

Chapter One

Paperwork could kill.

Nothing, to Eve Dallas's mind, reached the same heights—or depths—as paperwork's terminal boredom.

And if the boredom didn't kill you, the frustration would.

She had to survive it. As NYPD's Homicide Division's lieutenant, she had to survive it.

But it seemed desperately clear to her, as she sat at her desk in her tiny office in Cop Central, that by spring of 2061, somebody sure as hell should have found a cure.

Didn't she deserve that when she'd come in early, and full of righteousness, to tackle it? She'd known it would be thornier than usual, but even so, she'd underestimated.

It wasn't every day she ended up taking her whole damn squad in pursuit of a contract killer. On two continents. Wouldn't have happened, she thought as she struggled with numbers, a lot of numbers, if said contract killer hadn't put a target on her husband's back.

And hers.

Since he had, the men and women who served under her, along with a chunk of cops from EDD and her commander, had stood up, stepped up, and had refused to back down.

Maybe Roarke had ordered the shuttle for the flight from New York so she didn't have to figure out how to add that terrifying expense into her budget, into her report.

Because she'd married a stubborn Irishman, and a filthy rich one.

And sure, the takedown happened on his family's farm in Clare, with his aunt and the rest of them capping it off with enough food for an army. So no chits for meals.

But the overtime. Preapproved by Commander Whitney, yes, but Christ on a spreadsheet the OT boggled. Then she had the regs to meet for payment due on international investigations.

Paperwork could not only kill, she thought as she gulped coffee. It could kill slowly and painfully.

Once, as she worked, her partner, Detective Peabody, clumped down the hall to Eve's office in her pink cowgirl boots. And poked her cheery self into the room.

One snarl had her clomping away again.

And eighty-seven minutes after she'd sat down at her desk, Eve finished—every chit, every hour, every approved expense accounted for.

She submitted it—and woe be-fucking-tide any flat-nose in Accounting who questioned her. Then she laid her head on the desk, closed her glassy eyes a moment.

"No more numbers," she muttered. "In the name of humanity, no more numbers."

She sat up, rubbed her hands over her angular face, then back through her choppy crop of brown hair. Rising, she walked to her AutoChef, because she damn well deserved another hit of coffee.

As she drank it, she stood at her skinny window looking out at her view of New York. A tall, lanky woman, she wore good boots, smoke gray like her trousers, and the vest over her white T-shirt and weapon harness.

While her wedding ring was her only visible jewelry, she wore a fat diamond on a chain under her shirt. Both pieces Roarke had given her held equal fat slices of sentiment.

She watched the airtrams wind through a blue sky. The weather gods offered the city a perfect day in May. Sunny and seventies.

The poor bastards heading to their cubes inside one of the steel towers might not drink in much of it. But it was still there. And since she'd survived Death by Expense Report, she could appreciate it.

A good day, she thought, and tugged her window open a couple of inches.

With the kicky little breeze flowing in, she went back to her desk to see what else had piled up since her last shift.

Her communicator signaled.

She saw Dispatch on the readout.

"Dallas."

Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. Possible homicide. See the officers . . .

As she listened to the particulars, she grabbed her jacket off the back of her desk chair and headed out to the bullpen to get her partner.

Somebody hadn't had such a perfect day in May.

"Acknowledged. Dallas and Peabody, Detective Delia, en route. Peabody," she said, still moving, "we caught one."

Her stride hitched briefly as she blinked at Jenkinson's tie. She should be used to the detective's insane ties by now, she thought, but who got used to fat, bug-eyed yellow bumblebees buzzing over a neon-orange field?

Nobody did. Nobody ever should.

Peabody grabbed her coat and hustled to catch up. She wore curls today, her dark hair red-streaked and bouncy.

Something else Eve couldn't get used to.

"What've we got?"

"Dead body, West Fourth, two uniforms on scene. Interestingly, the nine-one-one came in from the Upper East Side. Two more uniforms being dispatched to that location to speak to the woman who called it in."

"How does somebody on the Upper East Side know somebody's dead in the West Village?" Peabody pondered it while Eve made a heel-turn away from the elevator, already crowded with cops, techs, civilian support heading down.

They took the glides.

"Dispatch didn't have that data."

"You got in early today."

"Paperwork. Done. Don't want to talk about it."

"McNab and I left early enough to walk in. You've got to take advantage of a day like this."

"Because like the DB on West Fourth found out, it could be your last."

