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Creation in Death

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Extract

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EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, EVE THOUGHT, LIFE was really worth living. Here she was, stretched out in a double-wide sleep chair watching a vid. There was plenty of action in the vid—she liked watching stuff blow up—and the "plotline" meant she didn't have to actually think.

She could just watch.

She had popcorn, drowned in butter and salt, the fat cat stretched across her feet keeping them nice and warm. She had the next day off, which meant she could sleep until she woke up, then veg until she grew mold.

Best of all, she had Roarke cozied up in the chair beside her. And since her husband had complained after one handful that the popcorn was disgusting, she had the whole bowl to herself.

Really, it didn't get any better.

Then again, maybe it did—would—as she planned to nail her husband like an airjack when the vid was over. Her version of a double feature.

"Iced," she said after a midair collision of a tourist tram and an ad blimp. "Seriously iced."

"I thought this storyline would appeal to you."

"There *is* no storyline." She took another handful of popcorn. "That's what appeals to me. It's just some dialogue stitching explosions together."

"There was brief full-frontal nudity."

"Yeah, but that was for you, and those of your ilk." She flicked a glance up at him, as on screen pedestrians ran screaming from falling wreckage.

He was so damn gorgeous—in anyone's ilk. A face sculpted by talented gods on a really good day. Strong bones laying the excellent foundation under that Irish white skin, the mouth that made her think of poets, until he used it on her so she couldn't think at all. Those wild Celt's eyes that saw just who she was.

Then you topped it off with all that black silky hair, added that long, lean body, the sexy Irish accent, tossed in brains, wit, temper, and street smarts and you had yourself a hell of a package.

And he was all hers.

She intended to make really good use of what was hers for the next thirty-six hours or so.

On screen a street battle erupted among the rubble with hurled miniboomers and whooshing blasters. The hero—distinguished by the fact he'd kicked the most ass thus far—burst through the mêlée on the back of a jet-bike.

Obviously caught up, Roarke dug into the popcorn. Then immediately pulled his hand out again and scowled at his own fingers. "Why don't you just dump salt into melted butter and eat that?"

"The corn makes a nice vehicle for it. Aw, what's the matter? You get your pretty hands messy?"

He wiped his fingers down her face, smiled. "Clean now."

"Hey!" She laughed, set the bowl aside. It would be safe, she knew, as even Galahad, the cat, wouldn't eat it her way. She poked a finger hard into Roarke's ribs, rolled until she was on top of him.

Maybe they'd just have a sneak preview of tonight's second feature.

"Going to pay for that one, pal."

"How much?"

"It's going to be the installment plan. I figure we'll start with . . ." She lowered her mouth to his, nipped that excellent bottom lip. She felt his hand move over her. Lifting her head, she narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you feeling my ass or wiping the rest of the butter and salt off your fingers?"

"Two birds, one ass. About that first payment."

"The interest is going to be—ha-ha—stiff." She went for the mouth again, started to sink in.

And her communicator signaled.

"Goddamn it." She pulled up. "This is crap. I'm not on call."

"Why is it in your pocket?"

"Habit. Stupid. Damn it," she spurted as she dragged the communicator out, checked the display. "It's Whitney." Sighing, she shoved a hand through her hair. "I have to take it."

"Pause vid," Roarke ordered, then rubbed the butter off her cheek. "Lights on, seventy percent."

"Thanks." Eve clicked on. "Dallas."

"Lieutenant, report to East River Park, at Second Street and Avenue D, as primary."

"Commander—"

"I understand you were neither on duty nor on call," he interrupted. "Now you are."

The word *why* went through her head, but she was too well-trained to verbalize it. "Yes, sir. I'll contact Detective Peabody en route."

"I'll see you at Central."

He clicked off.

"Unusual," Roarke commented. He'd already turned off the vid. "For the commander to contact you personally, and to yank you in this way."

"Something hot," Eve replied and shoved the communicator back in her pocket. "I've got nothing hot open. Not that it would have him

tagging me directly when I'm not on the roll. Sorry." She glanced over. "Screws vid night."

"It'll keep. But as my evening is now open, I believe I'll go with you. I know how to keep out of the way," he reminded her before she could object.

He did, she admitted. And since she knew he'd changed his own schedule, possibly postponing acquiring a small country or planetoid, it seemed only fair.

"Then let's get moving."

He knew how to stay out of the way when it suited him. He also knew how to observe. What Roarke saw when they arrived at the park were a number of black-and-whites, a small army of uniforms and crime scene techs.

The media people who had a nose for this sort of thing were there, firmly blocked by part of that army. The barricades had been erected, and like the media and the civilian gawkers, he would have to make his observations from behind them.

"If you get bored," Eve told him, "just take off. I'll make my own way back."

"I'm not easily bored."

