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Born in Death

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Extract

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Chapter One

The ways and means of friendship were murderous. In order to navigate its twisty maze, a friend could be called upon to perform inconvenient, irritating or downright horrifying acts at any given time.

The worst, the very worst requirement of friendship, in Eve Dallas's opinion, was sitting through an entire evening of childbirth classes.

What went on there – the sights, the sounds, the assault on all the senses – turned the blood cold.

She was a cop, a Homicide lieutenant with eleven years on the job protecting and defending the hard, merciless streets of New York. There was little she hadn't seen, touched, smelled, or waded through. Because people, to her mind, would always and could always find more inventive and despicable ways to kill their fellow man, she knew just what torments could be inflicted on the human body.

But bloody and brutal murder was *nothing* compared to giving birth.

How all those women with their bodies enormous and weirdly deformed by the entity gestating inside them could be so cheerful, so freaking *placid* about what was happening – and going to happen – to them was beyond her scope.

But there was Mavis Freestone, her oldest friend, with her little pixie body engulfed by the bulge of belly, beaming like a mentally defective while images of live birth played out on the wall screen. And she wasn't alone. The other women had more or less the same God-struck look on their faces.

Maybe pregnancy stopped certain signals from getting to the brain.

Personally, Eve felt a little bit sick. And when she glanced over at Roarke, the wince on his angel-kissed faced told her he was right there with her. That, at least, was a big red check in the Pro-Marriage column. You got to drag your spouse into your personal nightmares and into that twisty friendship maze right along with you.

Eve let the images blur. She'd rather study a crime scene recording – mass murder, mutilation, severed limbs – than look up some laboring woman's crotch and watch a head pop out. Roarke had horror vids in his collection that were less gruesome. She could hear Mavis whispering to Leonardo, the entity's expectant father, but blocked out the words.

When, dear God, when would it be over?

Some setup here, all right, she thought, trying to distract herself by evaluating the birthing center. The whole damn building was a kind of cathedral to conception, gestation, birth, and babies. She'd managed to duck Mavis's attempt to give her a tour of the entire place by pleading work.

Sometimes a well-placed lie saved friendships, and sanity.

The educational wing was enough. She'd sat through a lecture, several demonstrations that would haunt her dreams for decades, been forced as part of Mavis's coaching team to assist in a mock birth with the labor droid and squealing droid infant.

And now there was this hideous vid.

Don't think about it, she warned herself, and went back to studying the room.

Pastel walls covered with pictures of babies or pregnant women in various stages of bliss. All filmy and rapturous. Lots of fresh flowers and thriving green plants arranged artistically. Comfy chairs, supposedly designed to aid the women in hauling their loaded bodies up. And three perky instructors who were available for questions, lectures, demos, and serving healthy refreshments.

Pregnant women, Eve noted, were constantly eating or peeing.

Double doors at the back, one exit in the front, left of the vid screen. Too bad she couldn't make a run for it.

Eve let herself go into a kind of trance. She was a tall, lanky woman with a choppy cap of brown hair. Her face was angular, and paler than usual, with whiskey-brown eyes currently glazed. The jacket she wore over her weapon harness was deep green and, because her husband had bought it, cashmere.

She was thinking about going home and washing the memory of the last three hours away in a full liter of wine when Mavis grabbed her hand.

'Dallas, look! The baby's coming!'

'Huh? What?' Those glazed eyes popped wide. 'What? *Now*? Well, Jesus. Breathe, right?'

Laughter erupted around them as Eve lurched to her feet.

'Not this baby.' Giggling, Mavis stroked her basketball belly. '*That* baby.'

Instinct had Eve glancing in the direction Mavis pointed, and getting a wide-screen blast of the bellowing, wriggling, gunk-covered creature sliding out from between some poor woman's legs.

'Oh, man. Oh, God.' She sat down, before her own legs went out from under her. No longer caring if it made her a sissy, she groped for Roarke's hand. When he gripped it, she found it as clammy as her own.

People applauded, actually clapped and *cheered* when the wailing, slippery-looking form was laid on its mother's deflated belly, and between her engorged breasts.

'In the name of all that's holy . . . .' Eve muttered to Roarke. 'It's 2060, not 1760. Can't they find a better way to handle this process?'

'Amen' was all Roarke said. Weakly.

'Isn't it beautiful? It's the ult, the extreme ult.' Mavis's lashes – currently dyed sapphire blue, sparkled with tears. 'It's a little boy. Awww, look how sweet . . .'

Dimly she heard the lead instructor announce the end of the night's coaching class – *thank God* – and invite people to stay for refreshments or questions.