Hoping for the best, Eve jumped off the glides to try an elevator. Since she found it only about half as full as the one on Homicide's level, she squeezed in.

"Mostly we thought it was a really nice morning for a walk."

They squeezed off again on the garage level. Their footsteps echoed as they crossed to Eve's car.

“We walk a lot when we’re in the field,” Peabody continued as they got in the car. “But it’s not the same as, you know, sort of strolling along. New York in the spring. I mean, it’s just mag.”

Eve pulled out into the insane traffic, the cacophony of angry horns, the bellowing ad blimps, and the farting maxibuses that was New York in the spring.”

But what the hell; on Eve’s scale it was mag, any time of the year.

“And hey, Mavis, Bella, and I spent two amazing hours in the community gardens the other day. We’ve got a nice plot going.”

Eve thought of Mavis, her oldest friend—the performer, the mother, the crazed fashion plate, the pregnant-again Mavis. She could see Mavis doing a lot of things—strange things—but digging in the dirt didn’t make the list.

“She’s really doing that?”

“She’s good at it,” Peabody confirmed. “Good hands, good eye. I grew up farming, that’s the Free-Ager way, but she’s a natural. And Bella’s so cute in her little gardening outfits. Oh, and she has a boyfriend.”

“Mavis has a what? She’s married, knocked up again and married.”

“No, Bella has a boyfriend. His name’s Ned. He’s twenty-two—months. He’s got all this curly red hair, all these freckles. Mavis dubbed him Adorablicious, and she nailed it. They’re really cute together. His parents, Jem and Linc, are just learning how to garden. Jem’s a blogger, and Linc’s a biochemist.”

“Is this gardening or a social club?”

“It can be both, that’s the beauty.” She turned her head to grin at Eve. “You’d hate it.”

No question of that, Eve thought as she hunted for parking. But still.

“I planted a tree.”

“You did what?” Peabody’s dark eyes widened like inflated balloons. “What!”

“Roarke and I planted a tree. His idea, but we did it. Mostly. The landscaper guy dug the hole, but we put the tree in, and then dirt and whatever.”

“What kind of tree?”

“There!” Spotting a space, Eve hit the lights, hit vertical, and as Peabody slammed her goggling eyes shut, punched it across the street. She dropped down between a scarred mini and a burly all-terrain with maybe a half an inch to spare.

“Score.”

“I was going to say you should warn me, but it would probably be worse.” Happy to be unscathed, Peabody got out, waited for Eve to get their field kits from the trunk. “What kind of tree?”

Eve pointed south to the crosswalk. “A crying tree, a crying something. Peach, maybe.”

“A weeping peach?”

“Weeping, crying. Same thing, even though it doesn’t do either. It’s got little flowers all over it now, so we didn’t kill it.”

“That’s good, but why did you plant a tree? Why do a cop and a gazillionaire plant a tree?”

“Roarke gets . . .” Sentimental, she thought as they joined the river of people crossing the street. “Ideas. We did that pond thing, so—”

“You did it? It’s done? You said he was going to put one in.”

“Yeah, it’s done. It’s nice. It’s got those things that float on it.”

“Lily pads?” Peabody sighed.

“Those, and like a stone sort of skirt and plants and a bench, and he decided we should plant the tree ourselves.”

“Awww!”

“Social club’s closed,” Eve announced, and paused in front of the four-story building to get a sense.

Street level consisted of a place called Poets and Painters and a shop called Herbalists. Both had wide windows facing the street, as did the upper stories.

No privacy screens, she noted, no security bars, just glass.

She walked to the wine-colored door, between the two businesses, that accessed the units.

No security camera, standard locks.

“You could break in with a toothpick,” she decided, and mastered in.

Iron steps led straight up to the second floor, where a door on the right had a decent alarm system and the double doors on the left had solid locks.

“DB’s upstairs,” she told Peabody.”

They went up, boots clattering.

A uniform waited in the open doorway on the right. The double doors on the left stood open. At a glance Eve saw easels, stools, worktables, tools, big and small hunks of stone and wood.

She heard music pouring out of the room behind the uniform.

She held up her badge, turned on her recorder.

“Lieutenant.” The uniform, female, about fifty, her short, densely curled hair tidy under her cap, stepped back. “Officer Miller. My partner, Officer Getz, is upstairs with the DB.”

“Run it through.”

“We’d just completed taking a complaint up the block, were going off shift when the call came in. Zero-eight-thirty-three hours. Half a block away, you gotta take it. No response at either unit on this level, and we could hear the music through the door.”