He watched her now, observed her now. His cop. The wind kicked at her long black coat, one she'd need as this first day of March was proving as brutal as the rest of 2060 had been. She hooked her badge on her belt, though he wondered how anyone could mistake her for anything other than a cop, and one with authority.

Tall and rangy, she moved to the barricades in strong strides. Her hair, short and brown, fluttered a little in that same wind—a wind that carried the scent of the river.

He watched her face, the way those whiskey-colored eyes tracked, the way her mouth—that had been so soft and warm on his—firmed. The lights played over her face, shifting those angles and planes.

She looked back at him, very briefly. Then she moved on, moved through the barricades to do what, he supposed, she'd been born to do.

She strode through the uniforms and techs. Some recognized her; some simply recognized what Roarke had. Authority. When she was approached by one of the uniforms, she stopped, brushed her coat back to tap her badge.

"Sir. I was ordered to look out for you, to escort you. My partner and I were first on scene."

"Okay." She gave him a quick once-over. On the young side, cut as clean as a military band. His cheeks were pink from the cold. His voice said native New Yorker, heading toward Brooklyn. "What have we got?"

"Sir. I was ordered to let you see for yourself."

"That so?" She scanned the badge on his thick uniform coat. "All right, Newkirk, let's go see for myself."

She gauged the ground covered, studied the line of trees and shrubs. It appeared the scene was well secured, locked tight. Not only from the land side, she noted as she glimpsed the river. The water cops were out, barricading the riverbank.

She felt a cold line of anticipation up her spine. Whatever this was, it was major.

The lights the techs had set up washed white over the shadows. Through them, she saw Morris coming toward her. Major, she thought again, for the chief medical examiner to be called on scene. And she saw it in his face, the tightness of concern.

"Dallas. They said you were on scene."

"They didn't say you were."

"I was nearby, out with friends. A little blues club over on Bleecker."

Which explained the boots, she supposed. The black and silver pattern she assumed had once belonged to some reptile wasn't the sort of thing a man would normally sport on a crime scene. Not even the stylish Morris.

His long black coat blew back to reveal a cherry-red lining. Under

it, he wore black pants, black turtleneck—extreme casual wear for him. His long, dark hair was slicked back into a tail, bound top and tip with silver bands.

"The commander called you in," she said.

"He did. I haven't touched the body yet—visual only. I was waiting for you."

She didn't ask why. She understood she was meant to form her own conclusions without any outside data. "With us, Newkirk," she ordered, and walked toward the lights.

It might have been a sheet of ice or snow. From a distance, it might appear to be. And from a distance, the body arranged on it might appear to be artful—a model for some edgy shoot.

But she knew what it was, even from a distance, and the line of cold up her spine took on teeth.

Her eyes met Morris's. But they said nothing.

It wasn't ice, or snow. She wasn't a model or a piece of art.

Eve took a can of Seal-It from her kit, set the kit down.

"You're still wearing your gloves," Morris told her. "That stuff's hell on gloves."

"Right." With her gaze steady on the body, she pulled the gloves off, stuffed them in her pocket. Sealed up. She hooked her recorder to her coat. "Record on." The techs would be running one, as would Morris. She'd have her own.

"Victim is female, Caucasian. Did you ID her?" she asked Morris.

"No."

"As yet unidentified. Mid- to late twenties, brown and blue. Small tat of a blue and yellow butterfly on left hip. The body is naked, posed on a white cloth, arms spread, palms up. There's a silver ring on the third finger of her left hand. Various visible wounds indicating torture. Lacerations, bruising, punctures, burns. Crosshatch of slash wounds on both wrists, probable cause of death." She looked at Morris.

"Yes. Probable."

"There's carving in the torso, reading eighty-five hours, twelve minutes, thirty-eight seconds."

Eve let out a long, long breath. "He's back."

"Yes," Morris agreed. "Yes, he is."

"Let's get an ID, TOD." She glanced around. "Could have brought her in through the park, or by water. Ground's rock hard, and it's a public park. We may get some footprints, but they won't do us much good."

She reached in her kit again, paused when Peabody hustled up. "Sorry it took me so long. Had to come crosstown and there was a jam on the subway. Hey, Morris!" Peabody, a red cap pulled low over her dark hair, rubbed her nose, looked at the body. "Oh, man. Someone put her through it."

In her sturdy winter boots, Peabody sidestepped for a better view. "The message. There's something about that. Dim bell." She tapped at her temple. "Something."

"Get her ID," Eve ordered, then turned to Newkirk. "What do you know?"

He'd been standing at attention, but went even stiffer, even straighter. "My partner and I were on patrol, and observed what appeared to be a robbery in progress. We pursued a male individual into the park. The suspect headed in an easterly direction. We were unable to apprehend, the suspect had a considerable lead. My partner and I split up, intending to cut off the suspect. At which time, I discovered the victim. I called for my partner, then notified Commander Whitney."