'Air,' Roarke murmured into her ear. 'I'm in desperate need of air.'

'It's the pregnant women. I think they suck up all the oxygen. Think of something. Get us out of here. I can't think. My brain won't work right.'

'Stand with me.' He hooked a hand under her arm, pulled her up.

'Mavis, Eve and I want to take you and Leonardo out for a bite. We can do better than the offerings here.'

Eve could hear the strain in his voice, but imagined anyone who

didn't know him as well as she would only hear that easy, fluid stream of Irish.

There was a lot of chatter going on and women were making a beeline for the food or the bathrooms. Rather than thinking about what was being said or done, Eve focused on Roarke's face.

If it couldn't distract a woman, she was too far gone to worry about it.

He might have been a little pale, but the white skin only intensified the wild blue of his eyes. His hair was a black silk frame around a face designed to raise a woman's heart rate. And that mouth of his. Even in her current state it was tempting to just lean in a little and take a good bite of it.

And the body only added to the fantasy: tall, leanly muscled, and slickly presented in one of his perfectly tailored business suits.

Roarke wasn't just one of the richest men in the known universe, he also looked the part.

And at the moment, because he was taking her arm and leading her out of that nightmare, he was her ultimate hero. She grabbed her coat on the fly.

'We're sprung?'

'They wanted to see if a friend of theirs could join us.' He still had Eve's hand, and was rapidly walking toward the exit. 'I told them we'd get the car, bring it around to the front. Save them steps.'

'You're brilliant. Freaking white knight. If I ever recover from this trauma, I'll screw your brains out.'

'I hope, eventually, my brain cells regenerate enough to make that possible. My God, Eve. My God.'

'Total tandem here. Did you see how it sort of slithered out when—'

'Don't.' He pulled her into the elevator, called for their level of the parking garage. 'If you love me, don't take me back there.' He leaned back against the wall. 'I've always respected women. You know that.'

She rubbed at an itch on the side of her nose. 'You've nailed plenty of them. But yeah,' she added when he just gave her a bland stare. 'You've got respect.'

'That respect has now risen to admiration of biblical proportions. How do they *do* that?'

'We've just seen how. In graphic detail. Did you see Mavis?'

Eve shook her head as they walked out of the elevator. 'Her eyes were all glittery. And it wasn't fear. She can't wait to do all that.'

'Leonardo looked a bit green, actually.'

'Yeah, well, he's got that thing about blood. And there was blood – and other *stuff*.'

'That's enough. There'll be no talk of other stuff.'

Because the late January weather was lousy, he'd driven one of his all-terrains. It was big and black and muscular. When he uncoded the locks, Eve leaned back against the passenger door before he could open it.

'Look here, ace. We gotta face this, you and me.'

'I don't want to.'

Now she laughed. She'd seen him face death with more aplomb. 'What we did in there, that was just a preview. We're going to be in the room with her when she pushes that thing out. We have to be there, counting to ten, telling her to breathe, or to go to her happy place. Whatever.'

'We could be out of town, or the country. No, we could be called off planet. That would really be best. We'll be called off planet to save the world from some criminal mastermind.'

'Oh, if only. But you know and I know we're going to be there. Pretty soon, probably, because that bomb inside her's just ticking away.'

He sighed, then leaned down to rest his brow to hers. 'God pity us, Eve. God pity us.'

'If God had any pity on us, He'd populate the world without the middle man. Middle woman. Let's go drink. A lot.'

The restaurant was casual, a little noisy, and exactly what the midwife ordered. Mavis sipped some sort of exotic fruit punch that was nearly as sparkly as she was. Her riotous silver curls were tipped in the same sapphire as her lashes. Her eyes were a vivid, unearthly green tonight to match – Eve supposed – the tone of the sweater that fit over her breasts and belly like neon elastic. Numerous loops and squiggles hung from her ears and shot sparks of light as she moved her head. Her sapphire blue pants fit like a second skin.

The love of Mavis's life sat beside her. Leonardo was built like a redwood, and as he was a fashion designer neither he nor Mavis were ever at a loss for an eye-popping ensemble. He'd gone with

a sweater as well, a crazed and intricate geometric pattern of colors against gold. Somehow – Eve could have said – it suited his strong form and burnished copper complexion.

The friend they'd brought along was every bit as knocked-up as Mavis. Maybe even more so, if such things were possible. But in contrast to Mavis's out-of-orbit style, Tandy Willowby wore a simple black V neck over a white tee. She was a tea-and-roses blonde, with pale blue eyes and a blunt-tipped nose.

During the drive over, Mavis had chattered out introductions, explaining that Tandy was from London, and had only been in New York a few months.

