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Origin in Death

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

DEATH SMILED AT HER, AND KISSED HER GENTLY ON THE cheek. He had nice eyes. She knew they were blue, but not like the blue in her box of crayons. She was allowed to draw with them for one hour every day. She liked coloring best of all.

She could speak three languages, but she was having trouble with the Cantonese. She could draw the figures, and loved to make the lines and shapes. But it was hard for her to *see* them as words.

She couldn't read very well in any of the languages, and knew the man she and her sisters called Father was concerned.

She forgot things she was supposed to remember, but he never punished her—not like others did when he wasn't there. She thought of them as The Others, who helped the father teach her and care for her. But when he wasn't there, and she made a mistake, they did something that hurt her, and made her body jump.

She wasn't allowed to tell the father.

The father was always nice, just like he was now, when he sat beside her, holding her hand.

It was time for another test. She and her sisters took a lot of tests, and sometimes the man she called Father got wrinkles in his forehead,

or a sad look in his eyes when she couldn't do all the steps. In some of the tests he had to stick her with a needle, or hook machines to her head. She didn't like those tests very much, but she pretended she was drawing with her crayons until they were over.

She was happy, but sometimes she wished they could go outside instead of *pretending* to go outside. The hologram programs were fun, and she liked the picnic with the puppy best of all. But whenever she asked if she could have a real puppy, the man she called Father just smiled and said, "Some day."

She had to study a lot. It was important to learn all that could be learned, and to know how to speak and dress and play music, and discuss everything she'd learned or read or seen on-screen during her lessons.

She knew her sisters were smarter, faster, but they never teased her. They were allowed to play together for an hour in the morning and an hour before bed, every day.

That was even better than the picnic with the puppy.

She didn't understand loneliness, or might have known she was lonely.

When Death took her hand, she lay quietly and prepared to do her best.

"This will make you feel sleepy," he told her in his kind voice.

He'd brought the boy today. She liked when he brought the boy, though it made her feel shy. He was older, and had eyes the same color blue as the man she called Father. He never played with her or her sisters, but she always hoped he would.

"Are you comfortable, sweetheart?"

"Yes, Father." She smiled shyly at the boy who stood beside her bed. Sometimes she pretended the little room where she slept was a chamber, like the ones in the castles she sometimes read about or saw on-screen. And she was the princess of the castle, under a spell. The boy would be the prince who came to save her.

But from what, she wasn't sure.

She hardly felt the needle stick. He was so gentle.

There was a screen in the ceiling over her bed, and today the man she called Father had programmed it with famous paintings. Hoping to please him, she began to name them as they slid on, then off.

"*Garden at Giverny 1902,* Claude Monet. *Fleurs et Mains,* Pablo Picasso. *Figure at a Window,* Salvador Da . . . Salvador . . ."

"Dalí," he prompted.

"Dalí. *Olive Trees,* Victor van Gogh."

"Vincent."

"I'm sorry." Her voice began to slur. "Vincent van Gogh. My eyes are tired, Father. My head feels heavy."

"That's all right, sweetheart. You can close your eyes, you can rest."

He took her hand while she drifted off. He held it tenderly in his while she died.

She left the world five years, three months, twelve days, and six hours after she'd come into it.

I WHEN ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS FACES ON OR off planet was beaten to a bloody, splintered pulp, it was news. Even in New York City. When the owner of that famous face punctured several vital organs of the batterer with a fillet knife, it was not only news, it was work.

Getting an interview with the woman who owned the face that had launched a thousand consumer products was a goddamn battle.

Cooling her heels in the plush-to-the-point-of-squishy waiting area of the Wilfred B. Icove Center for Reconstructive and Cosmetic Surgery, Lieutenant Eve Dallas was fully prepared to go to war.

She'd had just about enough.

"If they think they can turn me out a third time, they're ignorant of the greatness of my wrath."

"She was unconscious the first time." Content to lounge in one of the luxurious, overstuffed chairs and sip some complementary tea, Detective Delia Peabody crossed her legs. "And heading into surgery."

"She wasn't unconscious the second time."

"Recovery and Observation. It's been less than forty-eight, Dallas." Peabody sipped more tea and fantasized what she would have done if she were here for face or body sculpting.

