



I POP QUIZZES WERE KILLERS. LIKE AMBUSHING assassins they elicited fear and loathing in the prey, and a certain heady power in the hunter.

As Craig Foster prepared to take his lunch break and finish refining the quiz, he knew how his fifth-period U.S. history class would respond. Groans and gasps, wincing of misery or panic. He understood completely. At twenty-six, he wasn't so far removed from the student section of the classroom to have forgotten the pain or the anxiety.

He got out his insulated lunch sack. Being a creature of habit, he knew that his wife—and wasn't it just mag being married—would have packed him a poultry pocket, an apple, some soy chips, and his favorite hot chocolate.

He never asked her to pack his lunch, or to make sure his socks were washed and folded in pairs and stacked in the right-hand side of his top drawer. But she said she liked doing things for him. The seven months they'd been married had been the best of his life. And it hadn't sucked before that, either, he decided.

He had a job he loved, and was damn good at, he thought with a quick burst of pride. He and Lissette had a very decent apartment within reasonable walking distance of the school. His students were bright and interesting—and, bonus time, they liked him.

They'd grumble and sweat a bit over the pop quiz, but they'd do fine. Before he got down to work, he shot his bride an e-mail.

Hey, Lissy! How about I pick up that soup you like, and the big salad on the way home from work tonight?

Miss you. Love every sweet inch of you!

You know who.

It made him smile thinking about how it would make her smile. Then he switched back to the quiz. He studied his comp screen as he poured out the first cup of hot chocolate and lifted the pocket bread filled with soy products masquerading as thinly sliced turkey.

There was so much to teach; so much to learn. The history of the country was rich and diversified and dramatic, full of tragedy, comedy, romance, heroism, cowardice. He wanted to pass all of it on to his students, to make them see how the country, and the world they lived in, had evolved into what they were in the early months of 2060.

He ate, added questions, deleted others. And he drank deep of his favorite chocolate as a soft snow fell outside the classroom window.

As the days of his own short history ticked minute by minute closer to their end.

Schools gave her the willies. It was a humbling thing for a tough-minded, kick-ass cop to admit, even to herself. But there it was. Lieutenant Eve Dallas, arguably New York City's top murder cop, would rather have been stalking through an abandoned tenement in search of

a psychotic chemi-head juiced on Zeus than striding down the pristine hallways of staunchly upper-middle-class Sarah Child Academy.

Despite the bright, primary colors along walls and floors, the sparkling glass of the windows, it was, for Eve, just another torture chamber.

Most of the doors along the maze were open, and the rooms beyond empty but for the desks, tables, counters, screens, boards.

Eve glanced over at Principal Arnette Mosebly, a sturdy, heading-toward-statuesque woman of about fifty. Her mixed-race heritage had given her skin the color of caramel cream and eyes of misty blue. Her hair was a glossy black worn in a ball of corkscrew curls. She wore a long black skirt with a short red jacket. The heels of her sensible shoes clicked and clacked on the floor as they walked along the second-floor corridor.

“Where are the kids?” Eve asked.

“I had them taken to the auditorium until their parents or guardians can pick them up. Most of the staff is there as well. I thought it best, and most respectful, to cancel afternoon classes.”

She paused a few feet away from where a uniformed cop stood in front of a closed door.

“Lieutenant, this is beyond tragic for us, and the children. Craig . . .” She pressed her lips together, looked away. “He was young and bright and enthusiastic. His whole life ahead of him, and—” She broke off, held up a hand as she struggled for composure. “I understand this sort of thing, I mean to say, having the police involved is routine in matters like this. But I hope you’ll be as discreet and efficient as it’s possible to be. And that it will be possible for us to wait to—to transport the body until after all the students have left the building.”

Now she straightened her shoulders. “I don’t know how that young man could have become so ill. Why would he have come in today if he was feeling unwell? His wife—he’s only been married a few months—I haven’t contacted her yet. I wasn’t sure—”

“You’re going to want to leave that to us. If you’ll give us a few moments.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Record on, Peabody,” Eve said to her partner. She nodded to the guard who stepped to the side.

Eve opened the door, stood at the threshold. She was a tall, lanky woman with a choppy cap of brown hair, with brown eyes that were flat and dispassionate now as she scanned the scene. Her movements were easy as she took a can of Seal-It from her field kit, coated her hands, her boots.

In nearly a dozen years on the force, she’d seen a lot worse than the doomed history teacher sprawled on the floor in pools of his own vomit and shit.

Eve noted the time and place for the record. “MTs responded to the nine-one-one, arriving at fourteen-sixteen. Pronounced victim, identified as Foster, Craig, at fourteen-nineteen.”

“Lucky we drew a couple MTs on the call who knew better than to move the body,” Peabody commented. “Poor bastard.”

“Having lunch at his desk? Place like this probably runs to a staff lounge, cafeteria, whatever.” Remaining at the threshold, Eve cocked her head. “Knocked over a jumbo insulated bottle, the chair.”

“Looks more like a seizure than a struggle.” Peabody skirted the edge of the room, her airboots squishing slightly. She checked the windows. “Locked.” She angled so she could study the desk, the body from that side of the room.

While her body was as sturdy as Arnette Mosebly’s, Peabody’s build would never be statuesque. Her dark hair had grown past the nape of her neck and curved up at the ends in a flirty little flip Eve had yet to resign herself to.

“Working lunch,” Peabody noted. “Lesson plans or grading papers. Allergic reaction to something he ate, maybe.”

“Oh, yeah, I’d say.” Eve crossed to the body, hunkered down. She’d

run prints, do the standard gauge for TOD, all the rest, but for a moment she simply studied the dead.

Spider legs of broken vessels ran through the whites of his eyes. There were traces of foam as well as vomit clinging to his lips. “Tried to crawl after it hit him,” she murmured. “Tried to crawl for the door. Get the formal ID, Peabody, verify TOD.”

Rising, Eve moved carefully around the puddles of what Craig’s body had voided, and picked up the insulated cup she saw, which had his name engraved in silver over black. Sniffed.

“You think somebody poisoned this guy?” Peabody asked.

“Hot chocolate. And something else.” Eve bagged the cup into evidence. “Color of the vomit, signs indicating seizure, extreme distress. Yeah, I’m thinking poison. ME will verify. We’ll need to get clearance to access his medicals from the next of kin. Work the scene. I’m going to talk to Mosebly again, and pull in the witnesses.”

