



While a late-summer storm bashed against her single skinny window, Lieutenant Eve Dallas wished for murder.

As far as she could see, a good, bloody killing was the only thing that would save her from the torture of paperwork stacked like the Alps on her desk at Cop Central. Her own fault, no question, but she'd been just a little too busy investigating and closing cases to hunker down with budgets and expense reports and the damn evaluation sheets.

Telling herself it was part of the job didn't help when she actually had to do it—in bulk—which was why she'd closed herself in her office with lots and lots of coffee and wondered why somebody didn't just kill somebody else and save her from this nightmare.

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Not really, she told herself. Or not exactly. But since people consistently killed other people anyway, why not *now*?

She stared at the numbers on her computer screen until her eyes throbbed. She cursed, sulked, steamed, then strapped on and squeezed, crunched, fudged, and manipulated until she could make the stingy departmental bottom line fit the needs of her division.

They were murder cops, she thought with bitter resentment. Homicide didn't run on blood alone.

She got through it, moved on to the expense chits submitted by her officers and detectives.

Did Baxter actually believe she'd bite on three-seventy-five for shoes because he'd fucked up his own chasing a suspect down a sewer? And why the hell had Reineke shelled out double the usual rate to a street-level licensed companion for information?

She stopped, got more coffee, stared out at the brutality of the storm for a few minutes. At least she wasn't out there, plugged like a wet cork into one of the shuddering airtrams, or shoving her way through the drowning hell of street traffic. She could be soaked, steaming like a clam in the endless stream of heat the summer of 2060 poured on New York.

Stalling, she thought in disgust, and forced herself to sit again. She'd promised herself she'd finish before the afternoon ceremony. Both she and her partner would receive medals. Peabody had earned it and more, Eve thought, as the catalyst for taking down a ring of dirty cops.

If paperwork was the drudgery of command, submitting Peabody's name for the Meritorious Police Duty Honor for Integrity was a boon. All she had to do was finish the grunt work, then she could enjoy the moment with a clear head and guiltless conscience.

She wished she had candy, but she hadn't settled on a new hiding

place to thwart the nefarious Candy Thief. She wished she could dump some of this crap on Peabody the way she had when Peabody had been her aide instead of her partner.

Those days were over.

Stalling again, she admitted, and raked her fingers through her short, choppy brown hair.

She hacked her way through the expense reports, submitted them up the chain. Someone else's problem now, she decided and felt almost righteous. No reason she couldn't start the evals later.

"Task complete. Shut it down."

Unable to comply, the computer responded.

"I finished."

Inaccurate statement. Previous command stipulated all listed reports and evaluations must be complete before system rest. This command by Dallas, Lieutenant Eve, priority basis, can only be countermanded at her order by fire, terrorist attack, alien invasion or an open and active case requiring her attention . . .

Jesus, had she really programmed that? "I changed my mind."

Previous command specifies changes of mind, fatigue, boredom, and other lame excuses not acceptable for countermand . . .

"Bite me," Eve muttered.

Unable to comply . . .

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“Fine, fine, fine. Computer, display previous evals, in alpha order, for all officers under my command.”

She worked her way through. She’d put the damn command in to keep herself in line—and because every single one of her men deserved the time and attention it took for a solid and judicious evaluation.

She finished Baxter, both Carmichaels, and had slogged her way to Jenkinson when the knock sounded on her door.

“Yeah, what?” She scowled over at Peabody as her partner opened the door. “Is it an alien invasion?”

“Not that I’ve heard. There’s a guy out here, pretty shaky, claims he can only speak to you. He says it’s a matter of life and death.”

“Yeah?” She perked up. “Computer, life-and-death countermand. Save and hold.”

Verification required . . .

“Peabody, tell this fucking machine there’s a human being requiring my attention on a matter of life and death.”

“Ah, Computer, Peabody, Detective Delia, requests the lieutenant’s attention on an urgent matter.”

Verification accepted. Saving data. On hold . . .

Annoyed, Eve gave the computer a rap with the heel of her hand. “It’s pretty pitiful when your own comp won’t take your word.”