'I'm so glad I saw you tonight. Tandy wasn't there for class,' Mavis continued as she mowed through the appetizers Roarke had ordered. 'She dropped by toward the end to give the midwife the vouchers for the White Stork. It's this completely mag baby boutique where Tandy works.'

'It's a lovely shop,' Tandy agreed. 'But I didn't expect to drop by, then get fed and watered.' She offered Roarke a shy smile. 'It's awfully kind of you. Both of you,' she added to Eve. 'Mavis and Leonardo have told me so much about you. You must be so excited.'

'About what?' Eve wondered.

'Being part of Mavis's coaching team.'

'Oh. Oh, yeah. We're . . .'

'Speechless,' Roarke concluded. 'What part of London are you from?'

'Actually, I'm from Devon originally. I moved to London as a teenager, with my father. Now here I am in New York. I must have a bit of the wanderlust. Though I expect I'll be grounded for a while now.' Dreamily, she stroked a hand over her belly. 'And you're a policewoman. That must be brilliant. Mavis, I don't think you ever told me how you and Dallas met.'

'She arrested me,' Mavis said between bites.

'You're having me on. No?'

'I used to work the grift. I was good at it.'

'Not good enough,' Eve commented.

'I want to hear all about it! But now, I have to make my way to the loo. Again.'

'I'll go with you.' Like Tandy, Mavis levered herself up. 'Dallas? Coming with?'

'I'll pass.'

'I remember – vaguely – what it's like not to have something planted on my bladder.' Tandy sent the table a smile, then waddled off with Mavis.

'So . . .' Eve turned to Leonardo. 'You met Tandy in the class?'

'Orientation,' he confirmed. 'Tandy's due about a week before Mavis. It's nice of you to let her come along. She's going through all this without a partner.'

'What happened to the father?' Roarke asked him, and Leonardo shrugged.

'She doesn't talk about it much. Just says that he wasn't involved, or interested. If that's the way it is, he doesn't deserve her or the baby.' Leonardo's wide face went tight and hard. 'Mavis and I have so much, we want to help her as much as we can.'

Eve's cynic antennae hummed. 'Financially?'

'No. I don't think she'd take money, even if she needed it. She seems okay there. I meant support, friendship.' He seemed to pale a little. 'I'm going to be part of her coaching team. It'll, ah, it'll be like a dress rehearsal for Mavis.'

'Scared shitless, aren't you?'

He glanced in the direction of the restrooms, then back at Eve. 'I'm terrified. I could pass out. What if I pass out?'

'Make sure you don't land on me,' Roarke told him.

'Mavis isn't nervous. Not even a little bit. And the closer we get, the more my insides . . .' He lifted his big hands, shook them. 'I don't know what I'd do if the two of you weren't going to be there. Backing me up.'

Oh, hell, Eve thought, and exchanged a glance with Roarke. 'Where else would we be?' She signaled the waiter for another glass of wine.

Two hours later, after dropping Leonardo and Mavis home, Roarke drove south and east toward Tandy's apartment building.

'Really, I can take the tube. Subway. It's too much trouble, and only a few blocks.'

'If it's only a few blocks,' Roarke said, 'it's hardly any trouble.'

'How can I argue?' Tandy let out a laugh. 'And it's so nice to sit in a warm car. It's so bloody cold out there tonight.' She settled back with a sigh. 'I feel pampered, and fat as a whale. Mavis and Leonardo, they're the best. You can't be around either of them for

five minutes and not feel happy. And I see they're lucky in their friends. Oops.'

Eve's head spun around so fast it might have flown off her shoulders. 'No oops. No oopsing.'

'He's just bumping around in there a bit. Not to worry. Oh, you know, Mavis is just giddy about the baby shower you're hosting for her next week. She bubbles over it.'

'Baby shower. Right. Next week.'

'Here we are. Just down the middle of this block. Thank you both so much.' Tandy adjusted her scarf, hauled up a purse the size of a suitcase. 'For the lovely food and company, and the luxurious ride. I'll see you both on Saturday, at the baby shower.'

'Need any help, ah . . .'

'No, no.' Tandy waved Eve off. 'Even a whale must fend for itself. And even if I can't see my feet these days, I remember where they are. Good night now, and thanks again.'

Roarke waited, engine idling, until Tandy had keyed herself into the building. 'Seems a nice woman. Stable and sensible.'

'Not like Mavis. Except for the whale factor. Gotta be tough, being knocked up, on your own, and not even in your own country. She seems to be dealing. You know, Roarke, how come just because you're pals you have to go to coaching classes, witness births, *and* give baby showers?'

