

1

THE LEGALIZED TORTURE OF SOCIALIZING LINED RIGHT UP TO PREMEDITATED murder when you added the requirement of fancy shoes.

That was Lieutenant Eve Dallas's stand on it, and she should know. She was a murder cop in fancy shoes about to socialize.

Moreover . . .

Whoever decreed that fancy shoes for females required sky-high skinny-assed heels rendering said shoes useless for any practical purpose—including walking—should be immediately subjected to every known manner of torture, legal or otherwise.

Surely by the almost-spring of 2061, in the freaking United States of America, useless skinny-heeled shoes should be banned. Beat with hammers, set on fire, then banned.

She walked in those damn shoes toward a swank penthouse, a tall, lanky woman in a slinky jade dress that shimmered with her movements while a fat, teardrop diamond shot fire from the chain around her neck.

The short, choppy brown cap of her hair set off the diamonds winking none too quietly at her ears. Her long brown eyes narrowed with dark thoughts.

Just who came up with the concept of the cocktail party? Eve wondered. Whoever did, by her decree, should join the originator of fancy shoes in the torture chamber. Who the hell decided it would be a freaking fantastic idea to create a custom where people stood around, usually at the end of a workday, making small talk while balancing a drink in one hand and a plate of tiny, often unidentifiable food in the other?

And, oh yeah, whoever came up with small talk as a social imperative? Straight into the torture chamber.

And while we're at it, throw the sick bastard who added the requirement of a gift every freaking time you turned around right in there with the others.

Because a sane person didn't want to have to think about what the hell to buy somebody who invited them to a damn party. A sane person didn't want to *go* to a party at the end of a workday and stand around in shoes with stupid skinny heels and balance weird food while making idiotic small talk.

A sane person wanted to be home, wearing comfortable clothes and eating pizza.

"Finished yet?"

Eve glanced toward the ridiculously handsome face of her husband—the guy responsible for the slinky of a dress, the damn shoes, and all the diamonds. She noted the amusement in those killer blue eyes, in the easy smile on that perfectly sculpted mouth.

It occurred to her not only that would Roarke enjoy the upcoming torture, but he could have deemed and decreed all the rules of it himself.

He was lucky she didn't pop him one.

“Need a few more minutes for the internal monologue?” he asked, the Irish in his voice just adding more charm.

“It’s probably the most sensible conversation I’ll have all night.”

“Well now, what a thing to say. Nadine’s first party in her new home will be full of your friends. They, and she, are smart, interesting people.”

“Smart people are home drinking a brew and watching the Knicks kick some Kings ass on-screen.”

“There’ll be plenty of games yet to come.” He gave her butt an affectionate pat as they approached the outer doors of Nadine Furst’s penthouse. “And,” he added, “Nadine deserves a party.”

Maybe, maybe she could concede that one. The ace on-screen reporter, bestselling author, and now freaking Oscar winner had earned a party. But she herself, murder cop, lieutenant murder cop, deserved maybe wishing a hot case had fallen in her lap at the last minute.

As Nadine earned her cred on the crime beat, she ought to understand.

She turned to face him again—that carved by romantic angels face framed with black silk. In her fancy shoes they stood pretty much eye-to-eye.

“Why can’t a party be brew and pizza and the round ball game on-screen?”

“It can.” He leaned over to brush his lips on hers. “Just not this one.”

When the doors opened, the quiet, classy corridor filled with voices, music. Quilla, Nadine’s teenage intern, stood in a black dress with a silver buckle at the belted waist, short-heeled red booties. The purple streaks in her hair glittered.

“Hey. I’m supposed to say good evening and welcome. And can I—may I”—she self-corrected with a roll of her eyes—“take your coats?”

“How do you know we’re not crashing?”

“Besides how I know you?”

Eve nodded. “Besides.”

“Because lobby security has the guest list and all, and you had to clear through it to get up here. And if you’re some doof who slipped by or live here or whatever, Nadine would have you booted. The place is full of cops.”

“Good enough,” Eve decided as Roarke handed over their coats.

“You look lovely tonight, Quilla.”

She flushed a little. “Thanks. Um, now I’m supposed to tell you to go right in, have a wonderful evening. There’s a bar and buffet in the dining area as well as waitstaff passing food and beverage.”

Roarke smiled at her. “You did that very well.”

“I’ve done it about a million times already. Nadine knows a shitload—I mean, a lot of people.”

“‘Shitload’ covers it,” Eve said. And as they moved through the foyer, through the open doors, was just a little horrified to see she knew most of them herself.

How did that happen?

“Dig the dress, Dallas. The color’s like bang.”