Maybe she'd just start with hair extensions. No pain, some gain, she decided, combing her fingers through her dark, bowl-cut 'do.

"And self-defense looks pretty clear."

"She put eight holes in him."

"Okay, maybe a little excessive, but we both know her lawyer's going to claim self-defense, fear of bodily harm, diminished capacity—all of which any jury's going to buy." Maybe blonde hair extensions, Peabody thought. "Lee-Lee Ten is an icon. Perfection of female beauty, and the guy played a mighty tune on her face."

Broken nose, shattered cheekbone, broken jaw, detached retina. Eve ran through the list in her head. She wasn't looking to hang a homicide on the woman, for God's sake. She'd interviewed the medical tech who'd treated Ten on-scene, and she'd investigated and documented the scene itself.

But if she didn't close this case down today, she was going to be dealing with the drooling hounds of the media yet again.

If it came to that, she'd be tempted to play a tune on Ten's face herself.

"She talks to us today, and we shut this down. Or I'm slapping her bevy of attorneys and reps with obstruction of justice."

"When's Roarke due home?"

With a frown, Eve stopped pacing long enough to look at her partner. "Why?"

"Because you're getting a little edgy . . . edgier than usual. I think you have Roarke-withdrawal." Peabody let out a wistful sigh. "Who could blame you?"

"I'm not having anything-withdrawal." She muttered it, and began pacing again. She had long legs on a long body, and felt a little confined in the overly decorated space. Her hair was shorter than her partner's, a deer-hide brown worn carelessly choppy around a lean face with large brown eyes.

Unlike many of the patients and clients of the Wilfred B. Icove Center, physical beauty wasn't one of her priorities.

Death was.

Maybe she missed her husband, she admitted. It wasn't a crime. In fact, it was probably one of those marriage rules she was still trying to learn after more than a year in the game.

It was rare for Roarke to take a business trip that lasted more than a day or two now, and this one had stretched to a week.

She'd pushed for it, hadn't she? she reminded herself. She was very aware he'd set a lot of his work aside in the past months to help with hers, or just to be there when she needed him.

And when a man owned or had interest in nearly every area of business, art, entertainment, and development in the known universe, he had to keep a lot of balls in the air.

She could handle not being juggled in for a week. She wasn't a moron.

But neither was she sleeping very well.

She started to sit, but the chair was so big, and so *pink*. It gave her an image of being swallowed whole by a big, shiny mouth.

"What's Lee-Lee Ten doing in the kitchen of her three-level penthouse at two in the morning?"

"Late-night snack?"

"AutoChef in her bedroom, another in the living area, one in each guest room, one in her home office, one in her home gym."

Eve wandered to one of the banks of windows. She preferred the dull, rainy day outside to the perky pink of the waiting area. Fall of 2059 had, so far, proved cold and mean.

"Everyone we've managed to interview stated that Ten had dumped Bryhern Speegal."

"They were completely *the* couple over the summer," Peabody put in. "You couldn't watch a celeb report on-screen or pick up a gossip mag without . . . not that I spend all my time on celebrity watch or anything."

"Right. She dumps Speegal last week, according to informed sources. But she's entertaining him in her kitchen at two in the morn-

ing. Both of them are wearing robes, and there is evidence of intimate behavior in the bedroom."

"Reconciliation that didn't work?"

"According to the doorman, her security discs, and her domestic droid, Speegal arrived at twenty-three fourteen. He was admitted, and the household droid was dismissed to its quarters—but left on-call."

Wineglasses in the living area, she thought. Shoes—his, hers. Shirt, hers. His was on the wide curve of the stairs leading to the second level. Her bra had been draped over the rail at the top.

It hadn't taken a bloodhound to follow the trail, or to sniff out the activity.

"He comes over, he comes in, they have a couple of drinks downstairs, sex comes into it. No evidence it wasn't consensual. No signs of struggle, and if the guy was going to rape her, he wouldn't bother to drag her up a flight of steps and take off her clothes."

She forgot her image of the chair long enough to sit. "So they go up, slap the mattress. They end up downstairs, bloody in the kitchen. Droid hears a disturbance, comes out, finds her unconscious, him dead, calls for medical and police assistance."

