

Chapter One

As it often did since he'd married a cop, murder interrupted more pleasant activities. Then again, Roarke supposed, the woman lying in a pool of her own blood a few steps inside the arch in Washington Square Park had a heftier complaint.

After all, he'd known what he, a former criminal (no convictions), was getting into when he fell for the cop. He doubted the woman in fashionable athletic wear expected to end the pretty spring night with her belly sliced open.

He and his cop might have missed the last scene of an entertaining play, but the woman missed the rest of her life.

And here, on a balmy May night, in the blooming spring of 2061, he watched another kind of play.

His cop and the victim held center stage under the hard crime scene lights. Together they made a sad silhouette against the thin curtain meant to shield the dead from the prying eyes of onlookers.

Uniforms had barriers up to separate the rest of the audience. The vendors, the lovers, the strollers and tourists, the buskers and dog walkers goggled at death.

He kept out of the way as the lead—Lieutenant Eve Dallas—performed her duties in this tale of morality and mortality.

She crouched beside the body, lean and tough in her leather jacket and boots, her field kit open beside her, her short brown hair shining under the lights.

"Victim is identified as Galla Modesto, age thirty-three, residence on Prince."

"Galla Modesto."

When Roarke spoke, Eve lifted her head, narrowed those whiskey-colored cop's eyes.

"You know her?"

"No. Her brother a bit. Modesto Wine and Spirits. She'd be one of the heirs—third generation, I'd think. International, family-owned company, with their home base in Tuscany."

"Interesting. Married—Jorge Tween—six years. One offspring, a son, age four." She took out a gauge. "TOD, twenty-two-eighteen. COD, from on-site observation, would be the eight-inch vertical slice through her abdomen."

Now with microgoggles in place, she leaned closer to the gaping wound. "It looks like a deep stab into her lower abdomen, with an upward thrust to open her up. ME to confirm."

Still crouched, she shifted a little. "No visible defensive or other offensive wounds. No handbag recovered, but the vic's dressed for a run or the gym. She's wearing a good-sized diamond and diamond-crusted ring on her left hand, what look like diamond stud earrings—two in the left, one in the right. And a sport-style wrist unit.

"No evidence this was a mugging."

Eve opened the zippered pocket of the woman's warm-up jacket. "Link." She bagged it, then reached into the pocket in the running pants. "ID."

Rising, she moved around to the other side of the body, opened the other pocket. "Panic button. Obviously didn't panic in time."

"Here's our Peabody," Roarke told her, "with McNab."

Eve's partner hurried toward the barricades with her main man, EDD detective Ian McNab.

Since Peabody wore a dress—one covered with pink tulips under her pink coat—and McNab wore his version of party wear in pink baggies, airboots so violently green they glowed, and a shirt with jags and jigs of both colors, Roarke deduced they'd been out when the call came through.

They both badged the uniforms, moved into the cordoned-off area. Peabody, still sporting red streaks in the dark hair she'd styled in festive curls, went straight to Eve and the body.

"Sorry, Dallas, we were at a club on the East Side, got delayed getting here."

Eve gave Peabody's outfit—including the skinny-heeled party shoes—a flick of a glance. "Officers Frist and Nadir first on scene. Talk to them, start interviewing any potential wits." She glanced back. "McNab can see about any security feed since he's here."

"Got it."

"Seal up and help me turn her first. Vic's Galla Modesto," she began, and gave Peabody the main points as they worked.

With the body turned, Eve saw no more wounds or marks—and found another small pocket in the back of the running pants. "Key swipe," she said for the recording. "Body and Mind Fitness Center," she read, then bagged it into evidence.

She closed her field kit, took out her comm to contact the sweepers and the morgue.

When she turned, Roarke held out a go-cup of black coffee.

"Where'd you get this?"

"An enterprising vendor. I suspect it's somewhere between cop coffee and palatable."

She drank, shrugged. "Somewhere between. Thanks. You should head out. I need to talk to witnesses, talk to her husband, go by the gym she used."

"I'm having your car sent down—and arranged my own transportation."

She drank more—barely—palatable coffee, and looked at him.

That face, that face. One of life's serious miracles, and sure as hell one of hers. Eyes, boldly blue with lashes as silky as the black hair that fell nearly to his shoulders, looked into hers. He had a mouth creative angels sculpted on a particularly generous day. The planes, the angles combined in a result somewhere between the romance of a poet and the sexuality of one of those angels defiantly taking the fall.