“You put all that in there so you wouldn’t squirm out of the paperwork.”

“Still. Send life and death back.”

He came at a stumbling run, a skinny guy she judged as late twenties. He sported a tangle of messy dreads, baggy red shorts, gel-flips,

a silver lip ring, and a dingy white tank that showed off his tattoo sleeves. Sweat ran down his thin, white face.

“You’re Dallas. Lieutenant Eve Dallas, NYPSD. Homicide.”

“That’s right. What’s the—”

He burst into tears—loud, hiccupping tears. “He said—he said—I could only talk to you. Had to come to you. He’s got her. He’s got Julie. He’s gonna kill her if you don’t come back with me. He said an hour, and it took me half that to get here.”

His words rolled on top of each other between sobs and shakes. Eve got out of her chair, shoved him into it.

“Suck it up and slow down. What’s your name?”

“I’m Tray. Tray Schuster.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know. He was just there, in my place. Our place. She just moved in last week. Just there when we woke up, and he tied us up. He ate breakfast, and he—doesn’t matter. You have to come or he’ll kill her. I forgot, I forgot. I’m supposed to say, ‘There’s the bell for round two.’ Please, he’s got a knife. He’s going to cut her. If you don’t come, if I got to anybody else, he said he’d kill her.”

“Where?”

“My place. Our place, I mean.”

“Where’s your place, Tray?”

“Two-fifty-eight Murray Street.”

The address clicked, and with the click came a twist in the guts. “Apartment three-oh-three?”

“Yeah.” He swiped at his face. “How did you—”

“Stay here, Tray.”

“But—”

“Stay.”

She strode out, into the bullpen. “Peabody.” Scanned the desks

and movement. “Baxter, Trueheart, Carmichael, Sanchez. Whatever you’re doing stop and suit up. Suspect is Isaac McQueen. He’s holding a woman hostage, two-fifty-eight Murray Street, apartment three-oh-three. Suspect is armed and extremely dangerous. Additional data en route as the suspect has given a time limit on response. Carmichael, Sanchez, get the wit from my office. Keep him locked in your vehicle. Peabody, with me. Let’s move!”

“Isaac McQueen?” Peabody scrambled to keep up with Eve’s long legs. “The Collector? He’s in Rikers. Life sentence.”

“Check that. He’s either out or somebody’s posing as him. That was his apartment. That’s where he kept . . .”

All those young girls. So many young girls.

“He’s got this guy’s cohab,” Eve continued, shoving her way onto the elevator. “He sent him to me, specifically. I took McQueen down, in that apartment.”

“There’s no alert or notification . . . wait.” Peabody swiped at her PPC. “Internal alert buried here. They haven’t even informed command. McQueen escaped sometime yesterday. Killed one of the nurses in the infirmary and managed to walk out wearing his uniform and ID.” Peabody looked up from her PPC. “He just walked out.”

“We’re damn well going to walk him back in.” She jogged across the lot to her vehicle. “Inform Commander Whitney. He can start knocking heads together at prison administration. He hasn’t killed her,” Eve murmured as she peeled out of the underground lot. “McQueen didn’t escape just to slice up some woman. He’s smart, organized, and he has an agenda. He has needs. He doesn’t kill them—unless they break or dissatisfy. He collects. He’s not interested in this Julie. She’s over his age limit.”

Peabody finished the text to their commander’s office before looking over at Eve. “She’s a lure. For you.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t make sense. He’d just end up boxed in, the way he was before.”

Didn’t make sense, Eve thought again, but ordered Peabody to request uniforms for backup.

She used the wrist unit her husband had given her, engaged its communicator. “Carmichael, I want you and Sanchez to cover the rear of the building. Uniforms on the way for backup. Baxter, you and Trueheart will go in with me and Peabody. Body armor. He’ll be expecting us.”

She shook her head, ripped through the narrow opening between two Rapid Cabs. “He won’t be there. No way he’s going to trap himself. He knows I’ll come, and won’t come alone.”