Eve stepped out again. Arnette Mosebly paced the hallway with a PPC in her hand. “Principal Mosebly? I’m going to have to ask you not to contact anyone, speak with anyone just yet.”

“Oh . . . I—actually, I was just—” She turned the PPC around so Eve could see the miniscreen. “Word game. Something to occupy my mind for a bit. Lieutenant, I’m worried about Lissette. Craig’s wife. She needs to be told.”

“She will be. Right now I’d like to speak with you, in private. And I need to interview the students who found the body.”

“Rayleen Straffo and Melodie Branch. The officer who responded said they couldn’t leave the building, and had to be separated.” Her lips thinned now in obvious disapproval. “Those girls were traumatized, Lieutenant. They were hysterical, as one would expect under these kinds of circumstances. I have Rayleen with the grief counselor, and Melodie with our nurse practitioner. Their parents should be with them by now.”

“You notified their parents.”

“You have your procedure, Lieutenant. I have mine.” She gave one of those regal nods Eve imagined were required in Principal Training 101. “My first priority is the health and safety of my students. These girls are ten years old, and they walk into *that*.” She nodded toward the door. “God knows what damage it’s done to them, emotionally.”

“Craig Foster isn’t feeling so well himself.”

“I have to do what needs to be done to protect my students. My school—”

“Right now, it’s not your school. It’s my crime scene.”

“Crime scene?” Color drained from Arnette’s face. “What do you mean? What crime?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out. I want the witnesses brought in, one at a time. Your office is probably the best place for the interviews. One parent or guardian per child during the interview.”

“Very well, then. Come with me.”

“Officer?” Eve looked over her shoulder. “Tell Detective Peabody I’m going to the principal’s office.”

His mouth twitched, very slightly. “Yes, sir.”

It was a different kettle altogether, Eve discovered, when you were the honcho instead of the one in the hot seat. Not that she’d particularly been a discipline problem in her day, she remembered. Mostly, she’d tried to be invisible, just get by, just get through and get out of the whole educational prison the day it was legal to do so.

But she hadn’t always managed it. A smart mouth and a bad attitude had surfaced often enough to earn her a few trips down to that hot seat.

She was supposed to be grateful the state was providing her, a ward thereof, with an education, with a home, with enough food to sustain life. She was supposed to be grateful to have clothes on her back, even if someone else had worn them first. She was supposed to want to bet-

ter herself, which had been tough when she hadn't remembered, not clearly, where she'd come from in the first place.

What she remembered most were the smug-toned lectures, the disappointed frowns that didn't quite hide the superiority.

And the endless, the terminal, the all-pervasive boredom.

Of course, it hadn't been smart and spiffy private schools for her, with state-of-the-art educational equipment, sparkling clean classrooms, stylish uniforms, and a one-teacher-per-six-students ratio.

She'd be willing to bet her next paycheck that the Sarah Child Academy didn't run to fist fights in the hallways, or homemade boomers in the lockers.

But today, at least, it ran to murder.

While she waited in Moseby's office with its homey touches of live plants and stylish teapots, she did a quick run on the victim.

Foster, Craig, age twenty-six. No criminal. Both parents still living, she noted, and still married to each other. They lived in New Jersey, where Craig himself had been born and raised. He'd attended Columbia on a partial scholarship, earned his teaching certificate, and was working on a master's degree in history.

He'd married Bolviar, Lissette, in July of the previous year.

He looked fresh and eager in his ID photo, Eve mused. A handsome young man with a clear complexion the color of roasted chestnuts. Deep, dark eyes, and dark hair worn in what Eve thought they were calling a high-top. Shaved close on the sides and back, brushed high on the crown.

His shoes had been trendy, too, she recalled. Black and silver gels, with ankle wraps. Pricey. But his sports jacket had been dirt brown, worn at the cuffs. Decent wrist unit, which had struck her as a knock-off. And a shiny gold band on the third finger of his left hand.

She imagined, when Peabody completed the scene, there would be under fifty credits in Craig's pockets.

She made a few quick notes.

Where did the hot chocolate come from?

Who had access to the insulated cup?

Shared classroom?

Time line. Last to see vic alive, first to find body.

Insurance policies, death benefits? Beneficiaries?

She glanced up as the door opened.

“Lieutenant?” Mosebly stepped in, one hand on the shoulder of a young girl with milky skin dotted with freckles that went with her carrot-red hair. The hair was long and brushed back into a sleek tail.

She looked slight and shaky in her navy blazer and spotless khakis.

“Melodie, this is Lieutenant Dallas, with the police. She needs to speak with you. Lieutenant Dallas, this is Melodie’s mother, Angela Miles-Branch.”

The kid had gotten the hair and skin from Mom, Eve noted. And Mom looked just as shaky.

“Lieutenant, I wonder if this could possibly wait until tomorrow. I’d prefer taking Melodie home now.” Angela had Melodie’s hand in a death grip. “My daughter isn’t feeling well. Understandably.”

“It’ll be easier all around if we do this now. It shouldn’t take long. Principal Mosebly, if you’ll excuse us.”

“I feel I should stay, as a representative of the school and as Melodie’s advocate.”

“A representative isn’t required at this time, and the minor child’s mother is present as her advocate. You’ll need to step out.”

There was an argument in Mosebly’s eyes, but she tightened her jaw, stepped out of the room.

“Why don’t you take a seat, Melodie?”

Two fat tears, one for each big blue eye, spilled out. “Yes, ma’am. Mom?”

“I’m going to be right here.” Keeping hands joined, Angela took the seat beside her daughter. “This has been terrible for her.”

“Understood. Melodie, I’m going to record this.”

With the nod came two more silent tears. At the moment, Eve wondered why the hell she hadn’t taken the scene and sicced Peabody on the kids. “Why don’t you just tell me what happened?”

“We went into Mr. Foster’s class—um, Rayleen and I. We knocked first, because the door was closed. But Mr. Foster doesn’t mind if you need to talk to him.”

“And you needed to talk to Mr. Foster.”

