

Neglect could kill a building brick by brick. It was, to his mind, more insidious than hurricane or earthquake as it murdered slowly, quietly, not in rage or passion, but with utter contempt.

Or perhaps he was being a bit lyrical about a structure that had served no purpose other than housing rats and junkies for more than a dozen years.

But with vision, and considerable money, the old building, sagging its shoulders in what had once been Hell's Kitchen, would stand strong again, and with purpose.

Roarke had vision, and considerable money, and enjoyed using both as he pleased.

He'd had his eye on the property for more than a year, waiting like a cat at a mousehole for the shaky conglomerate that owned it to crumble a little more. He'd had his ear to that mousehole as well, and had listened to the rumors of rehab or razing, of additional funding and complete bankruptcy.

As he'd anticipated, the reality fell between, and the property popped on the market. Still he'd waited, biding his time, until the fanciful – to his mind – asking price slid down to a more reasonable level.

And he'd waited a bit more yet, knowing the troubles of the group that owned it would surely make them more amenable to an offer well below even that level – with some additional sweating time.

The buying and selling of property – or anything else for that matter – was a business, of course. But it was also a game, and one he relished playing, one he relished winning. He considered the game of business nearly as satisfying and entertaining as stealing.

Once he'd stolen to survive, and then he'd continued when it had become another kind of game because, hell, he was damn good at it.

But his thieving days lay behind him, and he rarely regretted stepping out of the shadows. He might have built the foundations of his fortune in those shadows, but he added to them, wielded the power of them now in full light.

When he considered what he'd given up, and what he'd gained by doing so, he knew it to be the best deal of his life.

Now he stood in the rubble of his newest acquisition, a tall man with a lean and disciplined body. He wore a perfectly tailored suit of charcoal gray and a crisp shirt the color of peat smoke. He stood beside the spark plug of Pete Staski, the job boss, and the curvaceous Nina Whitt, his head architect. Workers buzzed around, hauling in tools, shouting out to each other over the grinding music already playing, as Roarke had heard it grind on countless other construction sites on and off planet.

'She's got good bones,' Pete said around a wad of blackberry gum. 'And I ain't going to argue about the work, but

I gotta say, one last time, it'd be cheaper to tear her down, start from scratch.'

'Maybe so,' Roarke agreed, and the Irish wove through the words. 'But she deserves better than the wrecking ball. So we'll take her down to those bones, and give her what Nina here has designed.'

'You're the boss.'

'I am indeed.'

'It's going to be worth it,' Nina assured him. 'I always think this is the most exciting part. The tearing down what's out-lived its time so you can begin to build up again.'

'And you never know what you're going to find during demo.' Pete hefted a sledgehammer. 'Found a whole staircase once, boxed in with particle board. Stack of magazines left on the steps, too, back from 2015.'

With a shake of his head, he held the sledgehammer out to Roarke. 'You should take the first couple whacks. It's good luck when the owner does it.'

'Well now, I'm all about the luck.' Amused, Roarke took off his suit jacket, handed it to Nina. He glanced at the scarred, dingy wall, smiled at the poorly spelled graffiti scrawled over it.

Fuk the mutherfuking world!

'We'll start right there, why don't we?' He took the sledgehammer, tested its weight, swung it back and into the gyp board with enough muscle to have Pete grunt in approval.

The cheap material broke open, spewing out gray dust, vomiting out gray chunks.

‘That wasn’t up to code,’ Pete commented. ‘Lucky board that flimsy didn’t fall down on its own.’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘You want, you can give it a couple more, and she’ll go.’

Roarke supposed it was a human thing to get such a foolish charge out of destruction. He plowed the hammer into the wall again, shooting out small sprays of gypsum, then a third time. As predicted, the bulk of the wall crumbled. Beyond it lay a narrow space with spindly studs – against code as well – and another wall.

‘What’s this shit?’ Pete shifted over, started to poke his head through.

‘Wait.’ Setting the hammer aside, Roarke took Pete’s arm, moved in himself.

Between the wall he’d opened and the one several feet behind it lay two bundles wrapped in thick plastic.

But he could see, clearly enough, what they were.

‘Ah well, fuck the motherfucking world indeed.’

‘Is that . . . Holy shit.’

‘What is it?’ Nina, still holding Roarke’s jacket, pushed against Pete’s other side, nosed in. ‘Oh! Oh my God! Those are – those are—’

‘Bodies,’ Roarke finished. ‘What’s left of them. You’ll have to hold the crew off, Pete. It appears I have to tag up my wife.’

Roarke took his jacket from Nina’s limp fingers, drew his ‘link out of the pocket. ‘Eve,’ he said when her face came on screen. ‘It seems I’m in need of a cop.’

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Lieutenant Eve Dallas stood in front of the soot-stained, graffiti-laced brick of the three-story building with its boarded windows and rusting security bars, and wondered what the hell Roarke was thinking.

Still, if he'd bought the dump, it must have some redeeming or financial value. Somewhere.

But at the moment that wasn't the issue.

'Maybe it isn't bodies.'

Eve glanced over at Detective Peabody, her partner, wrapped up like a freaking Eskimo – if Eskimos wore puffy purple coats – against the iced-tipped December wind.

At this rate, 2060 was going out on frostbitten feet.

'If he said there were bodies, there're bodies.'

'Yeah, probably. Homicide: Our day starts when yours ends. Permanently.'

'You should sew that on a pillow.'

'I'm thinking a T-shirt.'

Eve walked up the two cracked concrete steps to the iron double doors. The job, she thought, meant there was never a lack of starts to the day.

She was tall and lanky in sturdy boots and a long leather coat. Her hair, short and choppy, echoed the whiskey shade of her eyes as it fluttered in the brisk wind. The door screeched like a grieving woman with laryngitis when she yanked it open.

Lean like her body, her face, with a shallow dent in the chin, briefly reflected her wonder when she took her first look at the dirt, the rubble, the sheer disaster of the main-floor interior.

Then it went cool, her eyes flat and all cop.