“Maybe that’s what he wants you to think, and it’s a trap.”

“We’re about to find out.”

She studied the building, one of the cavernous homes that had survived the Urban Wars, and had been converted into apartments. It had seen better days—its better days had passed a century before—but it held up with its faded pink bricks and ornately grilled windows.

Its main entrance opened directly onto the sidewalk and had minimum security. Working-class neighborhood, Eve thought, as it had been during McQueen’s reign. Most of the residents came home at the end of the day, settled back with a brew and some screen, and minded their own business.

So McQueen had been able to mind his for nearly three years. And the lives of twenty-six girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen had been forever scarred.

“He’s got the privacy screen up,” Eve said. “If he’s up there, he knows we’re here. He’d have made contacts, friends, in prison. He’s charming, engaging, sly. It’s possible he got his hands on something more long-range than a knife. Keep down. Move fast.”

She checked in with Carmichael, gave the go.

Blanking out memories, she moved, taking point up the stairs, weapon drawn. Throat dry, mind cold.

“Let me scan the door.” Peabody pulled out her PPC. “He might’ve rigged it.”

“It opens on a living area, kitchen behind, eating area to the right. Two bedrooms, one right, one left. Bathroom attached to the one on the right. Half-bath left of the kitchen. It’s a big unit, about five hundred square feet.”

“Scan reads clear,” Peabody told her.

“Baxter, straight back. Trueheart, Peabody, go left. I’m right.” She nodded to Trueheart and the battering ram. Counted from three down with her fingers.

The door crashed on its hinges, locks snapping. Eve went in low and fast, focused on the now, not the then. She heard the rush of feet as her team poured into the room.

She shoved open the bedroom door, swept with her weapon. She saw the figure on the bed, but continued to clear—left, right, closet, bath as she heard her team members call, “Clear!”

“In here,” Eve shouted, and now moved to the bed.

“You’re okay. It’s okay. We’re the police.”

She loosened the gag around the woman’s bloody, swollen mouth. The sounds she made were incoherent moans and whispers.

He’d stripped her; his pattern there hadn’t changed. Before Eve could give the order, Trueheart, his young, handsome face radiating compassion, lifted the thin bedspread from the floor to cover her shaking body.

“You’re going to be all right now,” he said gently. “You’re safe now.”

“He hurt me. He hurt me.”

Peabody moved in, pulling the knotted sheet McQueen had used to

bind the woman's hands from the hook screwed into the wall. "He can't hurt you now." Then she sat, drawing Julie against her to let her weep.

"He swore he wouldn't hurt me if Tray did what he said, but he did. He did. He raped me, and he hurt me. And he did this to me."

Eve had already seen it, tattooed in bloody red over Julie's left breast, caged in a perfect heart.



"Bus is on the way," Baxter told Eve. He angled away from the woman sobbing in Peabody's arms, spoke quietly. "They'll have a rape counselor on the other end. Do you want me to call the sweepers to go through the place?"

It wouldn't matter, she thought. He wouldn't have left anything behind he hadn't intended to. But she nodded. "Let the boyfriend know she's safe. He can go with her to the hospital. You and Trueheart step out, please. Peabody, get Julie some clothes. You can't put them on yet." She stood at the foot of the bed, waited until Julie met her eyes. "They'll have to examine you first, and we're going to have to ask you questions. I know it's hard. You should know Tray did everything he could to get to me as fast as possible, to get me back here."

"He didn't want to leave. He begged him to let me go instead. He didn't want to leave me."

"I know. His name is Isaac McQueen. He told you something, Julie, something he wanted you to pass on to me."

"He said I wasn't right, wasn't . . . fresh, but he'd make an exception. I couldn't stop him. He hurt me, he tied my hands." Quivering

still, she held her arms out to show the raw bruising on her wrists. “I couldn’t stop him.”

“I know. Julie, I’m Lieutenant Dallas. Eve Dallas. What did Isaac want you to tell me?”

“Dallas? You’re Dallas?”

“Yes. What did he want you to tell me?”