“About the project. Ray and I are project partners. We’re doing a multimedia report on the Bill of Rights. It’s due in three weeks, and it’s our big second-term project. It counts for twenty-five percent of our grade. We wanted him to see the outline. He doesn’t mind if you ask him questions before class, or after.”

“Okay. Where were you before you went to Mr. Foster’s classroom?”

“I had lunch period, and my study group. Ray and I got permission from Ms. Hallywell to leave study group a few minutes early to speak with Mr. Foster. I have the pass.”

She started to reach into her pocket.

“That’s okay. You went inside the classroom.”

“We started to. We were talking, and we opened the door. It smelled awful. That’s what I said, I said: ‘Holy jeez, it really stinks in here.’” Tears rained again. “I’m sorry I said that, but—”

“It’s okay. What happened then?”

“I saw him. I saw him on the floor, and there was like, oh, gosh, there was all this vomit and everything. And Ray screamed. Or I did. I guess we both did. And we ran out and Mr. Dawson came running down the hall and asked us what was the matter. He told us to stay there and he went back. He went inside. I watched him go inside. And he came out really fast, with his hand like this.”

She clamped her free hand over her mouth. “He used his talkie, I

think, to call Principal Mosebly. And then Ms. Mosebly came and called the nurse. And then the nurse, Nurse Brennan, came and took us to the infirmary. She stayed with us, until Mr. Kolfax came and he took Ray with him. I stayed with Nurse Brennan until my mom came.”

“Did you see anyone else go into Mr. Foster’s room, or leave it?”

“No, ma’am.”

“When you were walking from your study group to the classroom, did you see anyone?”

“Um. I’m sorry. Um. Mr. Bixley was coming out of the boys’ restroom, and we passed Mr. Dawson on the way. We showed him our pass. I think that was all, but I wasn’t paying attention.”

“How did you know Mr. Foster would be in his classroom?”

“Oh, he’s always in his classroom before fifth period on Mondays. He always has his lunch in there on Mondays. And the last fifteen minutes is when he allows students to come in and talk, if they really need to. Even before that he doesn’t mind if it’s important. He’s so nice. Mom.”

“I know, baby. Lieutenant, please.”

“Nearly done. Melodie, did either you or Rayleen touch Mr. Foster, or anything in the classroom?”

“Oh, no, no, ma’am. We just ran away. It was awful, and we ran away.”

“All right. Melodie, if you remember anything else, any little thing at all, I need you to tell me.”

The child rose. “Lieutenant Dallas? Ma’am?”

“Yeah?”

“Rayleen said, when we were in the infirmary, Rayleen said that they would have to take Mr. Foster away in a big bag. Do you? Do you have to?”

“Oh, Melodie.” Angela turned the child into her, held tight.

“We’re going to take care of Mr. Foster now,” Eve said. “It’s my job to take care of him, and I will. Talking to me helps me do my job, it helps me take care of him.”

“Really?” Melodie sniffled, sighed. “Thank you. I want to go home now. May I go home now?”

Eve met the girl’s drenched eyes, nodded, then shifted her gaze to the mother. “We’ll be in touch. I appreciate your cooperation.”

“This has been very hard on the girls. Very hard. Come on, sweetheart. We’re going home.”

Angela draped her arm around Melodie’s shoulders and walked her from the room. Eve pushed away from the desk, followed them to the doorway. Mosebly was already heading for the pair.

“Principal Mosebly? Question.”

“I’m just going to escort Mrs. Miles-Branch and Melodie out.”

“I’m sure they know the way. In your office.”

Eve didn’t bother to sit this time, but simply leaned back on the desk. Mosebly steamed in, fists knotted at her sides.

“Lieutenant Dallas, while I perfectly understand you have a job to do, I’m appalled by your dismissive and arrogant attitude.”

“Yeah, I get that. Was it Mr. Foster’s habit to bring his own lunch and beverage to work?”

“I . . . I believe it was. At least several days a week. We have a nutritionist-certified cafeteria, of course. And state-approved vending. But many members of the staff prefer to bring their own, at least occasionally.”

“He generally eat alone? At his desk?”

Mosebly rubbed her thumb and forefinger over her forehead. “As far as I know he took his lunch in his classroom two or three days a week. A teacher’s work encompasses more than can be done during school hours. There are lesson plans, grading, reading, lecture and lab preparations. Craig, like most of the staff, was also pursuing his own further education, which requires study and writing, and so forth. He’d lunch at his desk so that he could work while he ate. He was dedicated.”

The anger seemed to drain out of her. “He was young and idealistic. He loved teaching, Lieutenant Dallas, and it showed.”

“Did he have any problems with anyone on staff?”

“I’m really not aware of any. He was a friendly, easygoing young man. I felt, both personally and professionally, that we were fortunate to have him on our faculty.”

“Dismiss anyone lately?”

“No. We have very little turnover here at Sarah Child. Craig was in his second year with us. He filled a hole left by one of our teachers who retired after fifty years of service. Twenty-eight of those years were given right here, at Sarah Child.”

“How about you? How long have you been here?”

“Three, as principal. I have twenty-five years in education, and in administration.”

“When did you last see Mr. Foster?”

“I saw him briefly this morning.” As she spoke, Mosebly went to a small cold box, took out a bottle of water. “He’d come in early to use the fitness facilities, as he did routinely. All staff are permitted to use the machines, programs, the pool, and so on. Craig made use of the privilege nearly every morning.”

She sighed as she poured water into a short glass. “Would you like some, Lieutenant?”

“I’m good.”

“I had a swim myself this morning, and was just leaving the pool area when he came in. We said good morning. I complained about the traffic, and kept going. I was in a hurry. I heard him dive in,” she murmured, then took a slow sip of water. “I heard the splash as I opened the locker room door. Oh, God.”

“What time was that?”

“About seven-thirty. I had an eight o’clock phone conference, and I was running behind because I’d spent too long in the pool. I was annoyed with myself, and barely spoke to Craig.”

“Where’d he keep his lunch?”

“Why, in his classroom, I suppose. Possibly the lounge, but I don’t

recall I've ever seen him put anything in or take anything out of the friggie or cupboard in there."

"Would the classroom be locked?"

"No. The school is, naturally, secured, but individual classrooms aren't locked. There's no purpose, and the Sarah Child program is based on trust and responsibility."

"All right. You can send for the second witness. Rayleen Straffo."

