

# 1

IT WOULDN'T KILL HER.

Probably wouldn't kill her.

Eyebrows knit together beneath a snowflake cap, Lieutenant Eve Dallas strode through the flood of people on the crowded sidewalk with thoughts nearly as bitter as the February wind.

She'd rather be back in her vehicle and driving home through the jam of other vehicles. Down to it, she'd rather engage in mortal combat in some downtown alleyway with a Zeused-up chemi-head than head for some fussy fern bar.

But a deal was a deal, and she'd run out of excuses—reasons, she self-corrected. She'd had solid reasons to put this deal off.

Like murder.

A murder cop dealt with murder and all it entailed. Not fancy drinks and small talk.

Resigned, she stuffed her hands—she'd forgotten her damn gloves again—in the pockets of her long leather coat that snapped and

billowed around her long legs. Her gaze scanned as she hiked the two blocks, brown and canny cop's eyes on alert. Maybe she'd spot a street thief, Christ knew plenty of tourists clipped by with their wallets all but hanging out saying: Take me.

Not her fault if she had to make an arrest and put this little meet off, again.

But apparently the snatchers and pickers had taken the evening off.

She reminded herself drinks with Dr. Garnet DeWinter, fashion plate, forensic anthropologist, and mild irritant couldn't annoy or bore her to actual death.

And if death by boredom equaled a potential risk, surely they had come up with a cure by 2061.

Thirty minutes, she vowed. Forty max, and she'd be done. Deal complete.

She stopped in front of the bar, a tall, rangy woman in flat, sturdy ankle boots, a long black coat, and the incongruous ski cap with a snowflake shimmering over her choppy brown hair and knitted eyebrows.

Du Vin.

Stupid name for a bar, she thought, her wide mouth twisting in derision. Snooty French name for a bar.

She wondered if Roarke owned it because her husband owned damn near everything else. She'd rather be having a drink with him. At home.

But she wasn't.

She reached for the door, remembered the snowflake. She yanked it off, stuffed it in her pocket to maintain a little dignity.

She stepped out of the noise and rush of downtown New York, into the fern-and flower-decked noise of the trendy, overpriced drinking hole.

The bar itself, a dull and elegant silver, swept itself into an *S* curve along the facing wall. Mirrored shelves filled with shiny bottles backed it. On the top shelf exotic red flowers spilled out of black-and-white checked pots.

Stools with black-and-white checked seats lined the front. An ass filled every seat while other patrons crowded in, keeping the trio of bartenders busy.

The generous space, artistically lit by silver pendants twisted into floral shapes, provided room for high tops, low tops, booths, and the waitstaff, dressed in sharply severe black, moving among them.

Just under the drone of sound generated by voices, clinking glassware and the *click* of shoes on the polished floor, the music system lilted with some throaty-voiced woman singing in French.

It all struck Eve as entirely too . . . everything.

Her instinctive scan of the room paused on a blonde—striking features, a lush tumble of hair, a curvy body packed into a bright pink skinsuit with high-heeled boots as green as her eyes.

It only took a beat for her to recognize the gossip reporter—or, as Larinda Mars termed herself, the social information reporter. The last thing Eve wanted, other than some weird French drink, was to find herself an on-air item on Channel Seventy-Five.

At the moment, Mars appeared much too focused on her table companion to notice Eve's entrance. Mid-thirties, mixed raced, slickly, polished looks, wavy brown hair, and blue eyes that looked as annoyed as she herself felt.

Business suit—not off the rack—high-end wrist unit.

His face didn't ring for her, but as long as he kept Larinda Mars's attention on him, Eve figured she owed him one.

The hostess, bold red hair swept up into a sleek, headache-inducing twist, approached with a practiced smile.

“Good evening, do you have a reservation?”

“I don’t know. I’m here to meet somebody. Maybe she got hung up.” Please God.

“Might she have made a reservation?”

“I don’t know. DeWinter.”

“Oh, yes, Dr. DeWinter. She’s here. I think she went down to freshen up. Let me show you to your table.”

“Fine.”

At least they headed to the opposite end of the bar from Mars.

“Would you like to check your coat?”