The kitchen had looked like a war zone. Everything white and silver, acres of room, and most of it splashed and splattered with blood. Speegal, the hunk of the year, had been facedown, swimming in it.

Maybe it had reminded her, just a little too horribly, of the way her father had looked. Of course, the room in Dallas hadn't been so shiny, but the blood, the rivers of blood, had been just as thick, just as wet after she'd finished hacking the little knife into him.

"Sometimes there's no other way," Peabody said quietly. "There's no other way to stay alive."

"No." Edgy? Eve thought. More like losing her edge if her partner could see into her head that easily. "Sometimes there's not."

She rose, relieved when the doctor stepped into the room.

She'd done her homework on Wilfred B. Icove, Jr. He'd stepped competently into his father's footsteps, oversaw the myriad arms of the Icove Center. And was known as the sculptor to the stars.

He was reputed to be discreet as a priest, skilled as a magician, and rich as Roarke—or nearly. At forty-four, he was handsome as a vid star with eyes of light, crystalline blue in a face of high, slashing cheekbones, square jaw, carved lips, narrow nose. His hair was full, swept back from his forehead in gilded wings.

He had maybe an inch on Eve's five-ten, and his body looked trim and fit, even elegant in a slate gray suit with pearly chalk stripes. He wore a shirt the color of the stripes, and a silver medallion on a hair-thin chain.

He offered Eve his hand, and an apologetic smile that showed perfect teeth. "I'm so sorry. I know you've been waiting. I'm Dr. Icove. Lee-Lee—Ms. Ten," he corrected, "is under my care."

"Lieutenant Dallas, NYPSD. Detective Peabody. We need to speak with her."

"Yes, I know. I know you've tried to speak with her before, and again, my apologies." His voice and manner were as groomed as the rest of him. "Her attorney's with her now. She's awake and stable. She's a strong woman, Lieutenant, but she's suffered severe trauma, physically and emotionally. I hope you can keep this brief."

"That'd be nice for all of us, wouldn't it?"

He smiled again, just a twinkle of humor, then gestured. "She's on medication," he continued as they walked down a wide corridor accented with art that highlighted the female form and face. "But she's coherent. She wants this interview as much as you do. I'd prefer it wait at least another day, and her attorney . . . Well, as I said, she's a strong woman."

Icove passed the uniform stationed at his patient's door as if he were invisible. "I'd like to attend, monitor her during your interview."

"No problem." Eve nodded to the uniform, stepped inside.

It was luxurious as a suite in a five-star hotel, strewn with enough flowers to fill an acre of Central Park.

The walls were a pale pink, sheened with silver, accented with paintings of goddesses. Wide chairs and glossy tables comprised a sitting area where visitors could gather to chat or pass the time with whatever was on-screen.

Privacy screens on a sea of windows ensured the media copters or commuter trams that buzzed the sky were blinded to the room inside, while the view of the great park filled the windows.

In a bed of petal pink sheets edged with snow-white lace, the famous face looked as if it had encountered a battering ram.

Blackened skin, white bandages, the left eye covered with a protective patch. The lush lips that had sold millions in lip plumper, lip dye, lip ice, were swollen and coated with some sort of pale green cream. The luxurious hair, responsible for the production of bottomless vats of shampoo, conditioner, enhancements, was scraped back, a dull red mop.

The single visible eye, green as an emerald, tracked over to Eve. A sunburst of color surrounded it.

"My client is in severe pain," the lawyer began. "She is under medication and stress. I—"

"Shut up, Charlie." The voice from the bed was hoarse and hissy, but the lawyer thinned his lips and shut up.

"Take a good look," she invited Eve. "The son of a bitch did a number on me. On my face!"

"Ms. Ten—"

"I know you. Don't I know you?" The voice, Eve realized, was hissy and hoarse because Lee-Lee was speaking through clamped teeth. Broken jaw—had to hurt like a mother. "Faces are my business, and yours . . . Roarke. Roarke's cop. Ain't that a kick in the ass."

"Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. Detective Peabody, my partner."

"Bumped hips with him four—no five years ago. Rainy weekend in Rome. Holy God, that man's got stamina." The green eye sparked a moment with bawdy humor. "That bother you?"

"You bump hips with him in the last couple years?"