“It’s green.”

“Jade,” Quilla qualified.

“Exactly.” Roarke sent Quilla a wink.

“So anyway, I can take the gift, too, unless you want to give it to her, like, personally. We’ve got a gift table in the morning room.”

“‘Morning room’?”

“I don’t know why it’s called that,” Quilla said to Eve. “But we’re putting the hostess gifts in there.”

“Great.” She shoved the fancy bag at Quilla.

“Chill. Okay, hope you have a kick.”

“A kick at what?” Eve wondered as Quilla headed off.

“I think it means have a good time. Which should speak to you,” Roarke added, “as you enjoy kicking things.” He trailed his fingers down her back. “Let’s get you a drink.”

“Let’s get me several.”

The passage to the bar, however, proved fraught with obstacles: people she knew. And those people had something to say, which cornered her into saying something back.

She was spared cold-sober small talk by passing waitstaff and Roarke’s quick hands.

His quick thinking and smooth moves also saved her from the chatty chat of one of Nadine’s researchers. “Darling, there’s Nadine. We need to say hello. Excuse us.”

With a hand on the small of Eve’s back, he steered her away.

Nadine stepped in from the terrace. Eve deduced the party do—lots of tumbling curls—as Trina’s handiwork. Though far from the usual polished, professional style, Eve supposed the streaky blond curls suited the dress. Strapless, short, snug, in hot tamale red.

Those cat-green eyes scanned, landed on Eve and Roarke. She met them halfway, rose to the toes of her skyscraper red heels and kissed Roarke enthusiastically.

“I’d say this proves our place is perfect for entertaining.”

“‘Our place’?”

Nadine smiled at Eve. “Well, it is Roarke’s building. A lot of your crew’s out on the terrace. It’s heated, and there’s a small bar setup, another buffet.”

Despite the fact that friendship often baffled her, Eve knew her job. “So where is it?”

Nadine fluffed her hair, batted her cat-green eyes. “Where’s what?”

“Well, if you don’t want to show it off—”

“I do. Yes, I do.” Laughing, Nadine grabbed Eve’s hand. With the

skill of a running back, she snaked through people, wove around furniture, bolted up the curve of stairs and into her pretty damn swank home office. It held a couple of sofas in classy blue, chairs that picked up the classy blue in a swirly pattern on white, tables in slate gray that matched the T-shaped workstation in front of a killer view of New York City.

A square, recessed fireplace flickered in the left wall. The gold statue stood on the mantel above it. Eve moved closer, studied it. Weird-looking dickless gold dude, she thought, but the nameplate read NADINE FURST, and that's what counted.

But if they weren't going to give him a dick, why didn't they give him pants?

"Nice." Curious, she lifted, it, glanced over her shoulder. "It's got weight. Blunt-force trauma waiting to happen."

"Only you." Nadine slid an arm around Eve's waist. "I meant what I said in my acceptance speech."

"Oh, did you say something?"

Nadine added a solid hip bump, and with a laugh, Eve set the award down again.

"It's all yours, pal."

"Not nearly, but—I get to look at it every freaking day. So." Turning, she reached out a hand for Roarke's. "Let's go down and drink lots of champagne."

Jake Kincade stepped into the doorway. The rock star, and Nadine's heartthrob said, "Hey."

His dark hair spilled and swept around a strong face currently sporting a three-day scruff. He wore black—not a suit, but black jeans with a studded belt, black shirt, and black boots Eve admired because they looked sturdy and comfortable.

How come, she wondered, *he* got to dress like a real person?

"How's it going?" he said to Roarke as they shook hands. "Look-

ing prime, Dallas. Got to gander the gold guy? He's shiny, but you gotta wonder. If they weren't going to suit him up, why not give him his works? One or the other."

"Good God," Roarke murmured.

Jake flicked him a glance. "Sorry."

"No, not at all. It's only, I know my wife and have no doubt she thought exactly the same."

"Maybe. More or less. It's a reasonable question."

"At least Jake didn't look at it and see a murder weapon."

The creases in his cheeks deepening, Jake grinned down at Nadine. "Maybe. More or less. Anyway, you got another wave coming in, Lois. How does anybody know so many people?"

Now Roarke laughed, took Eve's hand. "I'm beginning to think it's a good thing I saw her first."

"Lots of cops," Jake said as they started out. "Other than that trip to Central, I haven't seen so many cops since . . ." He looked at Eve. "I probably shouldn't mention the time I was sixteen and used fake ID to get a gig in this club that got raided."

"Did you kill anybody?"

"Nope."

"We'll let it pass."