Mosebly nodded, but there was nothing regal about it this time. "What about the other students? My staff?"

"We're going to need to interview the staff before any leave the building. You can dismiss the students, but I'll need your registration list."

"Very well."

Alone, Eve pulled out her communicator to tag Peabody. "Status."

"The body's just being transported. The ME on the wagon concurs with your poisoning assessment, though he won't commit until the vic's on the slab. The sweepers are on scene. It looks as if the vic was working on his comp at TOD. Putting together a pop quiz for his next class."

"There's a motive," Eve said dryly.

"I hated the pop quiz, and question its constitutionality. I did a quick check of the comp, and found the vic sent out an e-mail from that unit to an LFoster@Blackburnpub.com at twelve-oh-six today. No communication in or out prior to."

"Wife's name is Lissette. Content?"

"Just a sweetheart note, offering to pick up dinner on the way home from work. Recipient responded in the same tone, in the affirmative, at fourteen-forty-eight. Return post was not read."

"Okay. I'm waiting for the second wit. I'll send the principal back to you, have her set you up somewhere. Get started on interviewing the staff and let's nail the time line in each case. I'll take my share of them in here once I finish with the kid. Meanwhile, verify the wife's residence and place of employment. We'll notify after we leave here."

"And the fun never ends."

Eve clicked off as the door reopened, and again Mosebly entered with her hand on the shoulder of a young girl.

This one was blonde, with a cascade of curls held back from her face with a violet band. The band matched her eyes. They were puffy at the moment, red-rimmed, dominating a face of dewy skin with a slightly tipped-up nose. The mouth, rosy and bottom heavy, quivered.

She wore the same kind of uniform as Melodie, with the addition of a small gold star pinned to the lapel of the blazer.

“Rayleen, this is Lieutenant Dallas. Lieutenant, Rayleen is here with her father, Oliver Straffo. I’ll be just outside if I’m needed.”

“Have a seat, Rayleen.”

“Lieutenant.” Oliver kept his daughter’s hand in his. His voice resonated in the room, like a good actor’s in a theater. He was tall, gilded like his daughter. But his eyes were a cold steel-gray. She’d met them before. In court.

High-powered, high-dollar, high-profile defense attorney, she thought.

Crap.



“I’M ALLOWING THIS INTERVIEW,” HE BEGAN, “in this place, at this time, because I feel it’s in the best interest of my daughter’s emotional well-being. However, if I don’t like the tone or the texture of this interview, I will stop it and take my daughter away. Is that clear?”

“Sure. I was going to dig out the thumbscrews, but I don’t remember where I left them. Have a seat. Rayleen, I just need you to tell me what happened.”

Rayleen looked at her father first, got his nod. Then she sat, as he did, with admirable posture. “I found Mr. Foster. Melodie was with me. It was awful.”

“Explain to me how you found him. How you got to his classroom at that time of day.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She took a deep breath as if to prepare herself for an oral report. “I was in my study group, but I wanted, especially, to talk to Mr. Foster about the project I’m working on with Melodie. It’s worth a full quarter of our second-term grade in U.S. history, and I

wanted to do the best I could. I'm ranked first in my grade, and this is one of the most important projects of this term."

"Okay, so you left study group for Mr. Foster's classroom."

"Yes, ma'am. Ms. Hallywell gave us a pass so we could go to Mr. Foster's class early. He always has his lunch there on Mondays, and he lets students come in during the last fifteen minutes to talk to him, if they need to."

"What time did you leave study group?"

"I have the pass. It's time-stamped." Again she looked at her father for permission, then drew the pass out. "Melodie and I each have one. That's the school rule. It says twelve forty-seven P.M."

Eve made a mental note to walk the route to gauge the time it would take. "You went directly from study group to the classroom."

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Loitering in the hallways between classes is an infraction, and three infractions within a thirty-day period results in a loss of privileges." Her voice went prissy, reminding Eve that Rayleen was just the sort of kid she'd done her best to avoid in the cell block of school. "I don't have any infractions on my record."

"Good for you. How long did it take you to get from study group to Mr. Foster's classroom?"

"Oh, it couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes. Maybe three? I'm not absolutely certain, but we went right there. We were just talking, about the project, and some ideas for it. The door was closed, so we knocked first, then we opened it. And it smelled bad. It smelled sick, I guess. Melodie said something about the smell, and . . ." She pressed her lips together. "I laughed. I'm so sorry. I didn't know, Daddy, I didn't know."

"It's all right, Ray. Of course you didn't know."

"Then we saw him. He was lying there, and he was . . ." She hiccupped twice, then simply crawled out of her chair and into her father's lap.

“It’s all right, baby. It’s all right, Ray.” His eyes lasered into Eve’s as he stroked Rayleen’s hair. “Lieutenant.”

“You know I need to finish this. You know it’s vital to get the details as quickly as possible.”

“I don’t know what else.” Her voice was muffled as she pressed her face to her father’s chest. “We ran, we ran away. And Mr. Dawson was there, and he said to stay where we were. I sat down, I think. I sat on the floor, and we were crying, and Mr. Dawson came back. His hands were shaking when he took out his talkie and called Principal Mosebly.”

“Did you see anybody else go in or out of the classroom?”

“Principal Mosebly went to the door, then she called for the nurse and they took us—Melodie and me—to the infirmary.”

“On the way to the classroom, did you see anyone?”

“I think, yes, I think Mr. Bixley came out of the boys’ room, the restroom. He had his toolbox because one of the sinks was stopped up. That was before, before we passed Mr. Dawson and showed our passes. I went in first, into the classroom first. I was the first to see him.”

She lifted her tear-streaked face. “I don’t see how Mr. Foster could be dead. I don’t see how. He was my very favorite teacher.”

Her shoulders shook as she clung to her father.

“You can’t need any more from her,” Oliver said quietly. “I’m taking her home.”

“If she remembers anything else—”

“If she does, I’ll contact you.”

He rose, and carrying his daughter, strode from the room.

Eve started with Eric Dawson. He was a science teacher, in his middle fifties, and had been instructing at the academy for fifteen years. He carried a little paunch, and since his shirt buttons strained over it, Eve

assumed he was in denial over it. His sandy hair showed a little glint of gray at the temples. Pockets of fatigue dogged his light brown eyes.