“No, I’ve got it.” Eve slid into the booth, onto the checked seat. A wall—head-high when she sat, and topped with more flower pots—separated the booth from another section of tables.

The cop in her would have preferred a seat giving her a full visual radius of everything, everybody.

But she only had to handle it for thirty minutes.

A single glass of something pink and frothy stood on the other side of the table.

“Cesca will be taking care of you this evening,” the hostess announced. “She’ll be right with you.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Thirty minutes, Eve promised herself as she unwound her scarf—knitted by her partner’s artistic hands—stuffed it in her coat pocket. Accepting her fate, she shrugged out of her coat as the waitress, her hair a short, blunt swing of purple, stepped to the booth.

“Good evening, I’m Cesca, and I’ll be your server. What can I get for you?”

Eve considered ordering a cheap American beer, just to be contrary. “Wine, red’s fine.”

“A glass, a half bottle, or a bottle?”

“Just a glass.”

Cesca tapped a remote on her belt. The screen on the separating wall of the booth came on, and displayed a list—a long list—of red wines by the glass.

“Would you like some time to decide?”

“No . . .” Eve knew a little about wines. A woman couldn’t live with Roarke and not absorb some basic knowledge. She tapped a cabernet she knew she’d had at home, and knew came from one of Roarke’s vineyards.

“Oh, that’s a lovely wine. I’ll have it right out to you. Would you care for any appetizers, hors d’oeuvres, accompaniments?”

“No. No, thanks.”

The young waitress never lost her smile. “If you change your mind, we have a lovely selection—you can order from the screen. I’ll get your wine.”

Even as she stepped away, Eve saw DeWinter walk through a doorway at the far end of the bar.

DeWinter wore a body-skimming dress, nearly the same tone as the waitress’ hair, and matched the outfit with tall, supple boots in a silver gray—with killer, wire-thin heels.

Her lips, dyed a red that edged toward purple, curved when she spotted Eve, and humor lit in her eyes—a cool, crystal blue against the smooth caramel tone of her skin.

With her dark hair sleek, her stride confident, she crossed the polished floor, slid gracefully into the booth.

She said, “Alone at last.”

“Funny.”

“I expected a text telling me you had to cancel.”

“No DBs to deal with, tonight.”

“That’s cheery.”

“Won’t last.”

“No, but then what would you and I do if it did? You need a drink.”

“One’s coming.”

DeWinter picked up her own, leaned back as she sipped. “I love the drinks here. This one, the Nuage Rose is a favorite. What’s yours?”

“First time here. I’m sticking with red wine.”

“I assumed you’d been here before since Roarke owns it.”

Figured, Eve thought. “If I hit every place Roarke owns, just in the city, I wouldn’t have time to do anything else.”

“You’ve got a point. It’s a favorite of mine.” Obviously relaxed, DeWinter glanced around as she drank. “Close to work, beautiful decor, great people watching, and excellent service.”

As if to prove the last, Cesca set Eve’s wine on the table.

“You didn’t order any, but . . .” Cesca held out a black plate filled with thin, golden sticks.

“Olive straws. Cesca, you know my weakness. Thanks,” DeWinter said.

“No problem.” The waitress set down the straws, two little plates, some fancy napkins. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

“They’re terrific,” DeWinter told Eve, placing a few on her plate.

No point in being rude, Eve decided—plus they looked pretty damn good. And were, she thought when she sampled one.

“Why don’t we just get to it.” DeWinter nibbled on an olive straw. “I don’t need everyone to like me. I don’t even need to know why the people who don’t, don’t. You know as well as I: When you’re in a position of authority, some don’t. And when you’re a woman in that position, even though we’re in the second half of the twenty-first century, that just adds to it.”

She paused to drink again.

“But, even though you and I don’t and likely won’t work together routinely, there has been and will be times we do.”

With a shrug DeWinter gestured with her drink. “I can get around

that, as can you. We're both professionals, and good at what we do. But we also have personal connections."

Eve gave the wine a try—really good—while she studied DeWinter's striking face. "Did you practice all that?"