Add the music of Ireland in his voice, and you had an exceptional package.

“Always handy.”

And that perfect mouth curved. “We all do our part. I’ll just stay handy until the transpo gets here.” Absently, he scanned the crowd behind the barricades. “McNab should be back shortly with the security feed so . . .”

She saw his eyes narrow, saw something dark come into them.

“What?” She shifted instantly to look in the same direction. “What did you see?”

“Someone I used to know.”

Before she could speak again, he walked away, quick and smooth.

“Well, shit.” She gestured a uniform over to stay with the body, started to go after him when Peabody hurried back.

“We’ve got a few witnesses who saw her go down, and we have one who didn’t but claims she was coming here to meet him. He’s wrecked, so I’m thinking there might have been some hanky in the panky.”

“Let’s take him first.”

What the hell was Roarke doing? she wondered.

He cut through the crowd. He knew how to move fast, sliding through. Once upon a time he’d have come out the other side with pockets full from pockets he’d picked.

But though he moved fast, eyes scanning, instincts alert, he didn’t see the face again.

That bloody shadow from his past, Roarke thought as he looked beyond the lights, the crowds, the sparkle of the fountain, the empty benches, had shown himself deliberately.

A taunt. A kind of flipped middle finger, as he’d been—again deliberately—far enough away to easily melt out of sight and vanish again.

Well then, if the fucking bastard wanted to come out and play, he’d be more than willing for the game.

“We’re a long way from the alleys of Dublin now, boyo,” he muttered, and made his way back again.

Since the wit, Marlon Stowe, was shaking, with tears streaming, Eve took him to one of the benches.

Mid-thirties, she judged, about five-ten, a lot of thick, sandy hair, brown eyes, and a stubbly goatee.

“You were meeting Ms. Modesto here?”

“By the fountain. She said she’d try to be here about ten-fifteen, no later than ten-thirty.”

Since he wore black pants, a thin black sweater, black boots, she understood they hadn’t planned to take a run together.

“Why were you meeting?”

He swiped at his face. He had a smear of blue paint on the side of his thumb. “We were involved. We met last summer. Galla bought one of my paintings. I had a sidewalk display, and

she liked one I'd done in Tuscany. She—her family—they're from Tuscany, and she said it reminded her. And she came by a few times, and to this gallery, and . . . we fell in love."

"You had a romantic and intimate relationship with Ms. Modesto."

"We fell in love," he repeated. "Sometimes we'd meet here, and just sit and talk. Sometimes we'd go to my loft. I knew she was married, she told me. We never lied to each other. She has a little boy. She wanted to leave her husband, but she has a little boy. She wanted to leave him, even talked to her lawyer. But . . ."

Now he covered his face with his hands. "She told me, the last time we were together had to be the last time. We both knew . . . Right from the start we both knew it couldn't last. She had to think of her son first. She had to try to fix her marriage, fix her family."

"But she agreed to meet you here tonight."

"I asked if she would. Not to be together. Just to really say goodbye. I had something I wanted to give her."

"What's that?"

He opened the bag he carried, took out a package wrapped in thick brown paper. "It's a painting. Like a companion piece to the one she first bought. I thought, it's the first and it's the last."

"You must've been hurt and angry."

As he shook his head, his eyes welled again. "I loved her. I knew she was married, had a child. She never lied. She never promised. And . . ." He drew a long breath. "I knew she loved me. She couldn't be with me, but she loved me. If I hadn't asked her to come here tonight . . ."

He fell apart then, so Eve looked to Peabody, the soother.

"Marlon." Peabody sat beside him. "You can't blame yourself, but you may be able to help. Did anyone else know you and Galla were meeting here tonight?"

"No. We were careful—our relationship. It was private. It was . . ." He used the heels of his hands to scrub his face dry. "It was just for us. She said she'd tell her husband she was going to get some time at the gym. Just a quick solo workout. She did that, so it wouldn't be unusual. She wouldn't have told anyone she was coming here. I didn't tell anyone."

"How did you communicate?"

"Just texts."

"When were you last together, when she ended it?"

"Just last week. She came to the loft, and told me. We made love one last time. And today, the painting was ready, so I texted her and asked if she'd come here, so I could give her a gift. That it would help me say goodbye."