Hot-tempered music, Eve thought. A lot of bass, a lot of angry drums.

“No soundproofing,” the uniform continued. “We woke the tenant downstairs in case she had access, which she did. Hettie Brownstone. She and the DB are the only tenants other than the commercial on the street—neither of which were open at the time we arrived. Ms. Brownstone gave us her key cards to both units rented and occupied by Ariel Byrd, and complied when we asked her to wait in her apartment. We announced ourselves, entered. My partner took the second level while I cleared this one. He found the DB.”

Miller shifted to glance toward the stairs. Through the wide cased opening, Eve saw the other cop standing at parade rest, the wide window at his back, some shelving flanking it.

“It’s an artist’s studio, sir. Like for sculpting. The back of her head’s caved in. A good-sized hammer, like a mallet, is on the floor beside her, and has blood and gray matter on it—visibly. Also a take-out bag from Café Delish—that’s about a block east—on the floor at the top of the stairs. Like somebody dropped it, and the fancy coffee splatted good. Two muffins inside the bag.

“We secured the scene, called it in. I went down to inform Ms. Brownstone and conduct the initial interview.”

Miller glanced down at the notes in her hand.

“She’s known the victim for three years, since the vic moved in. She runs a dance studio on the premises, directly across from her apartment. According to her statement, she concluded her last class at nine, locked up. She has a five-year-old kid. She didn’t leave the premises, didn’t hear or see anyone. She states she put the kid to bed by nine-fifteen, took a shower, and had a glass of wine while she watched some screen until about ten-thirty.”

Miller looked up from her notes. “She was upset, Lieutenant, but cooperative. She stated she would speak to the investigating officers when they arrived, but had to get her kid to school. She would be back by nine.”

“All right. We’ve got the scene. I’m going to send your partner down. I want you to check with the Poet place. They’d have been open last night. And there’s cams on their door and the herb place. I want to see the feed from both.”

“Yes, sir, Lieutenant.”

“See what you can find out from the café, and check on Brownstone when she gets back. Inform her one or both of us will come down to speak with her as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir. Sir, I want to add, when I cleared this level, I noticed the bed, unless the victim wasn’t in the habit of making it, had been used. I think used, as there are wineglasses on either bedside table, and a nearly empty bottle of Shiraz on a counter in the kitchen area.”

“Good to know. Thank you, Officer.”

Eve walked to the stairs—not iron here, but wood. Old, maybe original.

The male uniform, maybe fifteen years his partner’s junior, met them at the top.”

To his right on the floor the soaked take-out bag lay in a pool of creamy brown liquid.

“Lieutenant. Miller said not to turn the music off. You’d want to keep everything, even that, the way it was when we accessed.”

“Correct.”

“I wouldn’t have heard you coming up. I only knew you were here because I looked down and saw you with Miller.”

Not ear-blasting loud, Eve thought, but loud enough to mask footsteps.

“Thank you, Officer. We’ve got the scene.”

Standing where she was, studying that scene, Eve opened her field kit. She sealed her hands, her boots as Peabody did.

“Music off.”

In the silence she looked at the victim, a small-statured female in sweatpants cut off at the knees, a sweatshirt cut off at the armpits.

Blood matted her hair, short, ink black with streaks of bright blue. “From the position of the wound, it looks like it hit slightly to the right—and she went down to the left. Came up behind her, that’s clear enough,” Eve commented. “She’s standing there at that worktable, facing it, the window, working on that hunk of stone.”

“It’s marble, I think.”

“Okay. She’s got tools right there. A chisel, a hammer, there’s bits of stone on the table, on the floor. Got the music going, the lights on. It’d be hard to see her from the street because the worktable’s too far back. But she can see out if she wants.”

“No sign of struggle. The coffee sack . . .” Peabody frowned at it. “Somebody starts up—most likely the nine-one-one caller, right? Sees the body, drops the bag. *Splat.*”

“That’s how it looks. No obvious signs of burglary or theft up here, either. A lot of statues—finished, half-finished. A lot of stone and wood and tools. The killer comes in—we’ll take a good look at the door for tampering—comes up the steps. Picks up that mallet—plenty of that sort of thing right there on that other bench. *Wham.*”

She held up a finger, circled the body. “Or possibly she’s had some wine and sex with someone. And he comes up with her. They argue—or started to argue downstairs. She’s done, calls for the music, picks up her tools. And in that moment when people just lose their fucking minds, he grabs the mallet and crushes her skull. Probably bashes her a couple times. Then it’s: Oh shit. Or: She deserved it. And he gets the hell out.”