"Speaking of cops, did you know Santiago can rock a keyboard?"

"Ah . . . he plays piano?"

"Wicked," Jake confirmed. "Renn brought his keys—the whole band's here—and the chick cop pushed Santiago into getting down. Chick cop's got pipes."

"She can sing," Nadine interpreted for Eve. "And that's Detective Carmichael, Jake. I asked Morris to bring his sax," Nadine added.

"Let me tell you, the dead doc can smoke that sax. Hey, there's one of my breed."

Looking down as Jake did, Eve saw Mavis, a fountain of pale, pale

blue hair, a frothy pink dress with a short, flippy skirt, blue shoes with towering heels fashioned out of a trio of shining silver balls.

Beside her, Leonardo resembled some sort of ancient pagan priest in a flowing vest shades deeper than his copper skin. His hair showered down to his shoulders in what looked like hundreds of thin braids. At the moment, Mavis talked to—bubbled over more like—a tight little group.

Feeney—the captain of the Electronic Detectives Division wore the same rumped, shit-brown suit he'd worn to work. Beside him stood Bebe Hewitt, Nadine's big boss, in shimmery silver pants and a long red jacket, looking fascinated. Then big-eyed teenage Quilla was towered over by Crack. The sex club owner also wore a vest. His stopped at his waist with lethal-looking studs on the shoulders, leaving his chest and torso bare except for muscles and tattoos.

Beside him, a woman—unknown—smiled easily. She wore classic New York black and had a face made exotic by knife-edged cheekbones and heavy-lidded eyes.

"The kid's a little young for a cocktail party," Eve commented.

"You're never too young to learn how to host an event, or how to behave at one," Nadine countered. She glided down the rest of the steps and over to greet Mavis.

"The kid's all right," Jake said to Eve. "Giving Nadine a run."

"Is she?"

He grinned with it. "Big time. Campaigned to come tonight, and tossed out how she could do a three-minute vid report on the party—soft-news clip. The Quill's got it going." He tapped his temple. "I got a couple earsful of your An Didean project, Roarke. She's keeping her own ear to the ground there. I'd like to talk to you about that sometime."

"Any time at all."

"Hey, Dallas." Mavis did a little dance on her silver balls, grabbed

Eve in a hug. “This party is whipping it.” She added a squeeze for Roarke, for Jake. “All my fave people, add food and adult beverage, and it’s going on. I heard there’s jamming on the terrace. Am I going to get in on that?”

“Counting on it,” Jake told her. “How about we check out the venue?”

“I’m in.”

“I’ll get the drinks,” Leonardo said.

After Leonardo kissed the top of her fountain of hair, Mavis beamed up at him. “Thanks, Honey Bear. Check you all later.”

“I’m heading to the music.” Feeney shot a finger at Eve. “Did you know Santiago can burn up the keys?”

“I heard that.”

“Light under a bushel.” With a shake of his head, Feeney took his rumpled suit out to the terrace.

“Bushel of what?” Eve wondered.

“I’ll explain later. It’s lovely to see you, Bebe.”

“And both of you. I’m grateful, Lieutenant, for the work you and your detectives did in the Larinda Mars investigation.”

“That’s the job.”

Bebe nodded, looked down into her drink. “We all have one. Excuse me.”

“She’s taking on too much of the blame.” Nadine looked after her as Bebe slipped away.

“It wasn’t on her.”

“No.” Nadine nodded at Eve. “But she’s the boss. I’m just going to smooth that out. And send somebody with another round of drinks.”

Crack shot his eyebrows up. “Cops do bring a party down.”

The woman beside him gave him a sharp elbow. “Wilson!”

He only laughed. “You looking fine for a skinny white girl cop.”

“You don’t look half bad for a big black man dive owner.”

“Down and Dirty ain’t no dive. It’s a joint. Yo, Roarke. I want you to meet my beautiful lady. This is Rochelle Pickering.”

Rochelle extended a hand to Eve, then to Roarke. “I’m so happy to meet both of you. I’ve followed your work, Lieutenant, and yours, Roarke. Especially in regard to Dochas and An Didean.”

“She’s a shrink,” Quilla announced, and Crack grinned at her.

“Kid shrink. Watch those steps, shortie, or she could come for you.”

“As if,” Quilla muttered, but melted away into the crowd.

“Wilson.” Rochelle rolled her eyes. “I’m a psychologist, specializing in children. I’ve actually consulted at Dochas.”

“I’m aware,” Roarke told her, which had her blinking at him.

“That’s . . . unexpected.”

“Our head counselor speaks highly of you.”