Behind her Peabody said, quietly, 'Ick.'

Though she privately agreed, Eve said nothing and strode toward the huddle by a broken wall.

Roarke came toward her.

He should've looked out of place in this dung heap, she thought, dressed in his pricy emperor-of-the-business-world suit, that mane of black silk hair spilling nearly to his shoulders around a face that spoke of the generosity of the gods.

Yet he looked in touch, in place, in control – as he did mostly anywhere.

'Lieutenant.' Those wild blue eyes held on her face a moment. 'Peabody. Sorry for any inconvenience.'

'You got bodies?'

'It appears we do.'

'Then it's not an inconvenience, it's the job. Over there, behind the wall?'

'They are, yes. Two from what I could tell. And no, I didn't touch anything after smashing through the wall and finding them, nor allow anyone else to. I know the drill well enough by now.'

He did, she thought, just as she knew him. In charge, in control, but under it a sparking anger.

His property, he'd think, and it had been used for murder.

So she spoke in the same brisk tone. 'We don't know what we've got until we know.'

'You'll know.' His hand brushed her arm, just the lightest touch. 'You've only to see. Eve, I think—'

‘Don’t tell me what you think yet. It’s better if I go in without any preformed ideas.’

‘You’re right, of course.’ He walked her over. ‘Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody, Pete Staski. He runs the crew.’

‘Meetcha,’ said Pete, and tapped his finger to the bill of his grimy Mets ball cap. ‘You expect all kinds of crap in demo, but you don’t expect this.’

‘You never know. Who’s the other suit?’ Eve asked Roarke, glancing toward the woman sitting on some sort of big overturned bucket with her head in her hands.

‘Nina Whitt, the architect. She’s a bit shaken still.’

‘Okay. I need you to move back.’

After sealing her hands, her boots, Eve stepped to the hole. It was jagged, uneven, but a good two feet wide at its widest point, and ran nearly from floor to ceiling.

She saw, as Roarke had, the two forms, one stacked on the other. And saw he hadn’t been wrong.

She took her flashlight out of her field kit, switched it on, and stepped through.

‘Watch your step, lady – Lieutenant, that is,’ Pete corrected. ‘This wall here, the studs, they’re flimsy. I oughta get you a hard hat.’

‘That’s okay.’ She crouched, played her light over the bags.

Down to bones, she thought. No sign of clothing, no scraps of cloth she could see. But she could see where rats – she imagined – had gnawed through the plastic here and there to get to their meal.

‘Do we know when the wall went up?’

‘Not for certain, no,’ Roarke told her. ‘I did some looking

while we waited for you to see if there's been a permit pulled for this sort of interior construction, and there's nothing. I contacted the previous owner – their rep, I should say. According to her, this wall was here at the time they bought the property, some four years ago. I'm waiting to hear back from the owner prior to that.'

She could have told him to leave that to her, but why waste the time and the breath?

'Peabody, send for the sweepers, and put a request in for a forensic anthropologist. Tell the sweepers we need a cadaver scan, walls and floors.'

'On it.'

'You think there might be more,' Roarke said quietly.

'We have to check.'

She stepped out again, looked at him. 'I'm going to have to shut you down, until further notice.'

'So I assumed.'

'Peabody will take your statements and your contact information, then you'll be free to leave.'

'And you?' Roarke asked.

She shrugged out of her coat. 'I'm going to get to work.'

Back between the walls, Eve carefully recorded the wrapped bodies from all angles.

'The skeletal remains of two victims, both individually wrapped in what appears to be heavy-grade plastic. We've got holes in the plastic. Looks like vermin chewed through. Increased the air – heat and cold to the bodies,' she said half to herself. 'And that probably accelerated decomp. No data, at this time, on when this secondary

wall was constructed. It's impossible, from an on-site eval, to determine TOD.'

Leaving the plastic in place for now, she ran a scan to determine height. 'Centimeters, crap.' She scowled at the readout. 'Convert that to American – to feet.' Her frown stayed in place as she studied the new readouts.

'Victim Two – top – is judged to be approximately five feet in height. Victim One – bottom – four feet, eleven inches.'

'Children,' Roarke said from behind her. 'They were children.'

He hadn't stepped through the opening, but stood just in it.

'I'll need the forensic expert to determine age.' Then she shook her head. He wasn't just a witness, wasn't even just her husband. He'd worked with her, side by side, on too many cases to count. 'Yeah, probably. But I can't confirm that. Go ahead and give Peabody your statement.'

'She's taking Nina's.' He glanced back to where the stalwart and sympathetic Peabody dealt with the shaken architect. 'It'll be a bit longer. I could help you.'

'Not a good idea, not just yet.' Carefully, she began to peel back the plastic on Victim Two. 'I don't see any holes in the skull – so no obvious evidence of head trauma. No visible damage to the neck, or nicks, breaks in the torso area.' She fit on microgoggles. 'There's a crack in the left arm, above the elbow. Maybe from an injury. This finger bone looks crooked, but what do I know. Looks crooked though. I can't see any damage or injury to determine COD, at this time.'

Identification from skeletal remains must be attempted by ME and forensics. No clothing, no shoes, no jewelry or personal effects.'

Sitting back on her heels, she glanced up at Roarke again. 'I only know the bare bones, but generally the jawline in a male is more square – and this looks more rounded to my eye. Plus the pelvis area is usually larger in males. It's just a guess – and needs verification – but these look to be female remains to me.'

'Girls.'

'Just a guess, and I don't even have that on TOD or COD. We may be able to estimate when this wall was built, because the probability's high it was put up to conceal the bodies. Between that and the forensics, we'll get approximate TOD.' She pushed up. 'I'll need forensics to help determine IDs. Once we know who they are, we can start working on how they got here.'

With little more she could do, she stepped out beside him.

'They're close to the same height,' he pointed out.

'Yeah. Possible: Same type of female vic – close in age, maybe, in size, maybe race. Maybe they were killed together, maybe they weren't. I can't see any signs of trauma, but further testing may pull that out. Hold on.'