"When you met here, did you ever notice anyone paying particular attention to her, to the two of you?"

"No. It's such a good space. It always felt safe here."

“When she came to your loft?” Eve drew his attention back to her. “Did you ever notice anyone outside, anyone who made you feel uncomfortable?”

“No. I have a small loft right in the Village, over the gallery. I work there, show there, do some teaching. She could only come once a week, sometimes twice, but usually once a week when she could get away, when her son was out with his nanny or on a playdate. We’d only have an hour, maybe two. We loved a lifetime’s worth. We knew we only had that little bit of time.”

“Did she ever tell you she felt threatened or had been threatened?”

“No, no. God no.”

“Did she fight with her husband?”

Almost absently now, he swiped his fingers over his eyes. “Not really, she never said so. He was more interested in the business, and the show, you know? How they looked together, going to events. She wanted to go back to Tuscany, to take her boy. For us to live there. We dreamed about that, even knowing it was just a dream.”

He thrust the painting to Eve. “Will you take this? I can’t look at it. I don’t want it. It’s too painful.”

“Peabody, give Mr. Stowe a receipt for the painting. We’ll need to take it into evidence for now.”

“I don’t want it.” He began to cry again. “I can’t sell it. Just keep it.”

“We’re not allowed to do that. But we’ll work something out. Detective Peabody will give you a receipt, and take your contact information.”

Eve spotted Roarke, passed the painting to Peabody. “Then you’re free to go. Do you need transportation?”

“No, no. I can walk. I’ll walk.”

“We’re sorry for your loss, Mr. Stowe. Please contact me or Detective Peabody if you think of anything that may help our investigation.”

She got up, moved quickly to Roarke. “What’s going on?” she demanded. “You’re pissed. Scary Roarke pissed.”

He took her arm. “Let’s walk.”

“I can’t just—”

“With me.” He tightened his grip to lead her away from the crime scene. “Lorcan Cobbe,” he began. “You’ll want to do a run there. From Dublin, and he’d be three or four—maybe five—years older than me.”

“One of your old friends?”

“Not remotely.” He moved away from the lights so they stood in shadows. “He worked for my father, and as he had no talent for thievery and considerable for viciousness, he did enforcement, intimidation, helped with the protection racket. We can get into all of that at another time, but you’ll want to run him. And you’ll want to take care.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. "A great deal of care, Eve."

"Why?"

"He'd do me in a heartbeat if he could manage it, but he'd kill what matters to me and enjoy it all the more. A killer is what is he, and always has been."

"And you saw him, at my crime scene."

"I saw him. He made sure I did. Aye, he made certain of that, bloody bastard."

He scanned the park again, but knew he wouldn't see that face again. Not tonight.

"I'm telling you, I didn't have to see him put the knife in that woman to know he did. He'll be your man on this."

"Why her? He couldn't know you'd be here."

"That's just a nice twist of fate for him. Killing's what he does, Eve, for pleasure and profit. He does his work primarily in Europe, but this wouldn't be his first job in the States, I'd think. I don't know of him coming, for business at least, to New York before, and I think I would. But he's here now."

She took it in. It was rare to see him agitated—more than angry—so she took it in, and took it seriously. "Describe him—as you saw him tonight."

"About six feet, a strong build, wide in the shoulders, light brown hair worn in what you'd call a topknot. Light complected, clean-shaven. Black pants and shirt, a red jacket. He stepped clear so I'd see him, looked right at me. Smiled."

He ran his hands down her arms, back again. "He'll know what you are to me. Or if he doesn't, he'll now make it his business to find out."

"Why does he hate you, particularly?"

"Particularly? He claimed to be Patrick Roarke's bastard, and as senior to me, his oldest son."

"Was he?"

"Unlikely, but not impossible, I suppose. Unlikely, as the old man liked him considerably more than me, and if he'd been his blood, would have taken him in. That's not important at the moment. He bloody well didn't just happen to be in the park when a woman—a wealthy one—ends up gutted. And gutting, throat slitting, disemboweling are favorite pastimes of Lorcan Cobbe."

"All right, I'll run him. I'll put out a BOLO."

Now he framed her face with his hands before she could object. "And you'll take care. Take very good care."

"Yes," she said because he needed her to. "And same goes."

"He won't try for me right off—what's the fun in that? I have to contact some people."

