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ON THE MEGA SCREEN BLOODY MURDER PLAYED OUT IN CLASSIC BLACK AND white for an audience of one hundred and seven. With the sharp screech of violins, violas, and cellos that number dropped by one.

Unlike the character of Marion Crane, Chanel Rylan didn't scream or flail at the shock of violent death. In row twenty-seven in theater three of Vid Galaxy in New York City's Times Square, she let out little more than a mouse squeak as the ice pick plunged into the back of her neck.

Her body gave one quick jerk; her hands batted at the air and up-ended the mini bucket of popcorn in her lap. Her last breath escaped like a long sigh.

She died in the dark as blood circled black down the drain on the screen.

No one noticed. With all eyes, all attention riveted to the screen, no one noticed the killer slip into the aisle and walk away from dark deeds.

When Lola Kawaski hurried back in, dropping into her aisle seat,

she cursed in a whisper, “Damn it, I can’t believe I missed the big, classic scene. *And* I’m going to have to miss the rest. I’m kicking myself for agreeing to be on call tonight, but we’ve got an emergency coming in, so—”

In apology, she patted Chanel’s arm. The movement caused her dead friend’s body to shift, slumping against Lola. Lola’s initial amusement—leave it to an actor to go all dramatic—flipped to alarm.

Then the screaming started.

Lieutenant Eve Dallas stood over the body. Someone had dragged said body into the aisle in a useless attempt at first—or more accurately last—aid. Now the scene was totally fucked.

So was her evening at home. She’d actually walked in the door on time for once, out of the claw swipe of late February wind and into the warmth of a Summerset-free house, as Roarke’s majordomo was off on his winter vacation.

She’d even beaten Roarke home and experienced the odd and rare sensation of having the big-ass fancy house all to herself. And the cat.

She’d considered squeezing in a workout—contemplated just jogging from room to room; if she managed to hit them all that would equal a pretty damn serious workout.

Instead, she wandered into the big front parlor with its art, antiques, and rich colors. She decided she deserved a big red circle around the day on the 2061 calendar, and she put on the fire, poured a glass of wine, sat in one of the butt-cuddling chairs.

The cat sat at her feet, eyed her suspiciously.

“I know, weird, right? I’m just sitting here.” Kicking out her legs, she crossed her booted feet at the ankles. “Maybe I could get used to it,” she said, lifting the wine for the first sip.

Her communicator signaled.

“Or maybe not.”

Two minutes later, she grabbed her coat from the newel post where she’d tossed it. And Roarke walked in.

The wind followed him, tossing his black-as-midnight hair around that remarkable warrior-poet face. His perfectly sculpted mouth curved, those wild blue eyes smiled at her.

Then he noted she shot her arms into the coat rather than stripping it off.

He said, “Uh-oh.”

“Sorry. Five damn minutes home, and I caught one. DB at a vid palace in Times Square.”

“An unhappy ending for the DB.” Ireland cruised through his voice. And as she wrapped her scarf around her neck, he left the door open to the cold. “Opening scene for my cop.”

He caught her face in his hands, kissed her—taking his time with it, despite the cold wind and the call of duty.

“I’ll see you later,” she told him. “Maybe even sooner. There’s a glass of wine in the parlor. I’d just poured it.”

He gave her another, briefer kiss. “I’ll think of you when I drink it.”

Less than ten minutes after she’d walked in, she started out. “Don’t forget to feed the cat.”

“As if he’d let me.”

Now Eve imagined Galahad’s belly was full, and Roarke had enjoyed her wine while she studied a woman identified as Chanel Rylan by her vid-watching friend.

Eve stood alone in the theater, having already taken the report of the first officer on scene. She studied the blood on the back of the chair—first in from the aisle—and the smeared drops helpful civilians had stepped in when moving the body.

Eve opened her field kit and, with her hands and boots sealed, crouched down to do her job.

She pressed the victim's right thumb to her Identi-pad.

"Victim is identified as Chanel Rylan, mixed-race female, age thirty-two. No marriages, no offspring, no current cohab."

She took out her gauges for time of death.

"TOD eighteen-thirty-one. No defensive wounds visible. ME to confirm."

Prepared to turn the body, Eve looked up and over at the familiar clomp, and watched her partner start down the slanted aisle.

Pink, fuzzy-topped boots, pink magic coat, and today's scarf a long snake of variegated blues. Peabody wore a matching cap over a flip of dark hair.

"So much for the night off." Peabody studied the victim. "Then again, she's got nothing but nights off now."

"Seal up. I want to turn her. First on scene reports the wound's at the base of her neck."