She walked over to where Peabody finished up with Nina.

'I'm sorry I'm not more help. This is so upsetting. I've never seen ...' Nina glanced over to the open wall, away again. 'I didn't even see clearly really, but ...'

'Did you examine the walls, the floors,' Eve began, 'when you got the job?'

‘We did several walk-throughs, of course. Measurements. Roarke’s directive was to gut the building, and to design spaces within the shell. We have all the blueprints and specs – architectural, engineering, mechanical. The bones—’ She broke off, paled. ‘That is to say the shell, the structure is very sound, but the interior isn’t. It contains a lot of cheap material, a lot of poor design, quick fixes that were done over several decades, all leading to a number of years of neglect.’

‘How many years of neglect?’

‘Our research indicates the building hasn’t been used, officially, for about fifteen years. I did research some of its history, just to give me some background for the new design.’

‘Send me what you’ve got. You’re free to go now. Do you have transportation?’

‘I can get a cab. I’m fine. I’m not usually so . . . delicate. Can I speak with Roarke a moment before I leave?’

‘Sure.’ Eve shifted her attention to Peabody. ‘I think they’re kids.’

‘Aw, shit, Dallas.’

‘Not a hundred percent, but that’s my initial take. I need you to take Roarke’s statement, it’s just less sticky that way. I’ll take the job boss.’ She looked over as the first of the sweepers came in the big iron door. ‘In a minute.’

With little more to do than direct, Eve set the sweepers to work, took Pete’s brief but colorful statement, then moved back to Roarke.

‘The best thing you can do is find out everything you can about who and what and where and when regarding this building in the past fifteen years.’

‘You think that’s when they were put there.’

‘If the place hasn’t been used, or rarely, in that time, my best guess is, yeah, it’s going to be sometime between then and now. Now, allowing time for the decomp. If you can get me data on that, and another ream of data detailing, say, the five years before that, we may have something to play on.’

‘Then you’ll have it.’

‘What’s that over there? Where that portion of the wall’s removed.’

‘That would be the previous owners, taking a look at the old wiring. There’s a similar break on the second level where they poked at the plumbing.’

‘Too bad they didn’t hit this spot. We’d have found the remains sooner and you’d have got it cheaper.’

‘It was cheap enough. Getting an actual inspection of the wiring and plumbing’s what put them in a mad scramble for more financing, or some backers. Neither of which they managed.’

‘And you came along, swooped it up.’

‘More or less. It and everything in it.’

She understood how he felt. ‘I can pretty much guarantee you didn’t own this place when they were put there. You found them, and they needed to be found. You can’t do anything here, Roarke. You should go, deal with the ten thousand meetings you’ve probably got on your schedule for the day.’

‘Only a couple thousand today, so I think I’ll stay a bit longer.’ He watched two of the sweepers in their white suits and booties run scanners over another wall.

‘Okay, but I’ve got—’ Eve broke off when the door screamed open again.

The woman who walked in might have been stepping onto a vid set. She wore a long sweep of coat in popping red, a flowing scarf that bled that red into silvery grays. A sassy red beret topped a short, sleek wedge of black hair. Gray boots with high skinny heels ran up under the hem of the coat.

She pulled off a pair of red-framed sunshades and revealed iced blue eyes that made an exotic contrast with smooth caramel skin. She tucked the shades into a gray bag the size of Pluto, took out a ‘link with an ornate protective cover, and began to record the scene.

‘Who the hell is that?’ In quick strides, Eve crossed the dusty space. Some reporter, she thought, trying for a scoop. ‘This is a crime scene,’ she began.

‘Right, yes. I find it helpful to have a clear record of the environment. Dr Garnet DeWinter.’ She stuck out a hand, gripped Eve’s, gave it two firm shakes. ‘Forensic anthropologist.’

‘I don’t know you. Where’s Frank Beesum?’

‘Frank retired last month, moved to Boca. I took over his position.’ She gave Eve a long, steady study. ‘I don’t know you either.’

‘Lieutenant Dallas.’ Eve tapped the badge she’d hooked to her belt. ‘I need to see your ID, Dr DeWinter.’

‘All right.’ She reached into the bag Eve speculated could hold a small pony, drew out her credentials. ‘I was told you have skeletal remains. Two.’

‘That’s right.’ Eve handed the credentials back. ‘Wrapped

in plastic, which was compromised, I believe, by vermin. They were discovered as demolition began, with that wall.'

She gestured, then led DeWinter over.

'Now, you I know.' DeWinter's vid star face lit on Roarke's. 'Do you remember me?'

'Garnet DeWinter.' To Eve's surprise, he leaned down, kissed both her cheeks. 'It's been five years, six?'

'Yes, six, I think. I read you'd married.' DeWinter spread her smile over him, and Eve. 'Congratulations to both of you. I certainly didn't expect to see you here, Roarke.'

'He owns the building,' Eve told her.

'Ah, bad luck.' She looked up, around, down. 'It's kind of a wreck, isn't it? But you're a genius at transformations.'

'As you are on bones. We're fortunate to have her, Eve. Garnet is one of the top forensic anthropologists in the country.'

"'One of'?" DeWinter said, and laughed. 'I found myself unsatisfied in the lab in The Foundry in East Washington, so I jumped at the chance to take the position here, have a more hands-on opportunity. And I thought it would be a good change for Miranda – my daughter,' she said to Eve.

'Great, good. Maybe we can all catch up later over drinks and beer nuts, and I don't know, maybe you'd like to take a look at the remains. Just for something to do.'

'Sarcasm. Ouch.' Undaunted, DeWinter swept off her coat. 'Would you mind?' she asked, handing it to Roarke. 'Through there?' At Eve's nod, she moved to the opening, once again used her 'link to record.

'I have a record,' Eve began.

‘I like my own. You opened the plastic wrapping on the top remains.’

‘After a full record.’

‘Still.’

‘You’re not sealed,’ Eve said when DeWinter started to step through.