“I didn’t go in,” he told Eve. “No more than a step or two. I could see . . . Anyone could see Craig was gone. I’d been annoyed with the girls, all that screaming. I thought they’d seen a spider or something equally foolish.” He paused, passed a hand over his face. “But as soon as I saw them . . . Even silly girls don’t reach that level of hysteria over a spider.”

“Did you see anyone else, other than the two girls?”

“I’d just left Dave Kolfax and Reed Williams in the staff lounge. We’d had lunch together, as we sometimes do. And I passed Leanne Howard going in. I was going to the chem lab to set up for the next class.”

“When did you last see Mr. Foster alive?”

“Oh, God. God. In the lounge, before classes this morning. I was having a coffee, and he had a tube of Pepsi from Vending. He didn’t drink coffee. I used to tease him about it. We talked a little about a mutual student, Bradley Curtis. His parents are divorcing, and Brad’s grades have been sliding. We agreed it was time for a meeting with the parents and a counselor. Then, ah, Reed came in. Yes, to grab a coffee. When I left they were talking about some action vid they’d both seen recently. I didn’t see him again until . . .”

“How did you get along?”

“With Craig? I liked him quite a lot. Quite a lot,” he repeated quietly. “I was, well, unconvinced when he first came on staff last year. He was so young—the youngest member of the teaching staff. But he made up for a certain lack of experience with enthusiasm and dedication. He cared a great deal, a great deal about the students. He must have been ill and not known it. He must have had some sort of condition. To die that way. It’s inconceivable.”

The sentiment was echoed by every staff member Eve spoke with. She finished up the session with Reed Williams, English department.

No pouch on this one, Eve noted. He had a strong, lean build that told her he took advantage of the fitness center facilities. His hair was

a deep, rich brown tipped with gold to simulate sun streaks. His square jaw was deeply clefted under a firm mouth. His eyes of sharp, bottle green were heavily and darkly lashed.

He was thirty-eight, single, and wearing a suit that she estimated had cost him a stinging slice of his monthly pay.

"I saw him this morning, in the fitness center. He was doing reps when I came in. I don't like to talk when I'm working out, so it was just a . . . well, a nod of acknowledgment. I'd say we were in there together for about twenty minutes. He headed out, waved. He generally took a swim after a workout. I was in there another ten minutes, I'd guess. Grabbed a shower, dressed. Then I saw Craig again in the lounge, with Eric. Eric Dawson."

"Did Mr. Foster have anything with him?"

"With him? No, just a tube of Pepsi. We talked vids for a few minutes, then headed off to class. I ran into him again in the staff restroom." Williams smiled slightly and showed a single dimple in his left cheek to go with the cleft. "Just a kind of 'How's it going?'" as we used the facilities. I guess that was right about eleven. Just before. The classes start on the hour, and I wasn't late."

"How did you get along with him?"

"Fine. We got along fine."

"You both liked action vids. Did you hang out socially?"

"Now and again, sure. I went to his wedding last year—most of the staff did. We had a beer together a couple of times." He shrugged. "We weren't best pals, but we got along. Mirri would know him better, socially."

"Mirri."

"Hallywell. English department, Drama. They saw each other outside the school."

"On a social level."

"Sure." He smiled a little again, and there was a smirk behind it. "They have a standing date Wednesday nights. To study."

With the initial interviews done, Eve tagged Peabody again. “Bixley.”
“Hernando M., Maintenance. He was dealing with a plumbing problem in the boys’ john down the hall from the scene. He passed the two wits and Dawson on his way out.”

“Buzz?”

“No. He’s late sixties, worked here for twelve years. His two grandsons attend on his employee tuition rate. Seems like a solid type.”

“Hallywell.”

“Mirri C. Finished her about fifteen minutes ago. English department, runs the Drama Club and directs the school plays. I’m about to interview the last on my list. Is there something about Hallywell? I didn’t get a buzz from her either.”

“I want a quick followup. If she’s still here, I’ll track her down. Find me when you’re done.”

“She was pretty broken up—Hallywell. Might check one of the washrooms. I’d say she’d need to compose herself before she left.”

Following Peabody’s advice, Eve tried the staff restroom closest to the lounge where Peabody was conducting interviews. The door required a key card; Eve used her master.

And found a woman sitting on the floor in front of the bank of sinks, weeping.

“Mirri Hallywell.”

“Yes. Yes.” She choked back a sob, sniffled, mopped at her face with a tissue. The face was splotchy from the crying jag, the pale blue eyes swollen from it. She had dark hair worn in a brutally short Caesar style and tiny silver hoops in her ears.

“I’m sorry. Are you with the police? I’ve already talked to a detective.”

“My partner. I’m Lieutenant Dallas. I need to ask you a few more questions.”

“Oh, God, oh, God. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say.”

Eve crouched. “It’s rough when a colleague’s killed, so suddenly.”

“It’s horrible. We weren’t just colleagues. We were friends. We were good friends. None of this seems possible.”

“How good friends?”

Mirri let her head fall back. “That’s a terrible thing to imply, a terrible thing to think about someone like Craig. Someone who can’t speak for himself anymore.”

“I speak for him now. That’s what I do.”

“Then if you’re going to speak for him you should know he loved his wife. They loved each other. I envy that, what they have together. I’m her friend, too. I’m her friend, and I don’t know how to begin to help her through this.”

“You and Craig saw each other every week, outside work.”

“We had a study date on Wednesdays.” Fire came into the ravaged eyes. “For God’s sake, is that what everything whittles down to for people like you?”

“If it was innocent, why get pissed off?” Eve countered.

“Because he’s dead. He’s dead.”

She drew in a shaky breath. “We were both working on our Master’s degrees. We’d go to the library or a coffee shop, study together for a couple hours. Maybe have a beer afterward. We’re going out—I mean, oh, God, I mean we were supposed to go out tomorrow, to the vids. Craig and Lissy and this guy they fixed me up with. I hate being fixed up, but they talked me into this one last month, and it’s worked out pretty well so far. So we’re doing a double date.”

“Mirri, if you and Craig had anything going, now’s the time to tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell. I’m not so desperate I’d poach a friend.” She scrubbed her hands over her face. “I was going to call Lissy, come in

here and call her, even though they said we weren't to contact anyone. I thought, I need to do that for her, she needs to hear about this from a friend. But I couldn't."