"Regretfully, no. Just that one memorable weekend in Rome."

"Then no, it doesn't. Why don't we talk about what happened between you and Bryhern Speegal in your apartment night before last?"

"Cocksucking bastard."

"Lee-Lee." This gentle admonishment came from her doctor.

"Sorry, sorry. Will doesn't approve of strong language. He hurt me." She closed her eyes, breathed slowly in and out. "God, he really hurt me. Can I have some water?"

Her lawyer grabbed the silver cup with its silver straw and held it to her lips.

She sucked, breathed, sucked again, then patted his hand. "Sorry, Charlie. Sorry I told you to shut up. Not at my best here."

"You don't have to talk to the police now, Lee-Lee."

"You've got my screen blocked so I can't hear what they're saying about me. I don't need a screen to know what the media monkeys and gossip hyenas are saying about all this. I want to clear it up. I want to have my goddamn say."

Her eye watered, and she blinked furiously to stem a tide of tears. And in doing so earned points of respect from Eve.

"You and Mr. Speegal had a relationship. An intimate relationship."

"We fucked like rabbits all summer."

"Lee-Lee," Charlie began, and she pushed her hand at him. A quick, impatient gesture Eve understood perfectly.

"I told you what happened, Charlie. Do you believe me?"

"Of course I do."

"Then let me tell it to Roarke's cop. I met Bry when I got a part in a vid he was shooting here in New York last May. We were in the sack about twelve hours after the how-do-you-dos. He's—he was," she corrected, "gorgeous. Toss-your-skirt-over-your-head gorgeous. Dumb as a toad, and—as I found out night before last—vicious as a . . . I can't think of anything that vicious."

She sucked on the straw again, took three slow breaths. "We had some laughs, we had great sex, we got a lot of play on the gossip circuit. He started to get a little too full of himself. I want this, you're not doing that, we're going here, where have you been, and so on. I decided to break it off. Which I did, last week. Just let's chill this awhile, it's been fun, but let's not push it. Pissed him off some, I could tell, but he

handled it. I thought he handled it. We're not kids, for God's sake, and we weren't starry-eyed."

"Did he make any threats at that time, was he physical in any way?"

"No." She lifted a hand to her face, and though her voice was steady, Eve saw her fingers trembled lightly. "He played it like, 'Oh yeah, I was trying to figure out how to say the same thing—we've about wrung this dry.' He was flying out to New L.A. to do some promos for the vid. So when he called, said he was back in New York, wanted to come up and talk, I said sure."

"He contacted you just before eleven P.M."

"Can't say for sure." Lee-Lee managed a crooked smile. "I'd had dinner out, at The Meadow, with friends. Carly Jo, Presty Bing, Apple Grand."

"We spoke with them," Peabody told her. "They confirm your dinner engagement, and stated that you left the restaurant about ten that evening."

"Yeah, they were going on to a club, but I wasn't in the mood. Bad call on my part, as it turns out." She touched her face again, then let her hand fall to the bed.

"I went home, started reading this script for a new vid my agent sent me. Bored the shit—sorry, Will—out of me, so when Bry called, I was up for some company. We had some wine, talked the talk, and he made a couple moves. He has some good ones," she said with a hint of a smile. "So we took it upstairs, had ourselves an intense round of sex. After, he says something like, 'Women don't tell me when to chill,' and he'll let me know when he's finished with me. Son of a bitch."

Eve watched Lee-Lee's face. "Pissed you off."

"Big-time. He'd come over there, got me into bed just so he could say that." Color joined the bruising on her cheeks. "And I let him, so I'm as pissed at myself as I am at him. I didn't say anything. I got up, grabbed a robe, went downstairs to settle down. It pays—and it can pay damn well—not to make enemies in this business. So I go in the kitchen, going to smooth out my temper, figure out how to handle this. I'm thinking maybe I'll make an egg-white omelette."

"Excuse me," Eve interrupted. "You get out of bed, you're angry, so you're going to cook eggs?"

"Sure. I like to cook. Helps me think."

"You have no less than ten AutoChefs in your penthouse."

"I like to cook," she said again. "Haven't you seen any of my culinary vids? I really do that stuff, you can ask anybody on production. So I'm in the kitchen, pacing back and forth until I can calm down enough to break some eggs, and he waltzes in, all puffed up."