‘You’re right, of course. I’m still getting used to the protocols.’ Out of the bag she pulled a white sweepers suit. She unzipped her boots, slid them off, then pulled the suit over her trim black dress. Then she took out a can of Seal-It, coated her hands.

She took the bag with her through the hole.

‘Friend of yours?’ Eve murmured to Roarke.

‘Acquaintance, but she makes an impression.’

‘You got that right,’ Eve said and went through the hole.

‘The remains on top—’

‘Victim Two.’

‘All right, Victim Two appears to be approximately 1.5 meters in length.’

‘Just barely over, I did the measurement. Victim One is nearly the same, just under that.’

‘Don’t take offense, but I’ll just remeasure, for my own record.’ Once she had, DeWinter nodded. ‘From on-site visuals of the skull shape, the pubic area, Victim Two is female, between twelve and fifteen years. Most probably Caucasian. I see no outward sign of trauma. The crack in the right humerus, just above the elbow, indicates a break. Most likely between the ages of two and three. It didn’t heal well. There’s also a fracture of the right index finger.’

‘Looks like more a twist than a break.’

‘Agreed. Good eye. As if someone grabbed the finger, twisted it until it snapped.’

DeWinter drew out microgoggles, slipped them on, tapped them, and a light focused down. ‘She had a few cavities, and her twelve-year molars were through. A tooth missing. I also see some damage to the eye socket, left. An old injury.’

Slowly, systematically, DeWinter worked her way down the body. ‘A rotator cuff injury. Again it looks like a wrenching injury – someone grabbing the arm, twisting forcibly. Another fracture here, looks like a hairline in the left ankle.’

‘Abuse. That’s a pattern of physical abuse.’

‘Agreed, but I’ll want to study these injuries in my lab.’

She glanced up at Eve, her eyes huge behind the goggles. ‘I’ll be able to tell you more once I have her there. I need to move her to examine Victim One’s remains.’

‘Peabody!’

Peabody popped into the doorway. ‘Sir!’

‘Help me lift these remains.’

‘Carefully,’ DeWinter warned. ‘If you could take them out, and have Dawson secure them for transport. Do you know Dawson?’

‘Yeah. Let’s get her up and out, Peabody.’

‘Poor kid,’ Peabody murmured, then gripped the plastic, lifted it with Eve like a hammock. ‘Who’s the fashion plate?’ Peabody asked under her breath when they’d moved the remains into the main room.

‘New forensic anthro. Dawson!’

When the head sweeper glanced her way, she signaled him. 'Tell him to secure and arrange for transport,' Eve ordered Peabody, and went back through to rejoin DeWinter.

'In the same age range as the other. With the skull characteristics, I believe mixed race. Most likely Asian and black. Two strains of my heritage as well. Again no outward sign of trauma. A clean break in the tibia, healed well.'

DeWinter moved slowly, carefully along the remains. 'I see no other breaks or injuries. All of the injuries, on One and Two, show they'd healed, and none were COD or incurred near TOD.'

As DeWinter's light shone, Eve caught a quick sparkle.

'Wait.' She crouched, peered down through the eye socket of the skull. 'There's something here.' Grabbing a tool out of her kit, she reached through, clamped the tiny glitter.

'Excellent eye, indeed,' DeWinter said. 'I missed it.'

'An earring.'

'I think a nose ring, possible brow ring. It's a very small stud, so I'd lean toward the nose. It simply dropped off and down during decomp.'

Eve slid it into an evidence bag, sealed it.

'We'll begin drawing out DNA, starting facial reconstruction. I assume you want ID as soon as we can possibly determine.'

'You assume right.'

'Cause and time of death may take longer. I could use a detailed history of the building, when the outer wall was constructed, what its purposes were.'

'Already being accumulated.'

‘Excellent. Dawson can secure these remains as well. I’ll start on them immediately, and contact you as soon as I have anything useful. I look forward to working with you, Lieutenant.’

Eve took the offered hand again, then let it go when she heard the shout.

‘We’ve got another one!’

She met DeWinter’s eyes. ‘Looks like you’re not done here yet.’

‘Nor you.’

Before they were done, they found twelve.

2

Eve went through the building section by section. To the south wall first, where sweepers meticulously cut out a large square of gyp board, bagging some of its dust and chunks for analysis. Inside the narrow opening, three wrapped remains were stacked. She examined them along with DeWinter.

Females, between twelve and sixteen. As with the first two, some showed older injuries, none showed overt trauma that could be determined as cause of death.

With the remains, Eve found three studs and one small silver hoop.

The rest of the main floor held a handful of partitions, two small restrooms, long since stripped of fixtures.

By the time she, along with DeWinter, climbed the open iron stairs to the second level, the sweepers had found five more.

‘Again we have a mix of ethnicity,’ DeWinter told her, ‘and again, all female, all in the same age range. Some injuries I’d suspect resulted from childhood abuse, but none that determine cause of death. Whoever did this preyed on females past puberty, but far short of adulthood. Females of this age range, some of whom most likely experienced earlier physical abuse.’

‘It was, for a few years, a kind of shelter.’

Eve glanced back at Roarke as she bagged what she thought might be a toe ring.

‘What kind of shelter?’

‘Documentation’s spotty. It was used as a kind of shelter for children and teenagers during the Urban Wars, those who’d lost their parents. A kind of makeshift orphanage.’

‘These bodies haven’t been here since the Urbans.’

‘It’s possible,’ DeWinter disagreed. ‘I’ll be able to determine how long, within a reasonable time frame, once I have the remains back in my lab.’

‘Not since the Urbans,’ Eve repeated. ‘The concealing wall wasn’t built that long ago. And there would’ve been no need to keep them here like this. People died in droves during the Urbans. You want to kill a few girls, need to get rid of the bodies? Just take them out, leave them on the street. And,’ she continued before DeWinter could speak again, ‘how the hell do you kill them, wrap them up, stack them up, then build walls to hide them when the place is full of people? You need time, you need some privacy.’

‘Yes, I see you’re right. I only meant, forensically, the remains could be from that time period, and we won’t know until tests are run to determine.’