Though one perfect eyebrow shot up, DeWinter maintained the same even tone. "No, but I've had plenty of time to think about it. So . . . I'm friendly with some of your friends. Nadine, Mavis, for instance. Friendly enough that Mavis and Leonardo had my daughter and me to Bella's birthday party. And wasn't that an event?"

"For Mavis, Tuesday mornings are events."

"That's part of her charm and appeal. I like her quite a bit. I understand she's one of your people—"

"She doesn't belong to me," Eve interrupted.

"She's part—a key part—of your circle. A very tight circle. You're careful who comes into that circle, and I respect that. I don't expect you and I will be the B of Bs, but—"

"The what?"

"Sorry, my daughter's influence." Humor, the genuine sort, brightened her face. "Best of besties. We can maintain a professional relationship, but I'm curious what it is about me that irritates you."

"I don't think about it."

Lips curved, DeWinter took another sip of her frothy drink. "Maybe for the purpose of this exercise, you could."

For the life of her, Eve couldn't see why it mattered. She shrugged. "I don't know you. You're good at your work. Really good. That's all I need."

"I'm pushy, and so are you."

"Okay."

"We don't necessarily approach a case the same way, but we have the same goals."

“No argument.”

“You’re not the type of person I’d look for, for a friend, being you’re rude more often than not, single-minded, and manage to be a hard-ass and a tight-ass at the same time.”

Though the tight-ass comment annoyed, Eve let it go. “Then what are we doing here?”

Shifting, DeWinter leaned forward just a little. “You also inspire amazing and unquestionable loyalty, not only in those who work under you, but in your personal life. You have a man I respect and admire quite a bit madly in love with you.”

Eve crunched into another olive straw. “Maybe he likes rude hard-asses.”

“He must. But I also know him to be a superior judge of character, a man who studies and sees the big picture. And I see that close circle of friends, the diversity of them. I’m a small-details-open-the-big-picture sort of person, so I’m curious.”

Casually, DeWinter picked up another olive straw. “Is it Morris?” DeWinter waited a beat, nodded. “A big part of it is Li, then. He’s also one of yours.”

A quick frisson of annoyance ran straight up her spine. “Morris is his own man.”

“He is, but he’s part of that circle, and the loyalty there is a solid two-way street. We’re friends, Li and I. We’re companions. We’re not bedmates.”

“It’s none of my—”

“Business? That’s bullshit, tight-ass.” She laughed then at the flash in Eve’s eyes. “I don’t expect you’re called that to your face often.”

“Not unless the other party wants their face bloodied.”

“I appreciate your restraint. I care about Li, as a friend. And though he’s about as perfect a specimen, inside and out, as it gets—and I’m pretty damn good myself—we’re not drawn to each other that way.”

She glanced away for a moment, gave a small sigh. “I’ll admit, I’ve half wished we were a few times, but we’re simply not. On either side. I didn’t know Amaryllis, but I do know Li loved her, loved her deeply. You know about loving deeply, and you know how the loss of her leveled him. You were there for him when it did. You’re still there for him.”

Eve knew the sound of bullshit, and she knew the sound of truth. What she heard was truth. It loosened her stiffened spine.

“He’s still grieving,” Eve said. “Not as much, not the way he was, but he’s still grieving.”

“Yes, he is. And part of him may always. We met each other at a time we both needed and wanted a friend and companion, without the complications of sex. We have a lot in common, and he’s become a very good friend to my daughter, who’s the love of my life. I’m not looking for Li to fill some void in me. I’m not, in fact, looking for anyone to do that as I don’t have a void, and no intention of complicating my baby’s life by inserting someone into it, on that level.”

She paused a moment, sighed again. “Though I do miss sex. Regardless, she’s my first, my last and my all. Li’s delightful with her, and I think she also helps him find more light, more comfort.

“She wanted to meet you.”

“Me? Why?”

“She’s heard your name, and she’s seen you on screen—it’s hard to block the crime channels, the Internet, when she’s a clever girl and very interested. Plus you and Roarke gave Bella the dollhouse at the party. Major hit. But you left before I could bring her over to you.”

“We had an incident.”

“I’m aware. I heard. And the officer who was injured?”

“On medical leave. He’ll be all right.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“We came back,” Eve added. “To the party.”