'I don't have the answer to that question.'

She heaved out a breath. 'Neither do I.'

Eve was dreaming of fang-toothed, many-armed babies bouncing out of Mavis to tear around the room, sending the midwife into screaming retreat while Mavis cooed: *Aren't they mag? Aren't they the ult?*

The signal of the bedside 'link had her popping out of the dream. She shuddered once.

'Block video,' she ordered. 'Lights on ten percent. Dallas.'

Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. See the officers at 51 Jane Street, apartment 3B. Possible homicide.

'Acknowledged. Contact Peabody, Detective Delia. I'm on my way.'

Acknowledged. Dispatch out.

Eve glanced over, saw Roarke's laser blue eyes were open and on hers. 'Sorry,' she said.

'I'm not the one being pulled out of a warm bed at four in the morning.'

'You're right about that. People ought to have the courtesy to off each other at reasonable hours.'

She rolled out of bed and into the bathroom for a lightning-quick shower. When she rolled back out, naked and warm from the drying tube, he was sipping a cup of coffee.

'Why are you up?'

'I'm awake,' he said simply. 'And look what I'd've missed if I'd turned over and gone back to sleep.' He handed her the second cup of coffee he'd programmed.

'Thanks.' She took it with her to the closet where she pulled out clothes. Had to be freaking freezing out there, she mused. And detoured to her dresser to yank out a V neck to go over the shirt, under the jacket.

Twice they'd put off tentative plans to take a couple of days in the tropics. Mavis, plus baby, equalled a pregnant woman wigging out at the thought of part of her coaching team dancing off to sand and surf this close to delivery time.

What could you do?

'Babies don't come out with teeth, do they?'

'No. I don't see how . . .' Roarke lowered his cup, gave her a baffled look. 'Why do you put thoughts like that in my head?'

'They're in mine, pal, they're in yours.'

'See if I make you coffee again.'

She dressed quickly. 'Maybe this murder is the work of a criminal mastermind that will take me off planet. You're nice to me, I could take you along.'

'Don't toy with me.'

She laughed, strapped on her weapon. 'See you when I see you.' She crossed to him, and because – hell, he was so damn pretty even at four in the morning – gave him a peck on both cheeks, then a long warm one mouth-to-mouth.

'Stay safe, Lieutenant.'

'Plan on it.'

She jogged down the stairs, where her coat was draped over the

newel post. She tossed it there habitually because it was handy – and because she knew it irritated Summerset, Roarke's majordomo and the blight of her world.

She swung it on, discovered a miracle had happened and her gloves were actually in the pocket. Because it was there, she tossed on the cashmere scarf. And still the cold was a shock to the system when she stepped outside.

Hard to complain though, she decided, when you got yourself married to a man who thought to remote your vehicle to the front of the house with the heater already running.

She strode through the cold, climbed into warm.

She glanced in the rearview as she drove toward the gates. The house that Roarke built filled the mirror, stone and glass, juts and turrets – and the light glowing in their bedroom window.

He'd have a second cup of coffee, she thought, while reviewing stock reports, early media bulletins, business news, on the bedroom screen. Probably make some overseas or off-planet transmissions. Starting the day before dawn wasn't a biggie to Roarke, she knew.

Lucky her again, to have ended up with a man who fell so easily into the crazed cop rhythm she often ran by.

She drove through the gates that closed quietly behind her.

This sector of prime and pricey real estate was quiet – the rich, privileged, or fortunate snuggled under the covers in their atmosphere-regulated homes, condos, apartments. But within a few blocks, the city burst into jittery, jumping life.

Heat gushed up in steam from the grates as the underground world of the city moved and shook under the streets and sidewalks. Overhead ad blimps were already touting their bargain of the day. Who the hell cared about Valentine's Day sales at the Sky Mall at this hour? Eve wondered. What sane person would push themselves into the insanity of a mall crowd to save a few bucks on a candy heart?

She passed an animated billboard running a loop of impossibly perfect people frolicking over white-sugar sand into blue surf. That, at least, was more like it.

The yellow streaks of Rapid Cabs were already darting. Runs to transpo centers, mostly, she mused. Early flights to somewhere. A couple of maxibuses belched along, likely carrying the poor suckers on early shifts, or the luckier ones heading home to bed after a graveyard tour.

She detoured around the endless party on Broadway. Day or night, blistering or freezing, tourists and the street thieves who loved them thronged to that mecca of noise, light, movement.

A few of the after-hours joints were still open down Ninth. She spotted a huddle of street toughs in their over-filled rip jackets and jump boots loitering – and most likely ingesting illegal substances. But if they were looking for trouble, they'd have a hard time finding it before five A.M. with the temps hovering around twelve degrees.