Eve straightened, handed the evidence bags out to Peabody. ‘Any documentation on how long the place housed Urban orphans?’

‘I’m working on it,’ Roarke told her. ‘This level and the one above were converted into dormitories, loosely. There were two communal baths, second floor, third floor.’

‘Best I can figure,’ Pete put in, ‘they went up toward the end of the Urbans, or right after. That’s going by material, and most of what was in them’s long gone. Nobody bothered with permits, inspections, codes back around then. What I can see of the plumbing that’s left, the wiring and basic infrastructure looks like it was scavenged, cobbled together. Same with the kitchen on the first floor, the two johns downstairs.’

‘No upgrades?’

‘Ah.’ He scratched his head. ‘Some patchwork, some jury-rigging here and there. Done on the cheap. It’s why we didn’t think squat-all about the walls. We could see they weren’t part of the original structure, but it’s had a lot of half-ass fiddling over the years.’

‘Dorms.’ Stepping out, Eve surveyed the big, open space, imagined it crammed with cots and narrow beds, cheap, box-like dressers or chests for belongings.

She’d lived through the experience of a state-run dorm – housing for disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and troubled kids. She supposed she’d been all three. But remembered, most of all, the days and nights of misery.

‘You could fit twenty, twenty-five in here, double with bunks.’

‘Be tight,’ Pete commented.

‘These kinds of places always run tight, and usually run cheap.’

She walked out, leaving DeWinter to her exam, studied the space across a narrow hall.

‘Another dorm, maybe,’ Pete suggested.

No, she thought, probably the ‘group’ room, where you

had to go for talk therapy, to listen to lectures, to receive duties or assignments. More misery.

She walked down into what had been the communal bathroom for the floor.

And flashed clearly back to the one she'd dealt with.

Room for six stalls, maybe seven in a pinch, she decided. One tub, considered a privilege, open showers, maybe three showerheads that offered a piss-trickle on a good day, three sinks.

She tuned back in, heard Pete's rambling voice.

'Stripped the old copper clean out, but you expect that. Helped themselves to some of the plastic pipes. Punched some holes in the old walls to get to it. Hauled out the johns, the tub. Had to be a tub over there, from what I can see of the rough plumbing. Mostly the same as this in the one on the third floor.'

'Girls on one level, boys on the other, most likely. Especially if there were teenagers.' At least that fit with her experience.

'Lieutenant.' Dawson walked to her, his face drawn now. 'We found more.'

So there were twelve, wrapped, stacked, and hidden between walls. Some with a glitter or two among the bones to speak of the life once lived.

When she'd done all she could do, she stood out on the sidewalk with Roarke. The cold, the noise, the rush of life blew away some of the film, gyp dust and death, that seemed to cling to her face, her mind.

'We're heading into Central. Any data you can find on the

place, the time lines, owners, usage, send it – however minuscule. We'll springboard off it, find more.'

'I've copied what I do have to your units, including the sellers.' He watched the way she studied the building. 'You don't like leaving them to DeWinter – your dead.'

'She's the expert. And no,' Eve admitted, 'I don't. But I can't look at their bones and figure out what happened to them. She can. Or I have to hope she can.'

'She's very skilled. Will she work with Morris?'

Eve thought of the chief medical examiner, another who was very skilled. And one she trusted completely. 'Yeah, she will. I'll make sure of it. Twelve,' she mused. 'In four different hidey-holes on three floors. Why spread them out? That's a question. All the same basic types, but with a spread over racial lines. But height, age, all close. Maybe body type, too. Sloppy enough, or just didn't care enough to remove all the body adornments.'

'Anyway,' she said, pushing that aside for now. 'They'll seal the place up until we clear it, and I can't say how long that'll take.'

'It's not a concern of mine. I want to know their names.'

She nodded, understanding. 'So do I. We'll find them, and we'll find out what happened to them. And we'll find who did it to them.'

'You're the expert.' He pressed a kiss to her forehead before she could evade, because he needed to. 'I'll see you at home.'

She skirted around the hood of her car, slid in behind the wheel. And there let out one long breath. 'Jesus Christ.'

Beside her, Peabody let out one of her own. 'I can't get

past them being kids. I know we have to, but I can't get past the fact a dozen kids were wrapped up and dumped in there like garbage.'

'You don't have to get past it. You use it.' Eve pulled out, wove through traffic. 'But I don't think it was like garbage, not to the killer.'

'What then?'

'I don't know, not yet. The way they were wrapped, the way he spread them out through the building, stacked some of them together. Does any of that mean something? We'll bring Mira in on this,' she said, referring to New York Police and Security Department's top profiler and shrink. 'And we start working, straight off, with the data Roarke has on the building. We dog this DeWinter like hungry hounds.'

'Did you see her *boots*?' Peabody's dark eyes rolled like a woman in the throes of ecstasy. 'They were like butter. And the dress? The cut, the material, and the really cute little buttons running all the way down the back?'

'Who wears butter boots and cute little buttons to a crime scene?'

'It all looked really good on her. And the coat was totally mag. Not mag like yours, a more girlie kind of mag.'

'My coat's serviceable, practical.'

'And magic,' Peabody added as it was lined with sheer body armor. 'But still. Plus I got from Dawson she's like a bone genius. I think he's got a crush on her, which I get because she looks amazing, but he says she can find more answers in a finger bone than a lot of lab rats can in a whole body.'

‘Let’s hope he’s right because we’ve got nothing but bones, a handful of cheap jewelry, and a building nobody apparently gave two shits about for years.’

‘Wall material,’ Peabody added. ‘Lab rats may be able to date some of the gyp board, the studs. Maybe even the plastic.’

‘There’s that. Cheap,’ Eve considered. ‘The plastic looked cheap to me. The kind you buy by the big-ass roll to toss over things you don’t want to get wet, or throw down on a floor when you’re painting or whatever, then just dump. Same with the wallboard. Not much of an investment, but decent enough work – carpentry work – so nobody poked at the walls before this.’

‘So the killer had some construction skills.’