Peabody stripped off her outdoor gear, sealed up. "I'd just ordered a bowl of minestrone. McNab offered to come with, but I told him to eat, and take mine to go. I figured if you wanted EDD, we'd just tag him."

Since Eve considered Peabody's skinny, wildly fashionable main man an e-ace, if she did, she would.

Together, they turned the body. Eve parted the victim's blood-matted blond hair.

"Single puncture wound, base of the skull. Not a flat blade. Stiletto maybe, or an ice pick. Hand me microgoggles."

Eve fit them on, her eyes huge and whiskey brown behind the lenses as she leaned over. "Smooth, small, and deep. Looks about three inches deep. No hesitation marks visible."

She rocked back on her heels, still crouched on long legs as she studied the chair.

"The killer had to be sitting right behind her. I can't see any angle

to the wound. The theater's dark, people are watching the screen. All he has to do is lean up a little and jam it into her. In and out. A couple of seconds. If this hit the brain stem, she wouldn't even have time to say ouch."

She stood now, hooked her thumbs in the front pockets of her trousers. A tall woman and lean with it, she took a penlight from the kit to examine the aisle, the seat directly behind the victim's.

"You can call in the sweepers. Long shot he left any trace on the seat—or that we'll be able to separate it from the hundreds of other asses who've sat in it—but maybe we'll get lucky."

She scanned the space, raking her fingers through her short chop of brown hair. "No cams in the theater. I've got a uniform getting security discs from the lobby, the concession area, anywhere there are cams. A place this size . . ."

"Ten theaters, two floors, with the two mega screens upstairs," Peabody supplied. "This is one of the smaller theaters in here, mostly for classic vids. Looks like, what, it holds maybe three hundred."

"Two seventy-five." Eve had already checked. "Uniforms have over a hundred people holding in the theater next door. The friend of the vic and three potential wits holding in another. Call the dead wagon, Peabody, and let's get a uniform to sit with her until she's bagged and tagged."

"She was really pretty."

"Yeah, I bet that's a comfort to her now."

She retrieved her coat, scanning, thinking, assessing as she put it on. "It's cold. Cold and precise. And cowardly. A stab in the back, in the dark. Didn't need to see her face, to watch her die, so some emotional detachment."

Eve took one last look at the body—objective, but not detached. Chanel Rylan was hers now, and that was as attached as it could get.

"Start with the big group," she told Peabody as they walked out.

“Hold on to anyone sitting in the vic’s section, or directly across the aisle. Anyone who touched the body.”

“The killer could be one of them. Could still be here.”

“Could be,” Eve agreed. “That would be ballsy. Stab in the back in the dark, not ballsy. But killing in public, even in the dark, takes some balls. We need a search for the weapon. All bins and recyclers, all areas. If the killer hung in, he had to ditch the weapon.”

Eve paused a moment in the wide, dimly lit corridor that led to the various theaters. “Me? I’d do the jab, stick the weapon back in my pocket, and slip out.”

Hands on hips, she studied the setup. “Who’s going to notice? Somebody needs a pit stop, wants more popcorn. He wouldn’t even have to leave the building. He could just walk into one of the other theaters down here, take a seat in the back.

“We need to check and see what time the other vids let out, which ones ended before the body was discovered. If any did, he could have just walked out like the rest.”

Eve signaled to a uniform. “Nobody touches or uses any trash bin or recycler. I want the sweepers to do a full search. That includes bathrooms. Which theater houses the audience from the crime scene?”

“That’s number one, Lieutenant. *A Dog and His Day*. Kid-friendly early show. It let out at eighteen-thirty-five, so it was between shows when first on scene arrived to secure the scene.”

“That answers that,” Eve murmured. “Peabody, start in theater one. Where’s the friend of the victim?”

“We’ve got her and three others in separate areas in number five. The three jumped in to try to assist, compromised the body and the scene. All three were seated in the proximity of the victim.”

“Okay. Peabody, go ahead and pull in McNab. We’re going to need more hands anyway, and he’s likely to get here and review the security feed before either of us finish with the wits.”

“Will do. Dallas, some of the wits are probably going to need to use the bathroom before we’re done.”

“Hell, you’re right. Officer, have a team clear the unisex facilities on the second level. Odds are slim the killer went up there to ditch the weapon, if he did ditch it. But clear it first—sealed up and on record. Anyone who needs to go needs to be accompanied by an officer. One at a time, and the facility is subsequently recleared before the next. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do employees have facilities, a locker area, break room?”

“Ah . . .”

“Find out, have it closed off. Let’s get started, Peabody.”

Eve moved down the long, curving corridor to the double doors of theater five.