Mirri drew up her knees, pressed her face to them. "I just couldn't. I didn't know what to say, how to say it, and I didn't have the guts to try."

"That's for us to do."

"What can you say?" Mirri demanded. "What can you say to someone like this? She's expecting he'll be there when she comes home. And he won't be there. Not tonight, not ever. What can you say?"

Then she sighed, pushed herself to her feet. "It's not your fault. I wish it were. I wish it could be your fault and I could scream and rave at you for it. Would you tell Lissy . . . would you just tell her how sorry I am, and that if I can help, if I can do anything . . . I'll be there."

Lissette Foster was an editorial assistant for a small publishing house with offices in midtown. The background Peabody accessed listed her as twenty-four, a native of Martinique who had moved to New York to attend Columbia. The only blight on her record was an underage drinking rap when she'd been nineteen. She'd been given probation, and community service.

Her mother remained in Martinique. Her father's whereabouts were unknown.

"So," Peabody continued, "speaking of the islands, how was your vacation?"

"It was good." A week of sun, sand, and sex. What could be better? "This snow's starting to stick."

"Yeah, we're supposed to get maybe four inches. Are you looking seriously at the wife?"

"She's first on the list. Spouses tend to be."

"Yeah, but newlyweds? I know how it's supposed to be tough the

first year, adjusting and whatever, but poison? It's sneaky and distant. A spouse gets pissed, it's usually bloodier, and more personal."

"Usually. If his lunch was poisoned, where did the lunch come from? Consensus is, from home. Wife had the easiest access. Although consensus also is the vic left the bagged lunch in his classroom. Unlocked room. He comes in early, dumps his stuff in the classroom, heads to the fitness center. Again, fairly easy access for anyone."

"Motive?"

"Other than the pop quiz? Not clear as yet. The wit? Rayleen Straffo is the fruit of Oliver Straffo's loins."

"Oh, shit! Seriously? Does she have horns and a tail?"

"If so, well hidden." Eve tapped her fingers on the wheel as she thought of Straffo. "He could get a lot of screen time with this, playing the Daddy card. Outrage, concern, blah, blah."

"It'd be just like him. You're going on Nadine's new show this week. You can balance his bullshit."

"Don't remind me. Stupid damn friendships. They always cost you."

"You're so soft and sentimental, Dallas."

"Yeah, I love that about me." Judging the snow, the insanity of New York drivers in same, Eve swung into a parking lot two blocks from the address. "I'm not trying for street parking in this snowing crap."

"I can use the exercise. I, like, ate my way through the holidays, and am expecting McNab to spring for something resembling chocolate for Valentine's Day, so I need to lose in advance. What are you getting for Roarke?"

"For what?"

"For Valentine's Day?"

"I just got his Christmas stuff five minutes ago." She stepped out of the car, remembered the scarf stuffed in her coat pocket. Pulling it out, Eve swung it around her neck.

"Two months ago. And it's *Valentine's* Day. For sweethearts. You

need to get him a gooey card and a sentimental token. I already got McNab's. It's a talking picture frame with our names inscribed on it. I put this shot of the two of us his father took at Christmas? He can keep it in his cube in EDD. Roarke would like something like that."

"Roarke already knows what we look like." A minicoupe skidded at the light, fishtailed into the crosswalk, and earned the curses and snarls of pedestrians.

She loved New York.

"Oh, speaking of pictures, I've got a new crop of Belle. Have you seen her since you got back?"

"No. Is she asking for tats and belly rings already?"

"Come on. She is so seriously adorable. She's got Leonardo's eyes and Mavis's mouth, and—"

"God help us if she inherits their fashion sense along with it."

"She smiles at me, every time I pick her up." Above her scarf, under her watch cap, Peabody's eyes went to brown goo. "People say that's gas, but she smiles at me. She's getting so big, and she's . . ."

While Peabody rhapsodized about Mavis's infant daughter, Eve listened to the music of New York. The blasting horns, the arguments, the rumbling ad blimps from overhead. Through them were the voices, a rat-a-tat of conversations, a litany of complaints.

"So, what are you going to take her?"

"What? Taking what? Where?"

"To Belle, Dallas, when you go to see her. The gift?"

"What gift?" Seriously stymied, Eve stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Why do I have to take a gift?"

"Because."

"*Why?* Didn't I do the shower thing, with gifts, then the hospital thing?"

"Yes, but when you go to visit the baby at home for the first time, it's traditional to—"

“Who makes this up?” Seriously aggrieved, Eve jabbed a finger into the marshmallow puffiness of Peabody’s winter coat. “I demand to know who makes these rules. It’s madness. Tell me who it is, and I’ll have them committed for psychiatric evaluation.”

“Aw, Dallas, you just need to bring her a little teddy bear or a pretty rattle. It’s fun shopping for baby stuff.”

“My ass. You know what’s fun?” Eve hauled open the door of the office building. “Finding out who poisoned some poor slob of a history teacher. That’s my idea of fun. Any more talk about shopping, gifts, babies, gooey cards, or Valentine’s Day, my boot’s going so far up your ass you’ll think the toe’s your tongue.”

“A week at the beach sure sweetened your mood. Sir,” Peabody muttered when Eve’s look fried off the top layers of her skin.

Eve turned on her heel toward the security station, and badged the guard. “Lisette Foster.”

“Just a minute, please.” He ran the badge number, the ID ploddingly, thoroughly. “Yes, sir, you’re cleared. Lisette Foster . . . Foster, Foster. Here we go. She’s with Blackburn Publishing. Editorial. Uh . . . that’s on the ninth floor. Bank of elevators to your right. Have a productive day.”

“Yeah, you bet. Native of Martinique,” Eve began as they stepped into an elevator to be assaulted with quiet, mind-melting music. “Student visa, most like, work visa maybe. She’d get her green card by marrying a U.S. citizen. And keep her status here as his widow.”

“Easier ways to get a green card.”

“Sure. But maybe things weren’t working, and divorce within two years cancels out the green. Maybe there was more going on in those Wednesday night sessions with Hallywell than studying. You got a job here, you want a life here. Killing to keep it isn’t a stretch.”