‘Enough to construct walls nobody looked at and thought: What the hell is that doing there? That blended in. But why the hell hide bodies there? Why not find a better way to dispose of them? Ditch or hide the bodies – taking them out and burying them’s easier – but hide them because you don’t want them found. They might connect to you. But you’ve got to have easy access to the building, so that connects to you. Yet you keep the bodies there.’

‘To keep them close?’

‘Maybe you want to visit them.’

‘That’s just more sick.’

‘The world’s full of sick,’ Eve said, and contemplated on just that as she drove into Central.

She zipped into her slot in the garage. No IDs, no faces, no names – but that didn’t mean they didn’t dig in hard.

‘I’m going to start the book and board,’ she said, striding to the elevator. ‘You take whatever data Roarke’s sent on the building itself, the history of it, get more.’ She stepped into the elevator. ‘I want to know everything there is to know about its use: who used it, who owned it, worked in it, lived in it. Primarily post-Urbans, but not exclusively.’

‘I’m all over it.’

‘We take the probability DeWinter’s on-scene estimate’s close, and the time line that’s most likely—’ She broke off to shift over when more people piled into the car. ‘We start at fifteen years, after the building was shut down. But we need to know who had a connection to it or interest in it prior, and after.’

The next time the doors opened, two uniforms hauled in a very fragrant sidewalk sleeper. Eve opted out, Peabody in her wake, and headed for the glide up.

‘She seemed to know her stuff, and not just fashion-wise.’

‘We’re going to find out.’ She hopped off the glide, continued to Homicide. ‘Everything, Peabody,’ she repeated. And she’d do a little digging on Dr Garnet DeWinter.

She stepped into the bullpen and the clashing scents of really bad coffee, processed sugar, and industrial-strength cleaner. The smells of home.

Detectives manned ’links and comps at their desks, uniforms did the same in their cubes. She noted the empty desks of Detective Baxter and his trainee, Officer Trueheart. Remembered after a quick mental search that they’d both be in court.

She split off from Peabody, shrugging out of her coat as she

made the short jog into her office. There, in her small space with its single narrow window, sat her AutoChef with the perk of real coffee, most excellent coffee, thanks to Roarke.

She tossed her coat on her excuse of a visitor's chair. The ass-numbing chair, plus coat, should discourage visitors. Then she programmed coffee, dropped down at her desk.

She wrote her report first, copying her commander and Dr Mira, adding a request for a consult to Mira's copy.

Then she tagged crime scene photos to her board. Twelve remains, she thought.

Young girls, who if DeWinter's gauge was accurate, would be adult women now, close to her own age. Women with jobs, careers, families, histories, lovers, friends.

Who'd stolen all that from them? And why?

'Computer, search and list any and all Missing Persons reports, New York area, for females between twelve and sixteen years. Subjects not found. Search parameters 2045 through 2050.'

Acknowledge. Searching . . .

That would take a while, she thought.

And it took time to kill a dozen girls, barring group slaughter, mass poisoning, or the like. She didn't see that here. A mass killing would have resulted, most logically, in a mass grave, not scattered hiding places.

So one or two, possibly three at a time, with the added burden of concealment.

A closed or abandoned building would afford the time, the

privacy needed. Nail down the TODs, then find who had opportunity and access – and the necessary skills to build the walls.

It grated a little, she could admit it, to depend on someone else to determine TOD – someone not within her usual team. But she studied the board, and reminded herself those girls, who would never have jobs, lovers, families, demanded she work with anyone who could provide answers.

But that didn't mean she shouldn't find out just who that anyone was.

She did a quick run on DeWinter.

Age thirty-seven, single, no marriage, one offspring – female, age ten. No official cohab on record. Born Arlington, Virginia, both parents living, both long-term cohabs, both scientists. No siblings.

The educations listing ran endlessly, and okay, Eve thought, were pretty damn impressive. She had doctorates in both physical and biological anthropology, both from Boston University of Medicine – where she sometimes served as a guest lecturer – master's degrees in a handful of other related areas like forensic DNA, toxicology. She'd worked in a number of facilities, most recently The Foundry in East Washington where she'd headed a nine-person department of lab rats.

Earned the price of her fancy coat and boots on the lecture circuit, Eve deduced, after scanning the list – and consulting on digs and projects all over the world. That list ran from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

Arrested twice, Eve noted. Once at a protest rally against rain forest development, and once for . . . stealing a dog.

Who stole a dog?

Both times she pleaded guilty, paid a fine, and did the required community service.

Interesting.

She'd started to look more deeply into the criminal charges when Mira knocked on her doorjamb.

'That was fast.' Automatically, Eve rose.

'I was on an outside consult and read your report on the way in. I thought I'd come by before I went to my office.'

'I appreciate it.'

'Those are your victims.'

Mira walked to the board.

Eve didn't think of Mira as a fashion plate. She thought of her as classy. The pale peach dress and matching jacket set off Mira's sweep of sable hair, the soft blue eyes. The sparkle of little gold beads around her neck echoed in eardrops, and both the peach and gold merged in a swirling pattern on the shoes with their needle-thin heels.

Eve could never quite figure out how some women managed to match and merge that way.

'Twelve young girls,' Mira murmured.

'We're waiting for data to ID them.'

'Yes. You're working with Garnet DeWinter.'

'Apparently.'

'I know her a little. An interesting woman, and unquestionably brilliant.'

'I keep hearing the second part. She stole a dog.'

‘What?’ Mira’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, then knitted in curiosity. ‘Whose dog? Why?’

‘I don’t know. I just did a run on her. She’s got an arrest for stealing a dog.’

‘That’s . . . odd. In any case, her reputation in her field is exemplary. She’ll help you find out who they were. May I sit?’

‘Oh, yeah. Let me . . .’ There were visitors and there were visitors. Eve scooped the coat off the chair, then gestured to her desk. ‘Take that one. This one’s brutal.’

‘I’m aware.’ And because she was, Mira took the desk chair.

‘Do you want some of that tea of yours? Or coffee?’