She skirted through a working-class section of Chelsea, then into the more arty flavor of the Village.

The black-and-white was nosed to the curb in front of a rehabbed townhouse on Jane. She took a loading zone a half block down, flipped her On Duty light, then stepped back out into the cold. By the time she retrieved her field kit and set her locks, she spotted Peabody hoofing it from the corner.

Her partner looked like an Arctic explorer wrapped in a thick, puffy coat the color of rusted metal with a mile of red scarf wrapped around her neck and a matching cap tugged down over her dark hair. Her breath puffed out like engine steam.

'Why can't people kill each other after the sun comes up?' Peabody gasped out.

'You look like an ad blimp in that coat.'

'Yeah, I know, but it's wicked warm and it makes me feel thin when I take it off.'

Together they walked to the townhouse, and Eve turned her recorder on. 'No security cams,' Eve observed. 'No palm plate. Door lock's been tampered with.'

There were riot bars on the lower windows, she noted. And the paint on the door and window trim was graying, peeling. Whoever owned the building wasn't big on maintenance and security.

The uniform on the door gave them a nod as she opened it. 'Lieutenant, Detective. Bitching cold,' she said. 'Nine-one-one came in at oh three forty-two. Vic's sister made it. My partner's got her upstairs. We responded, arrived 'bout three forty-six. Observed the entrance door to the building'd been compromised. Vic's on the third floor, bedroom. Hallway door lock's compromised, too. Put up a fight from the looks of it. Hands and feet bound with your old reliable duct tape. Worked her over some before doing her. Looks like she was strangled with the tie of

her robe, since she's still wearing it around her neck.'

'Where was the sister while this was going on?' Eve asked.

'Said she just got in. Travels for work. Uses her sister's place as a flop when she comes into New York. Name's Palma Copperfield. Shuttle attendant for World Wide Air. She mucked up the scene some – sicked up on the floor in there, touched the body before she ran outside again to place the nine-one-one.'

The officer glanced toward the elevator. 'She was sitting on the steps out there, bawling, when we pulled up. Pretty much been bawling since.'

'That's always fun. Send in Crime Scene when they get here.'

Thinking of the shoddy maintenance, Eve turned to the stairs, unpeeling her cold-weather gear as they climbed.

One unit per level, she noted. Decent space, privacy.

On the third floor she saw that the unit boasted what looked to be a spanking new security peep and cop-lock system. Both were broken in a way that indicated amateur – and effective.

She stepped inside, into a living area where a second female officer stood over a woman who was bundled under a blanket, trembling.

Early twenties, by Eve's gauge, with a long blond tail of hair sleeked back from a face where tears had washed through the makeup. She held a clear glass of what Eve assumed to be water in a two-handed grip.

She choked out a sob.

'Ms. Copperfield, I'm Lieutenant Dallas. My partner, Detective Peabody.'

'The Homicide police. The Homicide police,' she babbled in a flattened-vowel accent that told Eve Midwest.

'That's right.'

'Somebody killed Nat. Someone killed my sister. She's dead. Natalie's dead.'

'I'm sorry. Can you tell us what happened?'

'I – I came in. She knew I was coming. I called her this morning to remind her. We got in late, and I had a wind-down drink with Mae, the other attendant. The door, downstairs . . . the door was broken or something. I didn't need my key. I have a key. And I came up, and the lock – she had a new lock, and she gave me the code for it this morning, when – when I called? But it looked broken. The door wasn't even locked. I thought, 'Something's

wrong, something has to be wrong,' because Nat wouldn't go to bed without locking up. So I thought I should check, just look in on her before I went to bed. And I saw . . . Oh, God, oh, God, she was on the floor and everything was broken and she was on the floor, and her face. Her face.'

Palma started to cry again, the tears running fat and steady down her cheeks. 'It was all bruised and red and her eyes . . . I ran over and I called her name. I think I called her name and I tried to wake her up. Pull her up. She wasn't sleeping. I knew she wasn't sleeping, but I had to try to wake her up. My sister. Someone hurt my sister.'

'We're going to take care of her now.' Eve thought of the time it would take for her, then the sweepers, to process the scene. 'I'm going to need to talk to you again, in a little while, so I'm going to have you taken down to Central. You can wait there.'

'I don't think I should leave Nat. I don't know what to do, but I should stay with Nat.'

'You need to trust us with her now. Peabody.'

'I'll take care of it.'

Eve glanced at the uniform who nodded toward a doorway.

Eve walked away from the weeping. Then, sealing up, walked into death.