“He said to tell you that you owe it all to him. It’s time to pay up. I want my mom.” She covered her face with her hands. “I want my mom.”

It was foolish to feel useless. She could have done nothing to prevent what Julie Kopeski and Tray Schuster had endured. She could do nothing to change how that trauma would change them.

She knew Isaac McQueen’s pathology, his particular style of torture. He was adept at instilling a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in his victims, at convincing them to do exactly what they were told, how they were told, when they were told.

She hadn’t been one of his, but she understood the victimology as well.

She’d been someone else’s.

It did no good to remember that, or to think about the girls she’d saved. Or the ones who’d been lost before, twelve years before, when she’d looked into the eyes of a monster and had known him.

Instead, she drew Tray aside at the hospital.

“They need to examine her, and Julie needs to talk to the rape counselor.”

“Oh God. God. I shouldn’t have left her.”

“If you hadn’t, she’d be dead, and so would you. She’s alive. She’s

hurt and she's been violated, but she's alive. You're going to want to remember that, both of you, because alive's better. You said he was there when you woke up."

"Yeah."

"Tell me about that."

"We overslept, or I thought . . ."

"What time did you wake up?"

"I don't know exactly. I think it was about eight. I rolled over thinking, 'Holy shit, we're both going to be late for work.' I felt off, strung out, like we'd partied hard the night before. But we didn't," he said quickly. "I swear. Julie doesn't even toke zoner."

"We're going to need to screen both of you," Eve began.

"I swear, we didn't use anything. I'd tell you. He gave Julie something, he said, but—"

"It's probable he drugged you both. We'll screen to see what he used. Nobody's going to hassle you about illegals, Tray."

"Okay. Okay. Sorry." He scrubbed hard at his face. "I'm just screwed up. Can't think straight."

"What did you do when you woke up?"

"I . . . I told Julie to get moving, gave her a nudge, you know. She was really out. I kind of rolled her over, and I saw tape over her mouth. I thought she was pulling a joke, started to laugh. He was just there, man, that's all I know. He grabbed me by the hair, yanked my head back, and put a knife to my throat. He asked if I wanted to live. If I wanted Julie to live. He said there wasn't any need for anybody to get hurt. I just had to do what he told me. I should've fought back."

"McQueen has a good seventy pounds on you, maybe more. He had a knife to your throat. If he'd killed you, do you think Julie would be alive?"

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“I don’t know.” Tears kept leaking out of his eyes, faster than he could swipe at them. “I guess maybe not. I was scared. I told him we didn’t have much money, but he could take whatever he wanted. He thanked me, real polite. That was scarier. He had some of those plastic restraints and told me to put them on, and to sit on the floor at the foot of the bed. So I did, and Julie’s still out. He told me he’d given her something to make her sleep while the two of us got acquainted. He told me to hook the restraints to the leg of the bed, and handed me another set to put on my ankles. He put tape over my mouth. He said to sit and be quiet, and he’d be back in a minute.”

“He left the room?”

“I tried to get loose, but I couldn’t.” Absently, he rubbed at the abrasions on his wrists. “I could smell coffee. The bastard’s in the kitchen making coffee. He comes back with it, and with a bowl of cereal. He takes the tape off my mouth and sits down. He starts asking me questions while he has his freaking breakfast. How old am I, how old is Julie. How long have we been together, what are our plans. Have we had the apartment long. Did we know its history.”

Tray had to suck in a breath, let it out in a shudder. “He kept smiling, and he’s, like, earnest. Like he really wanted to get to know us.”

“How long did you talk?”

“He did most, and I don’t know. It’s, like, surreal, you know. He told me it was his apartment, but he’d been away a long time. He didn’t like the color we’d painted the bedroom. Christ.”

He paused, looked at the exam room door. “How much longer before I can go in?”

“It takes some time. Did Julie wake up?”

“He finished breakfast, and even took the dishes away. When he came back he gave her something else. I think I went crazy. I was

screaming, I guess, and I tried to get loose. I thought he was going to kill her. I thought—”

“He didn’t. Remember that.”