Lee-Lee looked over at Icove now, and he walked to her bedside, took her hand.

"Thanks, Will. He strutted around, said when he paid for a whore, he told her when to clock out, and this was the same thing. Hadn't he bought me jewelry, gifts?" She managed to shrug a shoulder. "He wasn't going to let me spread it around that I'd tossed him over. He'd do the tossing when he was damn good and ready. I told him to get out, get the hell out. He pushed me, I pushed back. We were yelling at each other, and . . . Jesus, I didn't see it coming. The next thing I know I'm on the floor and my face is screaming. I can taste blood in my mouth. Nobody's ever hit me before."

Her voice trembled now, and thickened. "Nobody ever . . . I don't know how many times he hit me. I think I got up once, tried to run. I don't know, I swear. I tried to crawl, I screamed—tried. He pulled me up. I could hardly see, there was so much blood in my eyes, and so much pain. I thought he was killing me. He shoved me back against the counter—the island counter, and I grabbed it so I didn't fall. If I fell, he'd kill me."

She paused, closed her eyes for a moment. "I don't know if I thought that then, or later, and I don't know if it's true. I think—"

"Lee-Lee, that's enough."

"No, Charlie. I'm going to have my say. I think . . ." she continued. "When I look back now, I think maybe he was done. Maybe he was finished hitting me, maybe he realized he'd hurt me more than he'd meant to. Maybe he just meant to mess up my face some. But at that moment, when my own blood was choking me, and I could hardly see,

and my face felt like someone had set it on fire, I was afraid for my life. I swear it. He stepped toward me, and I . . . the knife block was right there. I grabbed one. If I'd been able to see better, I'd have grabbed a bigger one. I swear that, too. I meant to kill him, so he didn't kill me. He laughed. He laughed and he reared back with his arm, like he was going to backhand me."

She'd steadied again, and that emerald eye stayed level on Eve's face. "I ran that knife into him. It slid right into him, and I pulled it out and stabbed him again. I kept doing it until I passed out. I'm not sorry I did it."

And now a tear escaped, ran down her bruised cheek. "I'm not sorry I did it. But I'm sorry I ever let him put his hands on me. He broke my face to pieces. Will."

"You'll be more beautiful than ever," he assured her.

"Maybe." She brushed carefully at the tear. "But I'll never be the same. Have you ever killed someone?" she asked Eve. "Have you ever killed someone and not been sorry?"

"Yes."

"Then you know. You're never the same."

When they were finished, Lawyer Charlie followed them into the hall.

"Lieutenant—"

"Reverse your thrusters, Charlie," Eve said wearily. "We're not charging her. Her statement is consistent with the evidence and other statements we've documented. She was physically assaulted, in fear of her life, and defended herself."

He nodded, and looked slightly disappointed that he wouldn't be required to jump on his expensive white horse and ride to his client's rescue. "I'd like to see the official statement before it's released to the media."

Eve made a sound that might have passed for a laugh as she turned and walked away. "Bet you would."

"You okay?" Peabody asked as they headed for the elevators.

"Don't I look okay?"

"Yeah, you look fine. And speaking of looks, if you were going to go for Dr. Icove's services, what would you pick?"

"I'd pick a good psychiatrist to help me figure out why I'd let somebody carve on my face and/or body."

The security to get down was as stringent as it had been to get up. They were scanned to ensure they'd taken no souvenirs, and most important, any images of patients who were promised absolute confidentiality.

As the scans were completed, Eve watched Icove rush by, then key into what she saw was a private elevator camouflaged in the rosy wall.

"In a hurry," Eve noted. "Somebody must need emergency fat sucking."

"Okay." Peabody exited the scanner. "Back on topic. I mean, if you could change anything about your face, what would it be?"

"Why would I change anything? I'm not looking at it most of the time anyway."

"I'd like more lips."

"Two aren't enough for you?"

"No, jeez, Dallas, I mean plumper, sexier lips." She pursed them as they got on the elevator. "Maybe a thinner nose." Peabody ran her thumb and forefinger down it, measuring. "Do you think my nose is fat?"

"Yes, especially when you're poking it into my business."