“Yes, Li mentioned that, but we’d already left. She had a school project that still needed—according to her—some fine-tuning. I don’t have designs on Li, and he doesn’t have feelings for me that go beyond friendship. So whatever problem you have with me, I hope you can take that out of the mix.”

“Okay.” Eve drank a little wine, considered. “I don’t know you, and what I do know I don’t really get. You strike me as a snob, and one with her own tight ass who’s plenty puffed up about all the letters after her name.”

DeWinter’s back went up like a bright red flag. “I’m not a snob!”

“What’s that thing you’re drinking, the thing you named with a snooty French accent?”

“I like this drink, and I speak French. That doesn’t make me a snob.”

Amused now—who knew that was all it took to get under DeWinter’s skin?—Eve plowed on. “And you—what’s the word—swirl around in your coordinated outfits?”

“You’re wearing five thousand dollar boots.”

“I am not.” Appalled, Eve stuck one foot out, stared. “God.” She probably was. “The difference is, I wouldn’t have a clue how much your boots cost, only that nobody with any sense would wear them when they’re going to stand on them for hours at a time.”

DeWinter’s face, her voice, registered absolute astonishment. “Your problem with me is how I dress?”

“It’s systemic,” Eve decided on the spot.

“Systemic, my ass.” DeWinter wagged a straw at Eve before crunching it. “You’ve formed an opinion of me on surface appearance, and you’re a better cop than that.”

“You’re too quick to preen in front of the cameras.”

“I don’t preen. And that’s rich coming from you when one of your closest friends is a reporter—and you get plenty of screen time.”

“When it’s advantageous to an investigation.”

“She wrote a damn book about you. And the vid adapted from it is up for Oscars.”

“No, she wrote a damn book about the Icovs.” Eve held up a hand. “You stole a dog.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.”

“You stole a dog,” Eve continued, “because it was being neglected and abused, and nobody else would do anything about it. You kept the dog. I believe in serve and protect, and when somebody—even a dog—is being abused, somebody needs to stop it. You did. That’s a point for you.”

“My dog’s a point for me?”

“Yeah, and maybe Morris has shifted to the other side because I know when somebody’s bullshitting me, and you’re not. And you’ve been good for him. When I look at it, at him, I’m not going to say otherwise. He’s steadier, and maybe part of that’s having you to hang with.”

“I care about him.”

“I got that. Doesn’t make you less of a snob or a media hound, but I got that.”

On a huff, DeWinter sat back again. “I swear to God, here and now, I don’t know why I half like you.”

“Back at you. Since I figure half is good enough, that should do it. I need to get home.”

“You haven’t finished your wine,” DeWinter began.

They both looked over at the sound of glass striking the floor. DeWinter looked away again, picked up her drink.

“No point in wasting—”

It’s as far as she got before Eve surged up.

Larinda Mars no longer sat in a booth, nor did her companion. Instead she walked like a drunk over the polished floor, her shoes

crunching on broken glass from a tray she'd knocked over when she'd run straight into a waiter.

Her eyes, both dazed and dull, stared straight ahead as she weaved and shuffled. And blood soaked the right sleeve of her pink skinsuit, dripping a thin river onto the floor.

Eve rushed for her, shoving people aside. Someone started to scream.

Mars's eyes rolled back as she pitched forward. Eve caught her before she hit the floor, so they went down together.

"DeWinter!" Eve snapped as she fought to pull the tight sleeve away and find the source of the blood.

"I'm here, I'm here. Put pressure on it."

"Where?"

DeWinter dropped down, pressed both hands on Mars's right biceps. "We need to cut the sleeve away. I need something to make a tourniquet. She's lost a lot of blood."

Jumping up, Eve dug in her pocket for a penknife. "Use this. You!" She grabbed one of the waitstaff. "Nobody leaves."

"I can't—"

"Lock the damn door." As she spoke, she dragged off her belt. "You!" She pointed at one of the bartenders as people panicked, scrambled. "Call nine-one-one. Now. We need medicals."

"I'm a doctor, I'm a doctor." A man fought his way through the crowd.

"So am I," DeWinter said as she cut away the sleeve. "I don't have a pulse."