“She’s a marvel.”

As promised, another tray of drinks arrived.

“I just have to take a moment,” Rochelle continued. “It hardly seems real I’m standing in this amazing space. That I’m meeting both of you. I met Nadine Furst and Jake Kincade, God, Mavis Freestone—who’s exactly, just exactly, as delightful as I’d hoped she would be. And Leonardo, someone whose work I drool over. And I’m drinking champagne.”

“Stick with me,” Crack told her. “The sky’s got no limits.”

Eve had questions, a lot of questions. Such as, she’d never known anyone to call Crack by his given name. What made this woman different? And how did a kid shrink hook up with the streetwise owner of the D&D? And when did Crack go all—what was the word? Smitten, she decided, the word was *smitten*. When did he go all smitten?

She could see the appeal. The woman was built and beautiful, but . . . just who was she anyway?

Thinking, she made her way to Mira. It took a shrink, she considered, to shrink a shrink. And nobody beat the NYPSD's top profiler.

Mira rose from the arm of a sofa where she'd perched, kissed Eve's cheek. As usual, she looked perfect. The dress, the color of the deep red wine being passed around, floated down to her knees and ended in a thin border of some fancy lacework that matched the elbow-length sleeves. She'd swept back her mink-colored hair—now highlighted with subtle copper streaks courtesy of Trina (whom Eve, so far, had managed to avoid).

"Nadine's really made this place her own. Stylish, yes, but eclectic and comfortable. She looks happy."

"The gold dude upstairs and the rock star out on the terrace play in."

"They certainly do. I like him—the Oscar, of course, but Jake. I like him."

Eve glanced toward the terrace. Through the glass she saw Jake and Mavis, nearly nose to nose as they sang while Jake's fingers flew over the guitar.

"Yeah, he works. Sort of speaking of that. Do you know anything about this Rochelle Pickering who's glued to Crack?"

Mira's eyebrows lifted. "A little. Problem?"

"You tell me."

"None I'm aware of. I volunteer at Dochas a few times a year. I met her briefly when we were both there some months back. She struck me as very stable and dedicated. A serious woman."

"Yeah, so what's she doing with Crack?"

Mira looked over to where Crack and Rochelle swayed to the music on the terrace. "Apparently enjoying herself. It's a party, Eve. It's what people do at parties. And here's Dennis to prove it."

Dennis Mira walked toward them with a plate of finger food. He wore a black suit with a crisp white shirt and striped tie. His tie was crooked, and his gray hair windblown. His eyes, the softest, sweetest green smiled at Eve.

Her heart went into meltdown.

“You have to try one of these.”

He took something off the plate, held it up to Eve’s lips. She saw what looked like a heap of little chopped up vegetables, all glossy with something and piled on a thick slice of zucchini. Something she’d have avoided putting anywhere near her mouth much less in it at all costs.

But those soft, sweet green eyes had her opening her mouth, letting him feed it to her.

“Delicious, isn’t it?”

She managed an, “Mmm,” as the meltdown completed.

She thought if everyone had a Dennis Mira in their lives, she’d be out of work. No one would have another violent thought.

“Let me get you a plate.”

“No.” She swallowed, decided her veg quota was complete for a month. “I’m good.” And found herself just a little disappointed when Mira straightened his tie.

“Such a happy party, isn’t it?” he continued. “So many interesting and diverse people in one space. I always think the same when you and Roarke have a party. It takes interesting people to gather so many of the same together.” He gave her that smile. “You look very pretty. Doesn’t she, Charlie?”

If Eve had owned a blush, she’d have used it.

Roarke slipped up beside her—more chat, chat—then the four of them wandered out to the terrace. She’d avoided the terrace, because that way lay Trina. But she couldn’t be a coward allevening.

The music blasted over New York. Eve decided if anyone called

a cop over noise violations, they'd find a whole bunch of them busting that reg, including her entire squad, a chunk of EDD—and the commander.

At the moment, Commander Whitney was dancing with Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Cher Reo. A lot of shoulder shaking and hip rocking was involved. Her partner, Detective Delia Peabody, executed some sort of wild swing and hop in time with her main man and EDD ace McNab.

Baxter, slick suit, no tie, flirted with the terrifying Trina, which was no problem as Detective Horndog flirted with any and all females. Reineke and Jenkinson clicked glasses as they joined in on the chorus of whatever girl duet Detective Carmichael and Mavis belted out.

It seemed Carmichael did indeed have pipes. And Jenkinson's tie glowed like the moons that covered it.

