



INEGLECT 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 outlived 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.”

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.