They stepped off into a small reception area where a woman sat behind a white counter. She wore a headset and a big, welcoming smile.

“Good afternoon!” she said, so enthusiastically that Eve’s eyes slit-
ted. “Welcome to Blackburn Publishing. How may I help you today?”

“Lisette Foster.”

“Of course. I can certainly find out if Ms. Foster’s free. May I say
who’s here to see her, and the nature of your business?”

Eve simply took out her badge again. “We’ll explain all that to Ms.
Foster.”

“Oh.” The woman’s eyes bugged as she stared at the badge. “Oh, my.
Excuse me.” She swiveled around, spoke into the mouthpiece of her
headset in a hissing whisper. “Lisette Foster.” Clearing her throat, she
darted a glance back at Eve. “Lisette, there’s someone here in Reception
to see you. It’s a *police* officer. I don’t know. I really don’t. Okay.”

With her smile strained at the edges, the woman turned back to Eve.
“She’ll be right here. If you’d like to sit—”

“We’re fine.”

By the time Eve had unwrapped her scarf, a woman was striding
out on ice-pick heels. Those alone indicated some level of insanity to
Eve. The heels were cherry red, the pencil-slim suit stone gray. Inside
it was an excellent body.

Lisette Foster had luminous skin, heavy-lidded, and currently an-
noyed, nut-brown eyes. Her hair was nearly the same shade and worn
ruler-straight to brush her shoulders.

She moved with purpose, Eve thought. Like a woman with a fire in
her belly. It might have sparked from anger, from ambition, or passion,
but it was hot.

“You’re police?” Lisette demanded in a brisk tone made exotic by
the French accent.

“Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody. We—”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake! I told him we’d keep the music down. Arrest
me then.” Drama quivering, she held out her arms, wrists together.
“Arrest me for playing music after the ungodly hour of nine P.M. on a
Saturday night. I should be dragged away in chains! Just because some

retired cop has *issues* is no reason to have police coming to where I work. Does he want me to get fired?”

“Ms. Foster, we’re not here about your music. We’d like to speak with you privately. Your office would be best.”

“Office?” Lissette let out a very lusty laugh. “I’m an editorial assistant. I’m lucky I’ve got a cube. What’s this about?”

Eve turned now to the woman at reception. “I need a private room. Office, conference room, lounge, whatever. I want it now.”

“Certainly, certainly. The conference room isn’t booked right now. You can—”

“Fine.” Eve looked back at Lissette. “Let’s go.”

“What’s this about? I have a meeting with the boss in . . . oh, God, ten minutes. She hates anyone to be late. If you think you can pitch a story idea to someone at my level, I can promise you, you’re wasting your time.”

She wound her way through a maze of cubes and narrow hallways, past offices with tiny windows, corner offices with views to kill.

“Look, I shouldn’t have talked that way about Sergeant Kowoski. Maybe the music was too loud. My husband and I were playing around, pretending we were at some hot club. We were probably a little drunk, and a little loud. I don’t want any trouble.”

She stepped into a room with a dozen chairs around a wide table, long counters along each side wall and screens front and back.

“Can we do this quickly? I really don’t want to be late for my meeting.”

“We’d like you to sit down.”

“This is ridiculous.” Blowing out a breath, she yanked out a chair, sat. Then came straight back to her feet again, with alarm in her eyes. “Oh, God. Has something happened to my mother? Was there an accident? *Maman?*”

“No.”

How did you tell someone the person she expected to be waiting for

her at home wouldn't be there tonight? Or any other night? Eve remembered. You told them fast, without flourishes.

"It's regarding your husband, Mrs. Foster."

"Craig? He's still at school."

"I'm sorry to tell you, your husband's dead."

"That's a terrible thing to say to someone. That's a vicious, terrible thing to say. I want you to leave, right now. I'm going to call the police—the *real* police—and have you arrested."

"Mrs. Foster, my partner and I are the real police, and we're the investigators on your husband's death. He died today at approximately twelve-thirty."

"Of course he didn't. He didn't. He was at school. That's his lunch break, and he sent me an e-mail just after noon. I packed his lunch this morning. He's at school, at the Monday faculty meeting right now. And he's fine."

Her breath began to come quick, choppy. Her color was fading even as she fumbled a hand behind to brace the table as her legs went out.

"You should sit down, Mrs. Foster," Peabody said gently. "We're very sorry for your loss."

"No. No. Was there a bomb? Was there a bomb at school? Oh, my God. Is he hurt? Is Craig hurt?"

"He died," Eve said flatly. "I'm very sorry."

"But he . . . But he . . . You could make a mistake. You must have. I should call him. You'll see. I should call him. But he's in his Monday meeting. He's not allowed to have the 'link on when he's in his Monday meeting. We'll go there." She pushed away from the brace of the table, swayed. "We'll go to the school and to Craig. I need my coat. I'll just get my coat."

She looked around, dazed. "Silly, so silly. I couldn't remember where I was for a minute. I need . . . what is it?"

"Sit down, Mrs. Foster."

“No, we have to go. To the school. We have to—” She jumped at the sound of a knock. A blonde in power red stepped in.

“I’d like to know what’s going on here. Lissette?”

“Elizabeth.” Lissette wore the dull look of sleepwalkers, and survivors. “Am I late for the meeting?”

“Peabody.” Eve nodded toward Lissette, then moved to the blonde. “Who are you?”

“I’m Elizabeth Blackburn, and who the hell are you?”

“Dallas, Lieutenant, NYPSD. I’ve just informed Mrs. Foster that her husband’s dead.”

“He’s . . . what? Craig. Oh, sweet Jesus. Lissy.”

Perhaps it was the pet name, or the tone of grief in it, but as Elizabeth started across the room, Lissette simply slid to the floor. Elizabeth went down on her knees, gathered Lissette up.

“Craig. My Craig.”

“I’m sorry. Lissy, Lissy, I’m so sorry. Was there an accident?” she demanded of Eve.

“We’ll need to speak with Ms. Foster about the circumstances.”

“All right, all right. My office is to the right, end of the corridor. I’ll bring her there to you as soon as she’s able. She needs a few minutes, for God’s sake. Just wait in my office.”

They left Lissette in the arms of her boss. There were a number of curious looks from offices and cubes, but no comment until they reached the corner office at the end of the hall. At that point a little brunette popped out like a jack-in-the-box.