"See hers." Peabody tapped a finger on one of the automated posters lining the elevator walls. Perfect faces, perfect bodies, modeled for passengers. "I could get that one. It's chiseled. Yours is chiseled."

"It's a nose. It sits on your face and allows you to get air through two handy holes."

"Yeah, easy for you to say, Chiseled Nose."

"You're right. In fact, I'm starting to agree with you. You need plumper lips." Eve balled a hand into a fist. "Let me help you with that."

Peabody only grinned and watched the posters. "This place is like the palace of physical perfection. I may come back and go for one of their free morphing programs, just to see how I'd look with more lips, or a skinny nose. I think I'm going to talk to Trina about a hair change."

"Why, why, why, does everybody have to change their hair? It covers your scalp, keeps it from getting wet or cold."

"You're just scared that when I talk to Trina she's going to corner you and give you a treatment."

"I am not." She was, too.

It was a surprise to hear her name paged through the elevator's communication system. Frowning, Eve cocked her head.

"This is Dallas."

"Please, Lieutenant, Dr. Icove asks that you come, right away, to the forty-fifth floor. It's an emergency."

"Sure." She glanced at Peabody, shrugged. "Reroute to forty-five," she ordered, and felt the elevator slow, shift, ascend. "Something's up," she commented. "Maybe one of his beauty-at-any-price clients croaked."

"People hardly ever croak from face and body work." Peabody ran a considering finger down her nose again. "Hardly ever."

"We could all admire your skinny nose at your memorial. Damn shame about Peabody, we'd say, and dash the tears from our eyes. But that is one mag nose she's got in the middle of her dead face."

"Cut it out." Peabody hunched her shoulders, folded her arms over her chest. "Besides, you couldn't dash the tears away. You'd cry buckets. You'd be blinded by your copious tears and wouldn't even be able to see my nose."

"Which makes dying for it really stupid." Satisfied she'd won that round, Eve stepped off the elevator.

"Lieutenant Dallas. Detective Peabody." A woman with a—hmmm—chiseled nose and skin the color of good rich caramel rushed forward. Her eyes were black as onyx, and currently pouring tears. "Dr. Icove. Dr. Icove. Something terrible."

"Is he hurt?"

"He's dead. He's dead. You need to come, right away. Please, hurry."

"Jesus, we saw him five minutes ago." Peabody fell in beside Eve, moving quickly to keep up with the woman who all but sprinted through a hushed and lofty office area. The glass walls showed the storm still blowing outside, but here, it was warm, with subdued lighting, islands of lush green plants, sinuous sculptures, and romantic paintings—all nudes.

"You want to slow down?" Eve suggested. "Tell us what happened?"

"I can't. I don't know."

How the woman managed to stand much less sprint on whip-thin heels Eve would never understand, but she bolted through a pair of double doors of frosted sea green and into another waiting area.

Icove, pale as death but apparently still breathing, stepped out of an open doorway.

"Glad to see the rumors of your death as exaggerated," Eve began.

"Not me, not . . . My father. Someone's murdered my father."

The woman who'd escorted them burst into fresh and very noisy tears. "Pia, I want you to sit down now." Icove laid a hand on her shaking shoulder. "I need you to sit down and compose yourself. I can't get through this without you."

"Yes. All right. Yes. Oh, Dr. Will."

"Where is he?" Eve demanded.

"In here. At his desk, in here. You can . . ." Icove shook his head, gestured.

The office was spacious yet gave the feeling of intimacy. Warm colors here, cozy chairs. The view of the city came through tall, narrow windows in this room, and was filtered by pale gold screens. Wall niches held art or personal photographs.

Eve saw a chaise in buttery leather, a tray of tea or coffee that looked untouched on a low table.

The desk was genuine wood—good old wood by her estimate, in a

masculine, streamlined style. The data and communication equipment on it was small and unobtrusive.

In the desk chair, high-backed and buttery leather like the chaise, Wilfred B. Icove sat.

His hair was a thick, snowy cloud crowning a strong, square face. He wore a dark blue suit, and a white shirt with thin red pencil stripes.

A silver handle protruded from the breast of the jacket, just under a triangle of red that accented the pocket.

The small amount of blood told Eve it had been a very accurate heart shot.