"Notifying the commander isn't procedure, Officer Newkirk."

"No, sir. I felt, in these circumstances, that the notification was not only warranted but necessary."

"Why?"

"Sir, I recognized the signature. Lieutenant, my father's on the job. Nine years ago he was part of a task force formed to investigate a series of torture murders." Newkirk's gaze shifted to the body, back to Eve's. "With this signature."

"Your father's Gil Newkirk?"

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant." His shoulders relaxed a fraction at her question. "I followed the case back then, as much as I could. Over the years since, particularly since I've been on the job, my father and I have discussed it. The way you do. So I recognized the signature. Sir, I felt, in this case, breaking standard and notifying the commander directly was correct."

"You'd be right. Good call, Officer. Stand by."

She turned to Peabody.

"Vic is ID'd as Sarifina York, age twenty-eight. Address is on West Twenty-first. Single. Employed at Starlight. That's a retro club in Chelsea."

Eve crouched down. "She wasn't killed here, and she wasn't wrapped in this cloth when she was brought here. He likes the stage clean. TOD, Morris."

"Eleven this morning."

"Eighty-five hours. So he took her sometime Monday, or earlier if he didn't start the clock. Historically, he starts on the first very shortly after he makes the snatch."

"Starting the clock when he begins to work on them," Morris confirmed.

"Oh, shit. Oh, crap, I remember this." Peabody sat back on her heels. Her cheeks were reddened by the wind, and her eyes had widened with memory. "The media tagged him The Groom."

"Because of the ring," Eve told her. "We let the ring leak."

"It was, like, ten years ago."

"Nine," Eve corrected. "Nine years, two weeks, and . . . three days since we found the first body."

"Copycat," Peabody suggested.

"No, this is him. The message, the time—we didn't let that leak to the media. We closed that data up tight. But we never closed the case. We never closed him. Four women in fifteen days. All brunettes, the

youngest twenty-eight, the oldest thirty-three. All tortured, between a period of twenty-three and fifty-two hours."

Eve looked at the carving again. "He's gotten better at his work."

Morris nodded as he made his study. "It appears the more superficial wounds were inflicted first, as before. I'll confirm when I get her home."

"Ligature marks, ankles, wrists—just above the slashes." Eve lifted one of the hands. "She didn't just lie there and take it, not from the looks of this. He used drugs on the others."

"Yes, I'll check."

Eve remembered it all, every detail of it, and all the frustration and fury that rode with it. "He'll have washed her, washed her clean—hair and body—with high-end products. Wrapped her up, probably in plastic, for transport. We never got so much as a speck of lint off any of the others. Bag the ring, Peabody. You take her, Morris."

She straightened. "Officer Newkirk, I'm going to need a full and detailed written report, asap."

"Yes, sir."

"Who's your LT?"

"Grohman, sir. I'm out of the one-seven."

"Your father still there?"

"He is, yes, sir."

"Okay, Newkirk, get me that report. Peabody, check Missing Persons, see if the vic was reported. I need to contact the commander."

By the time she exited the park, the wind had died down. Small mercy. The crowd of gawkers had thinned out, but the media hounds were more dogged. The only way to control the situation, she knew, was to meet it head on.

"I won't answer questions." She had to shout to be heard over the questions already being hurled at her. "I will make a brief statement. And if you keep shouting at me, you won't get that either. Earlier this

evening"—she continued through the shouts and the noise level dropped—"officers of the NYPSD discovered the body of a woman in East River Park."

"Has she been identified?"

"How was she killed?"

Eve simply stared holes into the reporters who attempted to break rank. "Did you guys just drop into the city out of a puffy cloud, or are you just running your mouths to hear your own voice? As anyone with half a brain knows, the woman's identity will not be given out until after notification of next of kin. Cause of death will be determined by the medical examiner. And anyone stupid enough to ask me if we have any leads is going to be blocked from receiving any ensuing data on this matter. Clear? Now stop wasting my time."

She stalked off, and was halfway to her own vehicle when she spotted Roarke leaning against the hood. She'd completely forgotten about him.

"Why aren't you home?"

"What? And miss the entertainment? Hello, Peabody."

"Hey." She managed to smile even though her cheeks felt like a couple of slabs of ice. "You've been here the whole time?"

"Nearly. I did wander off." He opened the car door, took out a couple of insulated takeout cups. "To get you presents."

"It's coffee," Peabody said, reverently. "It's hot coffee."

"Should thaw you out a bit. Bad?" he said to Eve.

"Very. Peabody, track down contact info on the vic's next of kin."

"York, Sarifina. On it."

"I'll get myself home," Roarke began, then stopped. "What was that name?"

"York," Eve repeated, "Sarifina." Something sank in her belly. "You're going to tell me you knew her."