She saw the woman seated with a female uniform in the rear row of the far right section. A man and woman together, one man alone, all with two officers, spread out in the far left section.

Nobody looked very happy.

Eve went to the lone woman first, gave the uniform the nod to step out.

“I’m Lieutenant Dallas.”

“Chanel . . . I don’t understand.”

Eve sat. The chairs here were wider, deeper than those at the crime scene. “I’m sorry, Ms. . . .”

“Kawaski. Lola Kawaski.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Kawaski. You and Ms. Rylan were friends.”

“Besties, roomies. I needed a roomie when I busted up with my boyfriend like, God, like, ten years ago. Chanel had just moved here, and she was one of the aps. We just hit it off straight-out. We’ve been there for each other through all the thin and thick. And now . . .”

Lola pressed fingers to eyes red from weeping.

“I’m very sorry for your loss. I know it’s hard right now, but I have questions I need to ask. You may be able to help us find who did this to her and why.”

“There’s just no why.” Lola sobbed into her hands. “No why.”

There was always a why, Eve thought.

“Was Chanel involved with anyone? Maybe she had a bad breakup?”

Lola shook her head, began to wind her long tail of brown hair around her fingers. “Nobody serious right now, or in the last year or so. She had a serious, back like four or five years ago, but they busted. Not mean or anything. Just busted when he got a break, a part in a home-screen series. But they shot it up in Canada, west Canada. So they busted. Chanel was happy for him, you know, but she was New York. Broadway. She worked plenty in swing, too.”

“Swing.”

“It’s like the supporting cast in a play, and you have to learn lots of the parts because you’re going to play more than one character. She worked at Broadway Babies, too. It’s a restaurant in the theater district where the waitstaff sings and performs while they serve you. She worked really hard.”

“Did she beat someone out for a part, cause resentment there?”

“It happens. People in the business know it happens. I know lots of them through Chanel. They get pissy, maybe, or depressed, but they don’t kill each other. She had lots of friends. She dated around, but not serious. She was bi. We didn’t . . . I’m just straight, and we were like sisters. She kept it light dating after Damien. She was happy for him. He’s still out there—Canada, and New L.A.—in another series. But it broke her heart a little, too.”

“So she dated a lot of people, competed for a lot of parts.”

“Yeah, that was, like, her life. I’m not going to say everybody loved her, but a lot did, and a lot really liked her or respected her. I don’t know anybody who’d do this to her. Who’d just . . . It doesn’t feel real.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened tonight? You and Chanel decided to see this vid. Why this vid, at this theater, at this time?”

“That’s easy. It’s classic, and we’re both really into classic vids. We try to come every couple weeks. If Chanel’s in a play, we work it around rehearsals or workshops or performances. She was in auditions for one now—second callback—so we came to the six o’clock because she had the night off, and we were going to go out to dinner, then to this club for open mic. She loves to hit open mics. It helps her rev for a big audition. It was just a girl-pal night on the town.”

“So you came here often.”

“At least a couple times a month. Mondays if she didn’t have a shift at the restaurant because the theater’s dark. Wednesdays if she was between plays. Sometimes we’d hit a matinee on my day off if she wasn’t in rehearsal.”

“So coming here was a routine for you. And just the two of you?”

“Mostly. We’d double-dated here a few times, but mostly people aren’t as into classic vids as we are. It’s, you know, our little thing.”

“Tell me about this evening. Walk me through it.”

“Okay.” Lola took a deep breath, swiped her hands over her face. “Chanel was juiced up because she thought she nailed the first callback. We met for a drink when I got off work.”

“Where?”

“Toodles, over on Seventh. I work just a couple blocks from there, so she met me. We hit happy hour, split a half carafe of house wine and a plate of mini pierogies. We just talked about stuff, like always. Her callback and, oh, Carmine, this sweet teacup poodle I neutered today. I’m a vet. Then we walked to the theater, talking about the first time each of us saw *Psycho*, and how it freaked me so I didn’t take a shower for months, and how she watched it over and over to study Janet Leigh’s performance.”

“Did you notice anyone who seemed to be listening to your conversations? Paying too much attention?”

“No. I just didn’t.”

“Okay, keep going.”

“So we got here early enough to get popcorn and drinks and good seats. The classic theater’s never full, especially on a weeknight, but I really like the aisle seat. And I wanted one especially since I was on call. I hate when people pick their way across the aisle in front of you during a vid. We just settled in, hung out for a couple minutes until it started.”

“Did anyone speak to either of you? Out in the lobby, in the theater? Did you notice anyone who made you feel uncomfortable?”

“No, we were talking to each other. I mean, the guy at the concession stand asked if we wanted the special but we didn’t.”