“Her neighbor might know if she was seeing anyone.”

“Yeah, we’ll check on that.” With her field kit, Eve crouched down, doing what she could to avoid the pool of blood. Using her Identi-pad to confirm ID, she read it into the record.

“Victim is officially identified as Ariel Byrd of this address, mixed-race female, age twenty-seven. I’ve got the body, Peabody. Start downstairs, start with the bedroom. Let’s see if we can lift some prints or DNA off the wineglasses.”

She didn’t need the microgoggles to examine the wound. “At least two blows from the shape, the width. And since the killer left the weapon right here, easily identified. Bagging for evidence.”

She bagged it, sealed it, labeled it, set it aside. “Vic’s wearing work gloves and boots and protective goggles.”

Eve leaned in, angled her head to look through the goggles to the dark eyes—filmed now—that stared back at her. Then took out her gauges to confirm time of death.

“TOD, twenty-two-forty-eight. COD, blunt force trauma to the back of the skull. ME to confirm.”

Since the victim was about five-three and maybe a hundred pounds, Eve didn’t call Peabody to help her turn the body.

“Yeah, she tipped to the left, damage to right cheekbone where it slammed against the floor. Hard fall.” She lifted the sweatshirt. “Rammed the table first, bet we’ve got a broken rib here. Couple of strong, hard blows from behind. The victim slams forward—but this table’s bolted down so it doesn’t move. Then she goes down to the left. I’m saying that’s when the killer follows up with the next hit, and that turns her head so she hits the floor with the right side of her face. She’s dead before she hits the floor.”

Eve duckwalked back, mindful of the blood. She straightened, took out her ’link to call for a wagon and the sweepers.

Crouching again, she examined the take-out bag, used a finger to press on one of the muffins.

Still fresh, she noted, so from this morning.

She flagged the bag and contents for the sweepers.

She took a tour around the space, a dedicated work space. Tools, tarps, a mini-AutoChef, and a tiny friggie that held water and a couple of energy drinks. An easel stood in the corner holding a series of sketches.

The wood, of course, the stone. Some pieces seemed finished to her—and some delicate, some chunky and rough. Faces in the stone, a nude woman, a nude man, a couple of indeterminate sex caught in an embrace.

And in wood a dragon curled as if in sleep, a woman standing en pointe, a many-branched tree with a hint of a face in the trunk.

Most likely, Eve considered, she'd had some success. She wasn't an expert on art, but the pieces had something that clicked with her.

Either success, she thought as she started downstairs, or somebody backing her financially. Rent in a space like this in the West Village wouldn't come cheap.

She scanned the living area.

No sign of any disturbance.

A wall screen, and a sofa that looked comfortably saggy, covered in dark pink, bright blue, deep green stripes. A big, thick rug—probably in deference to her downstairs neighbor—covered most of the floor. An eating area defined by a square table in that same deep pink, four chairs, two in the blue and two in the green. Flowers in a stone—marble?—vase.

The flowers looked very fresh.

No clutter, she thought, unless you counted the art crammed on the walls. All kinds of art, some framed, some just tacked-up sketches.

She glanced in the kitchen. A single counter, and the bottle of red with maybe a half a glass left. She marked it for the sweepers.

More wine, some cheese, some yogurt, some energy drinks in a refrigerator that looked as if it had done duty for a couple decades. An old AC—and she checked for last programmed.

No dishes in the sink.

She circled out and paused by the open door of a home office doubling as a guest room. Neat, uncluttered, colorful, Eve noted, with the bed made, the pillows plumped.

Someone—maybe the victim—had painted a mural on one wall, a street scene of sidewalk artists at their easels, cars blurring by.

She flagged the mini data and communication unit on the table under the window for EDD before continuing on.

The bathroom, clean again, simple. She opened the door of the mirrored cabinet over the sink to find some over-the-counter meds, organized by type. She took a moment to check the drawers and cabinet of the vanity before joining Peabody in the main bedroom.

Peabody stood, hands on hips, frowning at the room.

Two stands flanked the unmade bed, with a lamp and a print-dust-coated wineglass on each. The single horizontal window had a privacy screen—unengaged.

Peabody turned. "I wanted you to see it before I bagged the glasses. Prints on both. The vic's on the one on the right of the bed. The ones on the left aren't in the system. The lab's going to find DNA on the glasses and these sheets."