"Late twenties, attractive brunette?" He leaned back against the car again when Eve nodded. "I hired her a few months ago to manage a

club in Chelsea. I can't say I knew her other than I found her bright, energetic, capable. How did she die?"

Before she could answer, Peabody stepped back up. "Mother in Reno—that's Nevada—father in Hawaii. Bet it's warm there. She has a sister in the city. Murray Hill. And the Missing Person's data came through. The sister reported her missing yesterday."

"Let's take the vic's apartment first, then the club, then the next of kin."

Roarke laid a hand on Eve's arm. "You haven't told me how she died."

"Badly. This isn't the place for the details. I can arrange for transpo for you or—"

"I'm going with you. She was one of mine," he said before she could object. "I'm going with you."

She didn't argue. Not only would it waste time and energy, she understood. And since she had him, she'd use him.

"If an employee—especially one in a managerial position—didn't show for work a few days running, would you be notified?"

"Not necessarily." He did what he could to make himself comfortable in the back of the police issue. "And I certainly wouldn't know her schedule off the top of my head, but I will find out about that. If she missed work, it's likely someone covered for her, and—or—that her absence was reported to a supervisor in that particular arm of the Entertainment Division."

"I need a name on that."

"You'll have it."

"Reported missing yesterday. Whoever was assigned to that case would have, or damn well should have, interviewed coworkers at the club, neighbors, friends. We need to connect to that, Peabody."

"I'll run it down."

"Tell me," Roarke repeated, "how she died."

"Morris will determine cause of death."

"Eve."

She flipped a glance in the rearview mirror, met his eyes. "Okay, I can tell you how it went down or close to it. She was stalked. The killer would take all the time he needed to observe and note her habits, her routines, her mode of traveling, her vulnerabilities—i.e., when she would most likely be alone and accessible. When he was ready, he'd make the grab. Most likely off the street. He'd have his own vehicle for this purpose. He'd drug her and take her to his . . ."

They'd called it his workshop, Eve remembered.

". . . to the location he'd prepared, most likely a private home. Once there he would either keep her drugged until he was ready, or—if she was the first—he'd begin."

"The first?"

"That's right. And when he was ready, he'd start the clock. He'd remove her clothes; he would bind her. His preferred method of binding is rope—a good hemp. It chafes during struggle. He would use four methods of torture—physically, we can't speak to psychologically—which are heat, cold, sharp implements, and dull implements. He would employ these methods at increasing severity. He'd continue until, you could speculate, the victim no longer provides him with enough stimulation or pleasure or interest. Then he ends it by slitting their wrists and letting them bleed out. Postmortem, he carves into their torsos, the time—in hours, minutes, and seconds—they survived."

There was a long moment of absolute silence. "How long?" Roarke asked.

"She was strong. He washes them afterward. Scrubs them down using a high-end soap and shampoo. We think he wraps them in plastic, then transports them to a location he'd have already scouted out and selected. He lays them out there, on a clean white cloth. He puts a silver band on their ring finger, left hand."

"Aye." Roarke murmured it as he stared out the window. "I remember some of this. I've heard some of this."

"Between February eleventh and February twenty-sixth, 2051, he abducted, tortured, and killed four women in this manner. Then he stopped. Just stopped. Into the wind, into the fucking ether. I'd hoped into Hell."

Roarke understood now why she'd been called in, off the roll, by the commander. "You worked these murders."

"With Feeney. He was primary. I was a detective, just made second grade, and we worked it. We had a task force by the second murder. And we never got him."

Four women, Eve thought, who had never gotten justice.

"He's surfaced again, here and there," she continued. "Two weeks, two and a half—four or five women. Then he goes under. A year, a year and a half. Now he's come back to New York, where we think he started. Back to where he started, and this time, we'll finish it."

In his well-appointed living room, with the split of champagne he traditionally opened to celebrate the end of a successful project, the man the media had long ago dubbed The Groom settled down in front of his entertainment screen.

It was too early, he knew, most likely too early for any reports. It would be morning before his latest creation was discovered. But he couldn't resist checking.

A few moments, just to see, he told himself, then he'd enjoy his champagne with some music. Puccini, perhaps, in honor of . . . he had to pause and think before he remembered her name. Sarifina, yes. Such a lovely name. Puccini for Sarifina. He really believed she'd responded to Puccini best.

He surfed the channels, and was rewarded almost immediately. Delighted, he sat up, crossed his ankles, and prepared to listen to his latest reviews.

Identification is not being released in order for the woman's next of kin to be notified. While there is no confirmation at this time that the woman was

murdered, the participation of Lieutenant Eve Dallas on the scene indicates foul play is being considered.

He applauded, lightly, when Eve's face came on screen. "There you are," he said. "Hello, again! So nice, so very nice to see old friends. And this time, this time we're going to get to know each other so very much better."

He lifted his glass, held it out in a toast. "I know you're going to be my very finest work."