“Okay. Your initial statement said you came back to your seat and found Chanel. Why did you leave the theater?”

“I was on call, and my ’link vibrated. Right after Marion had dinner, had the talk with Norman Bates. I had to go out to the lobby to take it. I work at Pet Care, and we run a twenty-four-hour emergency clinic. There’s a vet assistant and a couple of support staff in the clinic at all times, but one of the vets is on call for emergencies. Gloria, the assistant on duty, said we had an emergency coming in.”

“What kind of emergency?”

“A dog, struck by a car, and the owner was bringing him right in. I had to go—if the dog needed surgery or had to be put to sleep, they needed a vet. I got some information from Gloria, but she didn’t have much because the owner was panicked and running with the dog. I gave her instructions because he’d probably get there before I could, then I went back to tell . . . to tell Chanel. I—I sat down for a second, said how I’d missed the big scene. You know, the shower scene, and I was sorry, but I had to go into work. I . . .”

Lola covered her face now, rocked. “I put my hand on her arm, I think. I think. She just sort of tipped against me. I started to laugh, I think. Drama queen. Then I . . . there was blood. I could feel it, smell it, and she wasn’t moving. I’m a little, ah, not sure exactly then.”

Her hands shook as she lowered them, and her eyes blurred as she tried to focus on Eve. “I think I started screaming. I think I tried to drag her up, and I was screaming for help. I think people were like shut up, sit down. But other people came over, and I think somebody ran for an usher or security or I don’t know. The lights came on, and the vid stopped, and Chanel was lying there.”

“Lola, did you see anyone come out when you were in the lobby on your ’link? Did you pass anyone going in or out of the theater?”

“I don’t think so. I was kind of annoyed to be called out, then, well, some poor dog’s hurt, so I was pretty much focused on talking it through with Gloria.”

“How long do you figure you were out of the theater?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe four or five minutes. I don’t think more than that. Well.” She shut her eyes. “Wait. I saw it was the nine-one-one signal we use for emergencies. I got up, went out. I went all the way out to the lobby because even with the soundproofing you can kind of hear the vids, just enough to be distracting. I still had my drink, so I walked over to the area where you can sit and eat if you want. I guess there were a few people there, waiting for the next show. I tagged Gloria back, talked to her—a couple minutes, maybe three, because she’s still a little green and I wanted to be sure she prepped. Then I walked back. So however long that was.

“Did you see who was sitting in the row behind you?”

“I didn’t notice. You mostly notice the people in front of you, if they get in the way. Behind or around, if they’re talking or rattling, you know. It was nice and quiet in the vid. People who go to classics are usually really respectful.”

“What about the dog?”

“The dog? Oh, oh, God, the dog. I had to tag Gloria. The officer asked me not to say why, just that I had an emergency of my own, and to pull in Carter or Lori.”

“About how long after you took the emergency tag did you tag them back, tell them to get another vet?”

“I’m not sure, really not. I guess fifteen or twenty minutes. Maybe even longer. I just forgot about that poor dog.”

“Understandable. I’m surprised the clinic didn’t tag you again after the owner brought the injured dog in.”

“He hadn’t gotten there, Gloria said.”

Eve only nodded. “He must’ve been running a long way. Is there someone we can contact for you, Lola? Someone you’d want to stay with you?”

“I don’t think I can go back to our apartment yet. I just don’t think I can stand that until I . . . I’m sort of seeing this guy. Maybe I can go to his place for a while. Maybe.”

“Do you want us to contact him for you, have him come and get you?”

Eyes welling again, Lola nodded.

“Give me his contact information. We’ll take care of it. I’m going to have the officer take you out to the lobby, stay with you.”

“Will you talk to me again? When you know . . . when you know, will you tell me?”

“Yes. And if you think of anything else, you contact me.” Eve reached into her own pocket—almost surprised to actually produce cards. Gave one to Lola.

Eve called the uniform back, gave her the friend’s contact information. Then turned her attention to the three people across the theater.

She chose one at random, sat down beside him. “I’m Lieutenant Dallas.”

“Um. Mark Snyder.”

“You came to the vid alone, Mr. Snyder?”

“Yeah. I wanted to absorb it, without distractions. I’m a film student. I, ah . . .” He clasped his hands together, stared at the blank screen. “I’m working on my master’s at NYU. Oh boy, this is really, really real.”

Though she’d run him, Eve judged him to be in his early twenties, a young black man with wild and improbably red dreads, a bar stud through his left eyebrow.

“Why this vid?”

“Hitchcock. I’m doing a paper on Hitchcock, and this particular work is a major part of the paper. But I, but I— Sorry.”