Standing spread-legged, Santiago ran his fingers over a keyboard. What came out was definitely music. Who knew? Trueheart, Baxter's earnest young partner, sat with his girlfriend and Feeney. Eve swore Feeney's eyes shone—or glowed like Jenkinson's tie—as he watched the Avenue A drummer bang and crash the drums.

She spotted Garnet DeWinter. The forensic anthropologist huddled in conversation with the commander's wife while Morris made his sax wail.

EDD Callendar rushed out on the terrace, giving a “Woo!” as she dragged a laughing Charles with her into the shaking bodies. Eve supposed dancing skills had once been a job requirement for the former licensed companion. Dr. Louise Dimatto, his wife, hooked an arm through Eve's.

“I'd say this house is warmed.”

“It's a heated terrace.”

“No.” On a laugh, Louise lifted her glass. “Housewarming, Dallas.

This house is definitely warmed. So, who's that stunning woman dancing with Crack?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Eve shrugged. "Kid shrink."

"Really. I love her lip dye. If I tried that color I'd look like a zombie. Is that—That's Detective Carmichael singing with Mavis."

"Yeah. She has pipes."

"I'll say. Well, since Callendar stole my man, I'm going to steal someone else's." She circled a finger in the air. "Feeny," she decided, and circled the dancers.

Roarke brought Eve another drink that washed away even the memory of zucchini. When they took the music down to slow and he turned her into his arms, she swayed with him under the swimming slice of moon.

Yeah, she thought, this house is warmed.

And if, on the drive home, she took out her PPC and did a quick little run on Rochelle Pickering, so what?

Roarke stretched out his legs in the back of the limo. "What are you up to there, Lieutenant?"

"Just checking something."

He waited only a beat. "Don't tell me you're running Rochelle."

"Okay."

"Eve, Crack's a big boy. Literally."

"Uh-huh."

"Eve," he said again, and laid a hand on hers. "You should know I've already run her."

"What? You're not a cop, and—"

"And she's not a suspect. She is, however, the top contender for the head therapist at An Didean."

"I thought you had one of those already."

“I did. She had a personal issue come up just last week, and is moving to East Washington to be with her son. I’m vetting the position again. Dr. Pickering was already a leading candidate when I went with Dr. Po.”

“Does she know that?”

“Unlikely. I can tell you she’s highly qualified, experienced, dedicated, comes strongly recommended. And has no criminal record.”

“That you found. Okay, okay,” she mumbled after his quiet stare.

“If she had one, you’d have found it.” She shrugged with it. “Save me time then.”

“She’s the only daughter and second child. Three siblings. Her father did time—twice—for assault, for illegals. Her younger brother did time, as a juvenile, for theft, possession—and as an adult for the same. He belonged to the Bangers.”

“That’s bad business. Their turf’s narrowed, but they’re still bad business.”

“Most gangs are. He’s been out of prison two years—just—completed rehab, and by all accounts is clean, and no longer affiliated with the Bangers.”

Eve put that aside for later. Though the Bangers weren’t as big and bad as they’d once been, they didn’t just let go, either.

“Her father died in a prison incident when she was fifteen,” Roarke continued, “and her mother self-terminated shortly thereafter. From that point—and reading between the lines, to a great extent prior—they were raised by their maternal grandmother. They grew up in the Bowery,” Roarke added. “The roughest part of it.”

“Banger turf.”

“Yes. The oldest brother went to trade school, and has his own business—plumbing—in Tribeca. He’s married, has a three-year-old daughter and another child on the way. The youngest is in law school, Columbia, on scholarship. The middle brother’s been gainfully

employed at Casa del Sol, Lower West Side, as a cook—a trade he apparently learned in prison—since he got out. He reports to his parole officer, attends regular AA meetings, and with his sister volunteers at a local shelter twice a month.”

“The Bangers don’t let go.”

“The Bangers are in the Bowery. Rochelle lives with her brother in a two-bedroom apartment in the Lower West, well outside their territory. She had a hard and difficult childhood—something you and I know a great deal about. She overcame. It’s hardly a coincidence she devoted her skills to the emotional welfare of children.”

She knew his tones, his inflections. Knew him.

“You’re going to hire her.”

“It strikes me as a happy twist of fate we happened to meet her tonight. I’d already planned to contact her Monday morning to set up an interview. If I’m satisfied after that, and she’s interested, I’ll offer her the position, yes.”

He shifted, trailed a finger down the shallow dent in her chin.

“Unless you give me a solid reason not to.”

She hissed out a breath. “I can’t. I’m not going to knock her because one of her brothers was an asshole, because her father was another.”

Maybe it worried her a little. But Roarke had a point. Crack was a big boy.