"Brachial artery." The man straddled Mars, began to pump her chest. "Get that tourniquet on. If we can keep her going . . . Tell the MTs we need blood. O-neg. She needs a transfusion."

Eve left the victim to the medicals, dealt with the crowd.

"Everybody stay where you are!" She whipped out her badge, held

it up. "I'm a cop. Take a seat, give the doctors room." She stepped over as a man in a cashmere top coat tried to shove the waitress away from the door. "I said take a seat."

"You have no authority to—"

She shoved her jacket back to reveal her weapon. "Wanna bet?"

He gave her a look of intense dislike, but stalked over to the bar, stood.

"Nobody out," Eve repeated. "Nobody in but cops and medicals."

"We won't need the medicals." DeWinter, her hands wet with blood, sat back on her heels. "She's gone."

No DBs? Eve thought as she took out her 'link to call it in.

No, it didn't last.

She had a bar full of people, one might be a murderer. Though she suspected whoever'd sliced Mars was long gone. Still, she needed to deal with what she had.

"Quiet down!" Her order cut down on most of the noise. "I need everybody to remain in their seats, or remain where they are."

"I want to go home." At the sobbing shout Eve simply nodded.

"I understand, and will try to get everyone out of here as soon as possible. For now, I need this table and this table to move in an orderly fashion to that area of the room."

"There's so much blood," someone murmured.

"Yeah, and that's why I need you to move. Take your things, and move to the north side of the room. Please."

"Why are you in charge?" someone shouted. "You can't keep us here."

Eve simply held up her badge. "This is a police badge. I'm Lieutenant Dallas, NYPD, and this is now a police investigation."

"Um, ma'am?" The waitress at the door raised her hand.

“Lieutenant.”

“Well, the MTs are here—I can see them pulling up.”

“Let them in. Please move to the north side.”

A woman stood up, picked up her purse with a shaky hand. And passed out cold. Since that started a fresh wave of panic and shouting, Eve ignored it, turned to the MTs who rushed in.

“Deal with the fainter,” she said, gesturing. “It’s too late for the bleeder. Listen up! I can take names and statements here, then send you on your way, or I can call for a wagon, have every single one of you transported to Central and deal with it there. Your choice. If you want to get out of here, quiet down. And you people at these tables, move it.”

“I’m not leaving my girlfriend.”

Eve studied the man who’d caught the fainter on her way down. “No problem. Give the MTs room to bring her around. I’d suggest you shield her eyes from the blood, help her move to the north side. And somebody with a chair on that side, give it up for—What’s her name?”

“Marlee.”

“Give Marlee a chair.” She turned to one of the bartenders. “How about some water for her?”

“Um. The police are here.”

Thank Christ, Eve thought. “Let them in, and go ahead and move over to the north. Thanks.”

A couple of beat droids, Eve identified as they stepped in. A whole lot better than nothing. “I need to secure this scene. These people at these tables need to move to the north side. Get them some chairs.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can’t we find something to cover her?”

At the doctor’s question, both Eve and DeWinter, said, “No,” in unison. Eve lifted her eyebrows at DeWinter.

“I’m sorry,” DeWinter continued, “I didn’t get your name.”

“Sterling, Bryce Sterling.”

“Dr. Sterling, I want to thank you for what you did here. We can’t cover her as it may compromise forensic evidence.”

“I’ve got shields coming,” Eve added. And a field kit as hers was two blocks down in the trunk of her car. “Who’s in charge of the bar?”

“I am.” One of the bartenders raised her hand. “I’m the manager on duty.”

“Name?”

“Emily. Emily Francis.”

“Ms. Francis, I don’t see any security cams in this area.”

“No, we don’t have interior cams. Just on the exterior.”

“Is there another exit?”

“There’s an exit to the alley. It’s . . .” She pointed behind her. “From the kitchen.”

“Is anyone in the back?”

“I—I was.” A man—really hardly more than a boy—lifted a hand. “I was in the storeroom, and I heard screaming, so I ran in.”

“We were in the kitchen.”

A group of three, all wearing white bib aprons stood together near the swinging doors behind the bar.

“Anybody back there now?”