He pressed a hand to his stomach, spent a couple of seconds breathing. “I—I love film. I want to direct. The classics are a particular inspiration to me. I come here a lot. The classics, at least two or three times a month and, in general, probably twice that. It’s a different, ah, experience watching in a theater than on a home screen or a mobile.”

“Where were you sitting?”

“In the same row as . . . the same row. In the center seat. We were the only ones in the row. I like to sit alone as much as I can, but I sort of knew them—the women. I mean, I’d seen them here off and on, and I knew they’d be quiet. Not talking during the vid or being distracting, so I sat in the center seat.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“It was—it was right after Bates cleans up the bathroom, after the shower scene. He’s going to wrap Marion’s body in the shower curtain, put her and her luggage and the money she stole and wrapped in newspaper in her car and sink it in the swamp. Perkins is amazing, he’s perfect. You believe him. You believe he’s horrified, panicked, protecting his crazy mother. I was studying the work, his expressions, his body language, and she started screaming.”

He took a moment to swallow. “The woman on the aisle, I mean. It jerked me out, pulled me out of the story. I was annoyed for a second, but then I realized it was one of the women in the row, the ones I sort of knew. So I knew something was really wrong, because they’re respectful. And the way she was screaming—I’m sorry, I don’t know her name. The one with the darker hair. I stood up. I could see something was wrong with the other woman. The blond woman. I thought she’d gotten sick or something. I started over, and the couple there?”

He gestured to the man and woman seated in another section. “They started over, too. From the other side. They were together on the other side, so we got there, and . . . there was blood, and the screaming, and they said—the other couple—to go for help, to get the lights on while they laid down the one with the blood in the aisle. I ran out, and part of me—in my head—kept running. Like a vid in my head. But I grabbed somebody from the lobby, and told him somebody in number three was hurt really bad. We needed an ambulance. They needed to turn on the houselights. She was bleeding really bad.

“I don’t know why I went back in, because in my head I was running away. The woman of the couple—not the one with the, with the one who got hurt, but the couple who tried to help. She’s a— God, I can’t find my words. A physician assistant. She said that, and she had blood on her, and she told people to stay back. I sat down, I just sat down because I didn’t think I could stand up. And then the police came.”

“Did you notice anyone sitting in the row behind you?”

“Not behind me, but behind them. At the end of the row. I really didn’t want anyone in my box, if you know what I mean. Within my area. In front, beside, behind. And there were lots of empty spots. I saw somebody slide into the row behind right after the houselights went down, and would’ve moved if he’d come toward the center. But he just sat behind them.”

“A man.”

“I . . . I don’t know. I didn’t look so much as sense. The houselights were down, and the opening credits starting to roll. I hate people who come in late, so I sensed the movement, figured I’d just move if he came into my box, but he didn’t. Or she. Honestly, it was dark, and it didn’t matter if it was a man or a woman to me. It was a corner-of-the-eye sort of thing.”

“Was he or she there when you heard and reacted to the screams?”

“I don’t know.”

“You stood up, started across the row. Was there anyone behind the women?”

“Give me a sec, okay?” He shut his eyes. “I’m going to visualize it. I don’t want to, but I will. I’m watching Anthony Perkins embody Norman Bates, because he does. He becomes and you as the audience believe. And she screams. To my right, she screams. The really, really pretty blonde is slumped over the brunette with the soft eyes. The brunette’s screaming, struggling to lift her friend. And I know something’s very wrong. Very wrong, so I stand up. Some people are yelling for her to shut up, but I know something’s just wrong, so I start over, and see the man and woman start over from the other section. And . . .

“No.” He opened his eyes. “Nobody was sitting behind them when I stood up. The whole row behind was empty.”

“Okay, Mark, that’s very helpful.” Eve dug in her pocket to give him a card. “If you think of anything else, if you get a better sense of the person who sat behind them, contact me. Do you need a ride home?”

“I think I want to walk. I think I need to walk.” He got up when Eve did. “You think the person who sat behind them killed her.”

“I need to find out.”

“I wish I’d looked. I wish I’d just turned my head a couple inches to the right and looked. I have good visual skills. If I’d looked, I’d be able to tell you what the person looked like. But I didn’t look. I just thought:

Good, not going to push into my box, and the vid's starting. Then I was inside the vid until the screams. Forty-five seconds."

"What's forty-five seconds?"

"Sorry, the shower scene. It runs for forty-five brilliant, terrifying seconds. I just wonder if the last thing she saw before . . . if the last thing she saw was murder."

Forty-five seconds, Eve thought when he walked away.

More than enough time to kill.