“I couldn’t *do* anything. He slapped me a couple times. Not hard, just light taps. That was scary, too. He said if I didn’t behave he’d, Jesus, he’d cut her left nipple off, and did I want to be responsible for that? He had one of these hooks Julie uses to hang plants and stuff, and he screwed it into the wall. He used the sheets to tie her up, and hung them over it so she was sitting up when she came out of it. She was so scared. I could hear her trying to scream behind the tape, and she was struggling against the sheets. Then he put the knife to her throat, and she stopped.

“He said, ‘That’s a good girl.’ He said to me that two things could happen. He could cut Julie, nipples, fingers, ears, little pieces of her could fall on the bedroom floor until she was dead. Or I could have one hour to go to the Homicide Division of Cop Central and speak to Lieutenant Eve Dallas, deliver a message, and bring her back. If I took longer, he’d kill Julie. If I spoke to anyone else, he’d kill Julie. If I tried to use a ’link instead of talking to you in person, he’d kill Julie. I told him I’d do anything he wanted, but to please let her go. Let Julie go deliver the message instead of me.”

He had to rub fresh tears from his eyes. “I didn’t want to leave her with him. But he said if I asked that again, or anything else, if I questioned him in any way, he’d take the first piece off her so I learned my lesson. I believed him.”

“You were right to believe him, Tray.”

“He told me what to say, made me repeat it over and over while he held the knife on Julie. He cut me loose, kicked some clothes and the flips over. Sixty minutes, he said. If it took sixty-one, she’d be

dead because I couldn't follow instructions. I had to run. I didn't have money or plastic or credits, nothing for a cab, for a bus. Maybe if I'd gotten another cop, quicker, he wouldn't have had time to hurt her."

"Maybe. And maybe he'd have slit her throat. That doesn't take much time. She's alive. I know this man, and you can believe me when I tell you he could have done worse."

She pulled out her card, passed it to him. "You're going to want to talk to someone about what happened to you. Someone who's not a cop. You can tag me when you're ready, and I'll give you some names."

She walked away, thinking of paperwork. She'd wished for murder, she remembered, and had gotten worse.

At Central, Eve used the bullpen for a brief, gritty briefing on Isaac McQueen.

"The subject is a thirty-nine-year-old male, brown and blue—though he changes both regularly. Six feet, three inches, at two hundred and twenty pounds. He has studied and is adept at hand-to-hand, including several areas of martial arts, and he kept in shape in prison."

She flashed his prison ID on screen, studied the lines a dozen years in a cage had dug into his face. Women found him handsome and charming, she knew, with his slow, flirtatious smile. Young girls trusted his almost feminine features, the full shape of his lips, the twinkle of dimples.

He used that, all of that, to lure his prey.

"He favors knives as weapons and as a means of intimidation. His mother was an addict, a grifter of considerable skill who taught him the ropes. They had an incestuous relationship, often working a mark as a couple. She also fed his addiction for young girls. Together they

abducted, raped, tortured, and subsequently sold or disposed of their victims until Alice McQueen's body was pulled out of the Chicago River in the fall of 2040. Her throat had been slashed. Though McQueen never admitted to the murder, he is believed responsible. He would have been nineteen.

"He is also believed responsible for the abduction of at least ten minor females in the Philadelphia and Baltimore areas, and the murder of Carla Bingham, Philadelphia, and Patricia Copley, Baltimore. Both women, ages forty-five and forty-two, respectively, were addicts McQueen partnered with, lived with, and hunted with during his time in those cities. Both were found in rivers with their throats slit. Due to lack of evidence or lack of balls by the respective prosecuting attorneys, McQueen has never been charged with these crimes."

But he did them, she thought. And more yet.