"We're going to need to talk about this, in more detail."

"And we will. Your car's here." He gestured toward the arch. "I'll see you at home."

As she watched him stride away, she realized she was worried because he was worried.

Marriage, she thought. It could fuck you up.

“LT.” McNab pranced over in his airboots, long tail of blond hair swinging. “Got your security discs. I already looked at the footage of the kill.”

“We have the kill on the feed?”

“Yes and no. I’m going to say the killer knew the cam angles, and kept his face clear. What we’ve got is the vic coming in, then what appears to be a male, about six feet, probably about one-ninety, black pants, black hoodie worn up, cutting across her path. We got him from the back, so no way to tell age or race or make a firm determination of gender.”

McNab glanced back as the morgue team bagged the body. A line of colorful hoops glittered on his earlobe. “He had his hands in his jacket pockets, his head down, moving right along, then cuts in front of her. She stops. You can see his right arm jerk up, then pull back. He keeps right on walking, and she staggers a couple steps. A lot of blood even before she goes down. Then you’ve got a couple of people running over to her. One of them turns her over. And the screaming starts. He’s already out of cam view by then.”

“Take them in, run through them. I need copies. All feed, all angles.”

“You got it. He had to be waiting for her, Dallas. The way he moved on her. It was purposeful, you know? Not random, it just didn’t feel random.”

He might dress like a circus act, but she knew his cop instincts hit solid.

“No, I don’t think random. Peabody,” she said when her partner joined them.

“I talked to a handful of people, and to a couple of the uniforms who talked to people. Most didn’t see or notice anything until she went down, but I have two who stated they saw a man in a black hoodie walking away as “she fell. No solid description beyond the hoodie, worn up, and the assumption of male.”

“That coordinates with the security feed. McNab, when you’re going over the discs, look for a male—the height and build you described. Caucasian, late thirties to early forties, light brown hair—man bun deal—red jacket. Flag anything you find with a view of him.”

“Okay. Is he a suspect?”

“Odds are. His name’s Lorcan Cobbe, out of Dublin. Roarke saw him in the crowd, recognized him. He’s a pro.”

“I can start reviewing on my portable if I stick with you for now,” McNab told her.

“Fine. Let’s move. Peabody, start a run on the vic’s husband, Jorge Tween, and let’s go notify him.”

“If this was a hired hit,” Peabody began.

“The spouse is number one,” Eve finished.

Her car waited at the curb, as advertised. She got in, sat a moment. “We’ll run Cobbe, too, put out a BOLO, but let’s see who we’re about to talk to first.”

Peabody got in the passenger seat, not so discreetly slipped her feet out of her party shoes as McNab climbed in the back. “Tween is forty-two, a VP in distribution at Modesto. He’s

worked for them for sixteen years. No criminal coming up. Married Galla Modesto six years ago—first and only marriage for both. Son, Angelo, age four.”

Eve pulled out, started the short drive to the Modesto/Tween residence.

“They purchased their New York residence five years ago. Tween works out of the NY headquarters. Got his net worth here at just under nine million.”

“Hers is more than ten times that,” Eve remembered. “There’s a fine motive added to her having an affair.”

“She broke it off,” Peabody pointed out, but Eve just shook her head.

“She had an affair, and more, if Stowe’s not full of it, fell in love. It takes a little time to arrange a hit, so there’s that. Then do you call it off because she called off the affair? Are you sure she did? Did she confess all? Doubtful. Either way, what’s to stop her from changing her mind, going back to her artist lover, taking her big mountain of money and moving to Italy?”

Reluctantly as Eve squeezed into a spot at the curb near the address, Peabody pushed her feet back into her shoes.

“I’ll stick here with this,” McNab said from the back. “Especially if I can get a fizzy from the AC.”

“Do that.”

He added a winsome smile. “Maybe you got some chips in here.”

“I don’t know what the hell’s in the AutoChef.” Leaving him to find out, Eve got out.

Peabody didn’t quite hide the wince when they started the half-block walk, crosstown.

“Why are you wearing those idiot shoes?”

“They’re pretty shoes! We went out dancing—date-night dancing. You need pretty shoes for date-night dancing. I didn’t know they were going to be work-a-case shoes.”

She moaned a little. “And they’re killing me.”

“Suck it up.”