‘No, thanks. I – oh, I *love* the sketch.’

Rising again, Mira walked over to admire the sketch of Eve, in full kick-ass mode.

‘Yeah, it’s good. Ah, Nixie Swisher did it for a school project or assignment. Something.’

Little Nixie, who’d survived, by chance, luck, fate, the brutal and bloody home invasion that had killed her entire family.

‘It’s wonderful. I didn’t realize she was so talented.’

‘I think she got an assist from Richard.’

‘Regardless, it’s excellent, and captures you. She’d be so pleased you put it in here.’

‘I told her I would on Thanksgiving, when she gave it to me. Anyway, it reminds me. Even when the worst happens, when you think you can’t take another step you can. You can survive.’

‘I only saw her briefly when Richard and Elizabeth brought the children to New York, but I could see she’s done more than survive. She’s begun to thrive.’

She turned away, glanced at the board again. ‘They never will.’

‘No. The preliminary indicates the victims cross ethnic lines, which means it’s unlikely they shared coloring or facial resemblance. That leaves age and possibly body type as physical links. My first instinct,’ Eve continued as Mira sat again, ‘at this point, is the ages of the victims were more important to their killer.’

‘Young, probably not fully developed physically or sexually.’

‘And small in stature, which would indicate even those who may hit the top of the age scale may have, and likely did, appear younger. Again, on the preliminary, there was no sign of violence immediately before death. Any sign of it was well before death, and healed.’

‘Yes, I saw in the preliminary prior abuse suspected on several of the victims. Young girls already used to violence,’ Mira said, ‘don’t trust easily. Given the nature of the building during the most probable time frame, they, or some of them, might have been runaways.’

‘I’ve started a search using Missing Persons reports. It’s—’ Eve glanced over when her computer signaled. ‘That should be it. Computer, number of results.’

Three hundred seventy-four unresolved reports on subjects fitting the criteria.

‘So many,’ Mira said, but from her expression, the number didn’t surprise her any more than it did Eve.

‘Some of those are kids who poofed – of their own accord. Slid through the cracks, got themselves new ID.’

‘Some,’ Mira agreed, ‘but not most.’

‘No, not most. It’s possible we’ll find our vics among these. Certainly we should find some of them. Then again, not every parent or guardian bothers to file a report when a kid goes missing. Plenty are just fine with it if a kid takes off.’

‘You didn’t run.’

‘No.’ There were few Eve felt comfortable speaking to about her past. Mira was one. ‘Not from Troy.’ Not from the father who’d beaten her, raped her, tormented her. ‘It never occurred to me I could. Maybe if I’d had exposure to other kids, to the outside, it would have.’

‘They kept you confined, separated, Richard Troy, Stella, so the confinement, the abuse, all of it was your normal. How could you know, especially at eight, it was anything but?’

‘Are you worried about me, with them?’ Eve gestured to the board.

‘Only a little. It’s always harder when it’s children, for anyone who works with death. It will be harder on you considering they’re young girls – a few years older than you were, and some of them abused, most likely by parents or guardians. Then someone ended their lives. Perhaps more than one person.’

‘It’s a consideration.’

‘You escaped and survived, they didn’t. So yes, it’ll be hard on you. But I can’t think of anyone more suited to stand for them. With only gender and approximate age, it’s

not possible to give you a solid profile. The fact that there was no clothing found may indicate sexual assault, or an attempt to humiliate, or trophies. Any number of reasons. Cause of death will help, as could the victims' histories once identified. Anything you're able to give me will help.'

Mira paused a moment. 'He had skills, and he planned. He had to access both the building and the material, and find the girls. That takes planning. These weren't impulse kills, even if the first might have been. The remains show no physical signs of torture or violence, though there may have been emotional torture. None of them were hidden alone?'

'No.'

'Not alone, but in pairs or small groups. It might be he didn't want them to be alone. He wrapped them, a kind of shroud. And built them a kind of crypt. It shows respect.'

'Twisted.'

'Oh yes, but a respect for them. Runaways, abused girls, buried – in his way – in a building with a history of offering shelter to orphans. That's an interesting connection.'

Mira rose. 'I'll let you get back to work.' She glanced back to the board again. 'They've waited a long time to be found, to have some hope of justice.'

'There might be others. Did the killer stop with these twelve, or even begin with them? Why stop? We'll look at known predators who were killed, died, or incarcerated around the time of the last victim – once we have that. But, too many aren't known. Still, we'll look for like crimes, known predators. A lot of times girls this age run in packs, right?'

Mira smiled. ‘They do.’

‘So it’s likely one or more of the vics had friends, maybe were friends. It’s possible we’ll find someone who was friends with a vic, and saw or heard something. We don’t have names, yet, but we have lines to tug.’

She sat again when Mira left, looked at the list of missing girls.

And began to tug.

She’d eliminated a handful – too tall to match the recovered remains – when Peabody poked in.

‘I’ve got a couple names.’

‘I’ve got hundreds.’

Confused, Peabody looked at the screen. ‘Oh, missing girls. Man, that’s just sad. But I’ve got a couple of names associated with the building during the time in question. Philadelphia Jones, Nashville Jones – siblings. They ran a youth halfway house/rehab center in the building, according to what Roarke dug up, from May of 2041 to September of 2045. They moved to another facility, one donated to them by a Tiffany Brigham Bittmore. They’re still there, heading up the Higher Power Cleansing Center for Youths.’

‘First, who names somebody after a city?’

‘They have a sister, Selma – I’m thinking Alabama – who lives in Australia, and had a brother, Montclair, who died shortly after they switched buildings. He was on a missionary trip to Africa, and got mostly eaten by a lion.’

‘Huh. That’s something you don’t hear every day.’

‘I’ve decided being eaten alive by anything is my last choice of causes of death.’

‘What’s first choice?’

‘Kicking it at two hundred and twenty, minutes after being sexually satisfied by my thirty-five-year-old Spanish lover, and his twin brother.’

‘There’s something to be said for that,’ Eve decided. ‘Who owned the building during the Joneses’ time?’

