swept a room.

She didn’t need Roarke to tell her someone had walked off with some trinkets. She spotted a couple of empty wall niches—and the dinner-party debris no house droids had dealt with.

They rounded back, started up to the second floor, once again separated. She caught the scent as she walked toward the room in line with the balcony, the one with double white doors open.

Blood and death . . . and flowers.

She found all three in the spacious suite with its wide bed flanked with high posts of burnished gold. Like the floor, drops and smears of blood marred the knotted white linens. A chair with gold finish lay with its back broken and trailing duct

tape—bloodied and ragged. Trampled white lilies swam in a pool of blood or scattered bruised petals over the white and gold carpet.

A large vase of deeply cut crystal had spilled its flowers and water over the carpet and lay smeared with blood and gray matter.

More blood on the footboard, at the edge where board met post, and what looked like blurry handprints, red against the white of the carpet.

Among the blood and gore, Anthony Strazza lay like a penitent at the altar, arms and legs outstretched. Still fully dressed, he wore a dark gray suit with a paler gray shirt. Cuff links winked at his wrists. His face, barely recognizable, showed red and purple from a beating in the slice of profile Eve could see.

Blood, gore matted his dark blond hair where it had seeped and run from the gaping wounds in the back of his skull.

“I’ve got a body!” Eve called out.

Roarke joined her, standing in the doorway with her.

“No one does this to steal—and then not take so much that’s easily transported.”

“Maybe it got out of hand,” Eve said. “We still have to clear the third floor.”

“Why don’t you do that, as we both know whoever did this is long gone. I’ll go out and get your field kit.”

Long gone, Eve agreed, but procedure was procedure for a reason. She cleared the top floor, Strazza’s office suite, a bathroom, a kind of media room in the contemporary and manly style, a shiny automatic kitchen, a full bar, a secondary workstation . . .

And an open safe built into a small cabinet. She went down as Roarke came up.

“Nearly empty safe on three. At a quick glance it didn’t look compromised. I lean toward the assailant beating the code out of Strazza, but you could check it out.”

She looked down at her shoes—needle-thin heels attached to her feet by a bunch of glittery straps. Resigned, she took them off, sealed her bare feet, her hands, handed him the can of Seal-It. “Haven’t cleared the closets or the master bath. Why don’t you seal up and do that? I need to officially ID the vic, call it in.”

“You’ll be getting Peabody up early, I take it.”

“It’s never early when you’re a cop. I need real clothes, damn it.” “I’ll take care of that.”

“How?” she demanded when he put the can back in her kit.

“By getting Summerset up early.”

She thought of Roarke’s majordomo, the pain in her ass. “But—”

Amused at her expected reaction, Roarke skimmed a finger over her bare shoulder before he went into the bedroom. “Your choice whether to do what you do more comfortably or in formal wear.” “Damn it. Clothes. And boots. And my regular coat. And—”

“He knows what to send along. Another safe in the closet—his closet—open and empty.”

Eve tossed her coat behind her, walked over the soiled carpet, crouched in a sheer dress of red and silver. The skirt consisted of dozens of thin, floaty panels that swirled like ribbons when she walked and exposed a long length of leg. Straps, as narrow and sparkly as those on the discarded shoes, crisscrossed over her bare back.

She pressed dead fingers to her Identi-pad.

“Victim identity verified as Anthony Strazza of this address.” She took out a gauge. “TOD, zero-one-hundred-twenty-six. COD to be determined by ME, but by visual exam of primary, most likely the skull fracture.”

“That would do it,” Roarke said from behind her. “No safe in the wife’s closet. I’d suggest the one in his is large enough to hold her jewelry and any he might have had. And I’ll take a look at the one upstairs.”

“Check the security feed first, would you? He likely cleared it out or compromised it, but we could get lucky. And the doors and alarms.”

“As an expert consultant, I’d have to say burglary wasn’t the point here, or not the primary one.”

“No, just a really big bonus to top off rape and murder.” She started to reach for her ’link. “Damn it. My ’link’s in that shiny thing.”

“No, it’s in your field kit, and the shiny thing’s now empty in the car.” “Oh, yeah, here it is. Thanks. Look, I’m going to tell Peabody to bring McNab, as this place is loaded with electronics. You could head home, catch some sleep.”

When he just raised his eyebrows, she shrugged. “Or not.”

“Or not. I can tell you the . . . intruder bashed the components in the security room. As I was clearing I didn’t look beyond that, or the droids—a trio of house droids, also smashed.”

“He likes violence—animate or inanimate. Whatever you can get.” “I’ll see what I can do.”

Alone, Eve looked down at the body, thought about just what one human could do to another.

And called it in.