“No. But I need to make sure everything’s turned off. Can I?”

“Name?”

“I’m Curt—ah, Curtis Liebowitz.”

“First, did anyone come through the kitchen in the last hour, and go out the alley door?”

“Uh-uh. I mean no. We would’ve seen them.”

“Go ahead, Curt, and come right back. Okay.” She turned back. “Here’s what’s going to happen. These officers are going to start taking names, contact information, and statements. When they, or the officers

now on their way to this location, are satisfied with that information, you'll be free to go."

She gestured one of the droids over.

"I want to know who was seated at the booths in front and behind the vic, at the tables nearest her booth—if they're still on scene. I want those individuals held."

"Yes, sir."

"Get started. Emily, right?"

"Yes."

Eve leaned in a bit, lowered her voice. "Do you know who owns this bar?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes. I didn't until you said your name, but—"

"Good. I need you to help me keep the staff calm and ordered. I'd like you to have your most reliable waitperson help you distribute water or soft drinks to the customers still in the bar. Can you do that?"

"Yeah. Lieutenant? I know the . . . her. Ms. Mars. Larinda Mars."

"Personally?"

"No, I mean, not really. I mean she's a regular. And she's on screen. The gossip channel."

A steady one, Eve thought. She'd expect no less from one of Roarke's business managers. "I don't see the man she was with here in the bar."

"I think he left before . . . before she came up from the bathroom. I mean she went through there, and that leads down to the restrooms, so I assume she went there."

"Do you know who she was with?"

"No, but I can find out. He paid for the drinks. He charged them. I think he used his 'link app. I can check."

“I’d appreciate if you’d do that, and have a couple of reliables pass out drinks. No alcohol, okay?”

“Got it.”

“Who served them?”

“That’s Kyle’s booth.” Emily looked around, gesturing with her chin. “He’s over there with Cesca and Malory.”

“Okay, go ahead and check that charge for me.”

Eve stepped back to the body, crouched down. “I’ve got a field kit coming, but in the meanwhile we’ve ID’d her—from the primary, and from the manager of the bar, as Larinda Mars.”

“I knew she looked familiar,” DeWinter added. “I’ve seen her reports.”

“We have TOD as verified on my recorder by both you and Dr. Sterling.”

“You had your recorder on?” DeWinter demanded.

“Relax. Jesus. I engaged it when she came staggering out with blood dripping everywhere. Dr. Sterling, in your medical opinion, how long does it take someone, given her height, weight, to bleed out from a cut to—you said brachial artery?”

“It depends. It might only take a couple minutes. It might take longer, between eight and twelve. Realistically, she was dead before we saw her. We simply couldn’t have saved her as she’d already lost too much blood.”

“Okay. Say somebody slices this artery. What’s the immediate response?”

“Depending, again, it would gush with every heartbeat. If it was only nicked or partially cut, it would leak more slowly. Without treatment, there would be confusion, disorientation, shock, increasing with blood loss until unconsciousness and death.”

“All right. I’m going to get your contact information, your statement.

Then you can go back to the kitchen, clean up if you want. I'll clear that. After, you're free to go, with thanks."

"My wife is here. She's . . ."

"I'll see that she's interviewed right away, so you can leave together."

As she straightened, one of the droids opened the door for her partner and her partner's main man.

Detective Peabody wore a pom-pom hat over her currently flippy dark hair. EDD ace, Detective McNab's red coat and plaid airboots lit up the bar like fireworks.

Eve moved to them quickly, held up a finger to hold off questions. "Peabody, I need you get the statement and contact information of the guy next to the DB. He's a doctor. His wife's in the crowd, and I need her interviewed next so they can be released. After, take the waitstaff. They're likely to have seen more. McNab, the manager is Emily Francis—the brunette behind the bar. She'll tell you where to find the security feed. Exterior only on this place."

She took the field kit from him. "I've got shields coming, so let them in, curtain off the body asap. I'm heading downstairs, the most likely site of the attack."

"Just one question?" Peabody held up a single finger. "What the hell happened?"

"Looks like somebody decided to cut off the social information network. Keep this crowd in line," she added, then strode off, moving around the blood trail so as not to compromise it more than it already was.