‘They did, sort of. In that they struggled to pay a mortgage on it, and the bills that come with a decrepit building in New York. They defaulted, and the bank took it over, eventually. Then the bank eventually sold it. I’ve got that name, too, but it’s looking like this little company bought it with the idea of pulling in investors so they could rehab it into a handful of fancy apartments. That fell through, and they eventually sold it at a loss to the group Roarke bought it from, who also lost money on the deal.’

‘Bad luck building.’

Peabody looked at the board, the crime scene photos. ‘It sure as hell seems like it.’

‘Well. Let’s go talk to Pittsburgh and Tennessee.’

‘Philadelphia and Nashville.’

‘Close enough.’

Higher Power Cleansing Center for Youths made its base in a tidy, four-story building just below the hip edge of the East Village. The short stretch on Delancey had rejected the Village’s artistic edge, and just missed the Bowery’s late twentieth-century facelift – and the bombings, pillaging, and vandalism that had infected its neighbors during the Urbans.

Most of the buildings here were old, some rehabbed, some

gentrified, others defiantly clinging to their shabby urban shells.

The whitewashed brick building boasted a tiny courtyard where a scatter of short shrubs shivered in the cold. A couple of teenagers, impervious to that cold, sat on a stone bench playing with their PPCs.

Eve passed them on the way to the front entrance. Both wore HPCCY hooded sweatshirts, sported various face and ear piercings, and identical expressions of suspicious disapproval.

Street vets already, smelling cop, she concluded.

At her steady gaze, their expressions shifted to cocky smirks, but she noted the girl – or she assumed girl – slid her hand into her companion's.

She heard the hoarse whispers, the quick giggle (definitely female) behind her as she and Peabody climbed the trio of steps to the front door.

Security there included cam, palm plate, and swipe unit. She pressed the buzzer, over which a sign helpfully advised: PLEASE PRESS THE BUZZER.

'A clean and healthy day to you. How can we help?'

'Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody, NYPSD. We're here to speak with Philadelphia and Nashville Jones.'

'I'm sorry, I don't see your names on Ms Jones's or Mr Jones's appointment books today.'

Eve pulled out her badge. 'This is my appointment.'

'Of course. Would you please put your palm to the plate for verification of ID?'

Eve complied, waited for the scan.

‘Thank you, Lieutenant Dallas. I’m happy to buzz you in.’

There was indeed a long buzz, followed by the clack of locks opening. Eve pushed the door open, entered a narrow lobby with an offshoot of rooms and hallways presumably to other rooms on either side, and a set of stairs jogging up.

A woman rose from a desk at the rear of the room, smiling as she crossed a buff-colored tile floor.

Matronly was the only description given her old-fashioned bubble of shoe-black hair, the dowdy pink sweater over a floral dress, the sensible shoes.

‘Welcome to Higher Power Cleansing Center for Youths. I’m Matron Shivitz.’

Fits, Eve thought. ‘We need to speak with Jones and Jones.’

‘Yes, yes, so you said. I’d love to be able to tell them what you’re here to speak to them about.’

‘I bet,’ Eve said and let the silence hang a moment. To the left the door held a plaque for Nashville Jones. The one to the right named his sister.

‘It’s police business.’

‘Of course! I’m afraid Mr Jones is in session at this time, as is Ms Jones. Ms Jones should be free shortly. If you choose to wait, I’d love to bring you some tea.’

‘We’ll wait. Hold the tea, thanks.’

Eve wandered deeper, looked through an open door where three kids worked comps.

‘Our electronics area,’ Shivitz explained. ‘Residents are allowed access to complete certain assignments, or research for assignments. Or if they’ve earned the privilege for free time.’

‘How do they earn the privilege?’

‘By completing tasks and assignments, participating in activities, earning merits through good work, kindness, generosity. And, of course, remaining clean in body and spirit.’

‘How long have you worked here?’

‘Oh, fifteen years, since the home opened. I began as an assistant matron and lifestyle coach, part-time. I’d be happy to arrange for a tour of our home, if you like.’

‘Sounds good. Why don’t we—’

Eve broke off when a door shoved open and a girl barreled out of Philadelphia Jones’s office. Flushed, teary-eyed, her hair a swirl of purple and orange, she bolted for the stairs.

‘Quilla! Inside pace, please.’

The girl shot Shivitz a furious look fired out of molten brown eyes, added a defiant middle finger salute, and stomped up the stairs.

‘I guess she’s not earning privileges today.’

Shivitz only sighed. ‘Some young spirits are more troubled than others. Time, patience, proper discipline, and reward eventually open all doors.’

So did a few hard kicks, Eve thought, but Shivitz was already hurrying to the still-open office door.

‘Excuse me, Ms Jones, but there are two police officers here to see you and Mr Jones. Yes, of course, of course.’ She turned back to Eve and Peabody. ‘Won’t you come right in? I’ll let Mr Jones know you’re here as soon as his session is over.’

Eve stepped over. She scanned what she thought of as a simple, straightforward office with a sitting area. The sitting area, she concluded, would be used for ‘sessions’, and visitors.

Child Protective Services, guardians, and the occasional cop, maybe a donor or two.

At a U-shaped work area, a woman with glossy brown hair pulled back in combs sat working on a computer. Her profile showed a strong, sharp chin, a generous mouth pressed now in a hard line, and the glint of a green eye.

‘Just one moment, Officers. Please, have a seat,’ she added without looking up.

Since she didn’t want to sit, as yet, Eve just walked toward the workstation, leaned against one of the two low-back chairs facing it.

‘I apologize,’ Philadelphia continued. ‘A little difficulty with my last session. Now. What can I do for you today?’

She swiveled around, faced Eve, a polite smile on her face.

Then she shot up out of the chair, a tall, rail-thin woman with horror in her eyes. She clutched at her throat.

‘Someone’s been murdered. Someone’s dead!’

Intrigued, Eve lifted her eyebrows. ‘More like a dozen. Let’s talk about that.’