"Between 2045 and 2048, he used New York as his hunting ground, partnered with Nancy Draper—age forty-four, funky-junkie. During this period he'd refined his skills, added some flourishes. He and Draper lived in an apartment on the Lower West Side, financing their habits and lifestyles by running games and identity theft and electronic fraud—other skills he'd developed. He no longer sold his prey, but kept them. Twenty-six girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen were abducted in New York, raped, tortured, beaten, and brainwashed. He kept them shackled in a room in the apartment. The apartment itself was soundproofed, with the prison area shuttered. During his New York phase, he tattooed his vics, with the number indicating their abduction status inside a heart over the left breast. Twenty-two were found in that room."

And she could see them still, every one.

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“The remaining four have never been found, nor have their bodies been recovered. Even their identities are unknown as he often preyed on runaways.

“He is a highly intelligent and organized sociopath, a predatory pedophile, a narcissist with the ability to assume numerous personas. He uses his mother-substitutes for support, cover, for ego, then eliminates them. Nancy Draper’s body was recovered from the Hudson River two days after his capture. She’d been dead for three days. It’s likely McQueen was preparing to move on, either out of New York or simply to a new partner.”

She favored the new-partner theory, always had.

“He confessed to nothing, even after intense interrogation. He was convicted on multiple counts of kidnapping, forced imprisonment, rape, battery, and was sentenced to consecutive life sentences without possibility of parole on-planet, at Rikers, where the reports state he was a model prisoner.”

She heard one of her men give a sound of disgust and derision, and since she felt the same, made no comment.

“Right up until yesterday when he slit the throat of a medical and escaped. Since that time he returned to his former apartment, bound the couple living there, threatened them, and after forcing the male vic to leave to find me, beat and raped the female, leaving her with the heart tattoo numbered twenty-seven.

“He left them alive because he wanted them to deliver messages. He’s back, and he intends to pick up where he left off. This isn’t homicide,” she added. “It’s not officially our investigation.”

She saw Baxter straighten at his desk. “LT—”

“But,” she continued in the same tone, “when a fuck like McQueen sends me a message, I’m going to pay attention. I expect every one of you to do the same. Read his file. Take his picture. Whatever you’re

working on, whoever you're talking to—a wit, a weasel, a vic, a suspect, another cop, the guy selling you a soy dog from the corner glide-cart, you show it. Keep your eyes and ears open. He's already hunting for number twenty-eight.”

She headed to her office—she needed a minute—and only closed her eyes briefly when she heard Peabody's footfalls behind her.

“I have to write up the report, Peabody, and touch base with the commander. Read the file.”

“I've read the file. I studied the case, in depth, when I was at the Academy. You were barely out of the Academy yourself when you found him. Still in uniform. It was your first major collar. You—”

“I was there, Peabody. I remember the details.”

Peabody's dark eyes stayed steady, her square face sober. “You know who he is, what he is, how he is. So you know he broke pattern to send you a message. You cost him twelve years, Dallas. He's going to come after you.”

“Maybe, but I'm not his type. I went through puberty a long time ago. I'm not naive, stupid, or defenseless. It's a lot more likely he'll consider it a competition—he needs to beat me. And there's a city full of young girls for him to pluck from to make me pay for those dozen years.”

Tired, she sat. “He doesn't want me dead, Peabody, at least not right off. He wants to show me he's smarter than I am. He wants to humiliate me, at least for a while. That's how he'd see this, a humiliation for me when he starts his new collection.”

“He'd have studied you. He thinks he knows you, but he doesn't.”

“He will, before it's over. Look, we're getting tight on time. Go change into your uniform.”

“We can postpone the ceremony, start working the case.”

Though having a medal pinned on her chest was the last thing Eve

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wanted with Tray Schuster's grieving face and Julie Kopeski's shock-glazed eyes in her head, she shook her head.

"We're not postponing anything, and it's not our case." But she intended to make a hard pitch for it. "Now get out of my hair. I have to change, too. You're not the only one getting a medal today."

"I know it's not your first. Is it still a big to you?"

"This one is. This one's a big. Now go away."

Alone, she sat a moment. Peabody was right, she thought, McQueen didn't know her. She wasn't humiliated. She was sick—in the heart and the belly, in the mind. And thank God, she realized, she was working her way toward pissed.

She'd work better pissed.