“Excuse me! That’s Ms. Blackburn’s office.”

“Where she just asked us to wait.” Eve yanked out her badge. “Go back to work.”

Inside was a glossy workstation, a cushy sofa, and two pretty chairs. A fairly stunning flower arrangement stood on the table under the south-facing window.

“If she faked that reaction,” Peabody began, “she’s got major talent.”

“Not so hard to fake if you practice. But yeah, it seemed genuine. Go on out before they get here, have someone show you her cube. I want to know what she has in there.”

“On that one.”

Eve wandered to the windows, pausing long enough to note what Lissette’s boss kept on her desk. A framed photograph of a girl somewhere in her blossoming teens, a loaded disc file, a pile of memo cubes arranged in a pyramid, and a file that revealed artwork for what was likely a disc cover when Eve flipped it open.

Outside the windows, snow continued to fall on the city in thin, slick flakes. An airtram chugged through it holding a clutch of miserable passengers.

Personally, she thought, she’d stick with the vicious traffic on the slick streets below.

She turned as Peabody stepped back in.

“Nothing much, and not a lot of room for it. Files, memos, notes on current work. She’s got a wedding picture of her and the vic in a really nice frame. I’m betting wedding present. Some snaps of him, or them, pinned to the cube walls. Oh, and a little file of ads and pictures from decorating magazines. That’s about it.”

“All right. We’ll give her another minute, then we’ll take this back in the conference room. We’ll swing by the morgue next. I want to know exactly what killed Craig Foster.”

It didn’t take a minute. Seconds later Lissette came in, leaning heavily on Elizabeth Blackburn.

“You’re just going to sit,” Elizabeth told her. “And I’m going to sit with you. I gave her a soother,” she said to Eve, then jutted her chin pugnaciously before Eve could speak. “And don’t even think about starting on me about it. She needed something. It’s mild, and won’t keep her from talking to you.”

“You her boss or her legal rep?”

"I'm whatever she needs me to be right now."

"Are you sure?" Lissette's voice was cracked and raw, and carried the awful pain of fading hope. "Are you absolutely sure there's no mistake? That it's Craig?"

Knowing her strengths, Peabody took point. She moved to the couch where Lissette sat with Elizabeth. "I'm very sorry. There's no mistake."

"But . . . He wasn't sick. We had full medicals before we got married. He was healthy. People don't just . . . Did someone hurt him? Was there an accident at the school?"

"We need to find out why and how this happened. We have to ask you questions. You can help us find out."

"I want to help. I want to know. I love him."

"Let's start with this morning. You said you packed his lunch."

"I did. I always do." Her eyes fluttered, widened as she shot a hand out to grip Peabody's arm. "Was something wrong with the sandwich? He liked that awful processed poultry substitute. Did it make him sick? Oh, my God."

"We don't know that, Mrs. Foster. Did anyone come to your apartment today, before your husband left for work?"

"No. He leaves so early. He likes to use the fitness center at the school. He takes good care of himself. He does. We do. Elizabeth."

"You're doing fine. How much more of this?" Elizabeth demanded.

"Was your husband having problems with anyone at the school?" Eve asked.

"Craig? No. He loved it there."

"How about prior relationships? Did either one of you have trouble with a former relationship?"

"We were together two years before we got married. You know how you meet someone, and it's just it? Your whole life is there, that minute. That's what it was like for us."

Eve stepped forward, then sat so her eyes were level with Lissette's.

“If you want to help, you need to be straight with me. Absolutely straight. Did he gamble?”

“He wouldn’t even buy a lottery ticket. He was careful with money.”

“Did he use illegals?”

She bit her lip. “Um, we did a little zoner in college.” Her gaze slid toward Elizabeth’s.

“Who didn’t?” Elizabeth patted her arm.

“Recently?”

“No.” Lissette shook her head at Eve’s question. “Absolutely not. He could be dismissed for any illegals use. Plus, he really feels strongly about setting examples for his students.”

“Were you having financial problems?”

“Nothing serious. I mean, we had to juggle a little sometimes, especially since Craig wants to save. Sometimes I spend more than I should, but he’s so careful it balances out. He saves for things. Important things. He . . . he took tutoring work last year for extra money. Then he used it to bring my mother to New York for Christmas. He knew how much it would mean to me, so he worked extra and he bought my mother a shuttle ticket, and paid for her hotel because we don’t have room. He did that for me. No one’s ever going to love me like that again. No one could. Not ever in my life.”

Because the tears started again, Eve rose. “I’m sorry for your loss, and appreciate your cooperation at this difficult time.” Crappy words, she thought. And the only words. “Is there anyone you’d like us to contact for you?”

“No. No. Oh, God, Craig’s parents. I have to tell them. How do I tell them?”

“We can take care of that for you.”

“No, I have to. I’m Craig’s wife. I have to do this.” She got shakily to her feet. “I have to see him. I don’t know where he is.”

“He’s with the medical examiner now. I’ll contact you as soon as you’re cleared for that. Do you have someone who can go with you?”

“I’ll go with her. No, Lissy, I’ll go with you,” Elizabeth insisted when Lissette teared up again and shook her head. “You just sit for a minute while I walk Lieutenant Dallas and Detective Peabody out. Sit right here, I’ll just be a minute.”

She moved quickly, and purposefully, not stopping until they’d reached an intersection in the maze. “How was Craig murdered?”

“I didn’t say he was.”

Elizabeth turned, looked dead into Eve’s eyes. “I know who you are. I keep up with who’s who in New York. Lieutenant Eve Dallas, Homicide.”

“I don’t have any information to give you at this time. Mr. Foster’s death is under investigation.”

“That’s bullshit. Just bullshit. That girl just lost the love of her life. Like that!” Elizabeth snapped her fingers. “She needs answers.”

“She’ll have them, as soon as I do. How well did you know him?”

“I met him a number of times. He’d come in every now and then, and Lissy would bring him to company parties and events. Sweet boy. Dopey in love. Bright. He struck me as bright, like Lissy is. Two bright young people getting started with their life, their careers. You’re bright, too, from everything I’ve read, heard, or seen of you. You get those answers for Lissy. You get her that much to hold on to.”

“That’s the idea.”