"Yeah, that's not sleep mode. Did you check the drawers in the stands?"

"A tablet, her 'link, and a sketch pad and pencils in a case in the one on the right. Nothing on the left. No calls, texts, incoming or outgoing, on the 'link since mid-afternoon. Then just a text. I recorded the number, registered to a Gwendolyn Huffman.

"What did it say?"

“Just: I’m looking forward to our sitting. The victim texted back she was, too, and the texter said she’d see her soon, and wouldn’t come empty-handed.”

“No time stated. Bag it for EDD. No condoms, no sex toys,” Eve added. “Not here, not in the bathroom. Closet?”

“Just clothes, shoes, a couple of handbags—one day, one evening. Two roly bags, the small inside the large. She wasn’t a clotheshorse,” Peabody added as Eve walked to the closet to look herself.

“But you can see she organized what she had by type. Work clothes, street clothes, one basic black dress, a couple of what I’d call fun-night-out outfits. Shoes the same way. She’s got underwear, sleep clothes, workout gear, and that sort of thing in the dresser—organized by type again. One small drawer for jewelry—costume, arty, fun stuff. Everything’s tidy, Dallas, and nothing looks as if anyone went through it looking for anything.”

“No, not here, not anywhere else.”

“It bugs me.”

Yeah, it did, Eve thought, but turned. “Speak.”

“Okay, so you look around the place—her studio upstairs, the living space down here—and everything’s clean, really neat and tidy. Except for the art on the walls, she was a serious minimalist, and clearly liked everything clean and in its place.”

“Agreed.”

“No discarded shirt tossed on the little chair over there, no shoes kicked off anywhere to be put back on or put away later.”

“No dirty dishes—except those glasses,” Eve added. “The spread thing’s folded on top of the bench at the foot of the bed, but the sheets are tangled, half kicked off. Not sleep mode. Sex mode.”

“Maybe I can see leaving the bed messy—she’s going to smooth it out before coming back to sleep. That’s a little stretch considering how, you know, precise she was in her living style, but I don’t see her leaving those used wineglasses.”

“She used the kitchen AC at eighteen-ten last night to order up a single serving of chicken and rice with a side of brussels sprouts. Those dishes, and the ones from what she ordered for breakfast yesterday at zero-eight-twenty, lunch at thirteen-thirty-five, are in the dishwasher, clean. She programmed it to run at eighteen-twenty-eight.”

“So maybe she didn’t feel like emptying it so she could load the wineglasses, but I don’t see her leaving them in here.”

“Doesn’t fit the pattern,” Eve agreed.

“She’s having wine and sex with somebody, and all signs say consensual. But somewhere along the line, there’s an argument. Serious enough for the victim to get up, throw on some work clothes, and not follow pattern by tidying up. She’s like: ‘I’m not doing this again. We’re done. Get dressed, get out. I’m going to work.’”

“Following that line,” Eve said, “the dumped lover doesn’t want it to be done, doesn’t want to get out. And concludes the fight by bashing the victim with a mallet.”

“Crime of passion,” Peabody concluded. “I’ll show you who’s done, bitch!”

“Decent probability on all of that. The morgue and the sweepers are on the way. Let’s have a look at the entrance door, and flag the sheets. The sweepers can take them, the glasses, and the rest.”

“They’re going to find DNA,” Peabody predicted, “but if the prints aren’t on file . . .”

“DNA being on file for the as-yet-unidentified lover is less likely,” Eve finished as she opened the front door, hunkered down. She put on microgoggles to study the lock, the key card swipe.

“Cheap crap,” she muttered, “but no sign I can see of tampering. Let’s have EDD come in, check it—and see if they can tell how many times it was accessed yesterday. They can check the main door downstairs, too. Possibility: One lover storms out. ‘Fuck you, Ariel.’ She’s upstairs, music on, working. Second lover comes in. Hard to square someone without any sex toys or basic protection juggling a couple of bed partners, but maybe. Second lover sees bed, wineglasses. Why, that bitch! Walks up, bashes her. ‘That’ll teach you to cheat on me.’”

“Being tidy and organized doesn’t mean she wasn’t a bitch, and one tangling sheets with multiples.” Even so, Peabody sighed. “Too bad if she turns out to be a cheater, because I really like her work.”

When she heard the steps clanging, Eve replaced the goggles in her field kit. “That should be the morgue or the sweepers. Either way, let’s get them started, then go down and talk to the neighbor. She might know who the vic liked to tangle sheets with.”