“This is sucking it up. So Roarke knew this Cobbe back in Ireland?”

“Dublin, when he was a kid. I’ll get more details, but Cobbe let Roarke spot him. Wanted him to. Roarke says he’s a killer by nature and profession. I’ll get more details,” she said again, and stopped in front of the house to get a sense of it.

Three stories of whitewashed brick had an elegance, a quiet charm. The security light glowed pale green, but no glow came from the lights at either side of the front door.

The lights that would have welcomed someone home.

Windows stayed dark, so no one waited up for the woman who’d never come home again. Flowers spilled out of painted boxes on the windows flanking the door.

She caught the scent of something soft and sweet as she stepped up, pressed the buzzer.

The household has retired for the night. Please leave your name and contact information. If this is an emergency—

"NYPD." Eve cut off the computer, held up her badge. "Inform Jorge Tween the police need to speak with him."

Please state the nature of your emergency.

"Your circuits are going to have an emergency unless Mr. Tween is informed the NYPD is at the door. Scan the damn badge, and get it done."

The scanner light swept her badge.

Your identity is verified, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. Please wait.

"I hate those damn things."

"You actually have those damn things. You know, on the gates, and on—"

"Doesn't mean I can't hate them. Not a light on inside," Eve commented. "Your wife goes out to the gym, doesn't come back in, say, an hour. Do you just turn off the lights and go to bed?"

"Doesn't seem right," Peabody agreed. "Even if you're pissed at each other, it feels off. At least the lights here should be on if someone's out. Who doesn't do that?"

"Someone who's not expecting anyone. It's a little thing. It's a petty little thing."

Lights came on inside, flooding the windows with their cheerful flowers. Locks clicked.

The door opened for a woman of about fifty in a dark blue robe. Her dark hair tumbled around her face. Her eyes, gypsy brown, held fear and worry.

"You're the police."

"Yes, ma'am." Once again, Eve held up her badge. "We need to speak to Mr. Tween."

"Yes? The system alerted me. I'm the housekeeper. Please, excuse me, come in."

She had an Italian accent and bare feet with toenails painted bold red.

Narrow tables stood on either side of the entrance. They held slender purple flowers in long, thin vases, reflected back by tall mirrors. The tile floor spread in the color of gold sand.

"Please, here in the parlor you can sit." She gestured as she led the way. "You would like coffee? Tea?"

"We're good. Could we have your name?"

"Of course. I am Elena Rinaldi. I am the housekeeper. Please sit. I will alert Mr. Tween. He and Ms. Modesto are sleeping. It is very late."

"Ms. Rinaldi, when did you last see or speak with Mr. Tween or Ms. Modesto?"

"Ah . . . I think about nine this evening. Yes, about nine before I retired to my quarters for the night. Please sit," she repeated, and went out.

"Before Modesto went out," Peabody murmured.

"Yeah." Eve looked around what she imagined they called the front parlor.

More flowers—someone had a fondness for them. And a formal sort of feel with cream-colored sofas, peacock-blue chairs, tables with a slight sheen of gold. More gold in the ornate

frame of the big oval mirror over a white marble fireplace filled with flowers and candles now for spring.

The art went for Italian scenes. Red tile roofs on stucco houses and great cathedral domes. Rolling hills and farmhouses. She recognized Tuscany—because she'd been there. As well as a painting of the Spanish Steps in Rome.

She walked to the one of Tuscany—those hills, those tall, slim trees, vineyards with purple grapes climbing, a winding path leading to a house of pale rose stucco with flowers rioting at its feet.

And in the corner, the artist's signature.

M. Stowe.

"It's good work," Peabody commented. "I sent the other one in, still wrapped. You've been there, right?"

"Yeah."

"Does it really look like that?"

"Yeah, it does. It's her room. This is her room."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's formal and elegant. The flowers, the paintings—especially that one. The couple of photographs?" Eve gestured. "The kid, her and the kid, but not the husband. Her family, most likely, but not with him. The dust catchers all feel female."

Frowning, Peabody looked around. "You're right about that. It all feels female. Not frilly, but female."

Eve gestured. "The tablet on the table by the chair that faces Stowe's painting? She could sit there, read or work or whatever, look up and see the painting. Think about her lover. Think about home.

"A company room," Eve added. "But otherwise hers."

She turned when she heard footsteps, and waited to meet Jorge Tween.