

# Ritual in Death

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One owes respect to the living; to the dead one owes only the truth.

—VOLTAIRE

The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.

—JOSEPH CONRAD



# One

Her feet were killing her. And made her imagine traveling back in time, hunting down whoever had invented stiletto heels, and beating the crap out of him.

What was the point of them other than throwing a woman off balance, making it next to impossible to run, and inducing foot cramps?

The question occupied Eve's mind as she tuned out the bulk of the party conversation buzzing around her like a hive of drunk hornets. What if one of the guests at this shindig went off and . . . stabbed somebody in the eye with a shrimp fork, for instance? How was she supposed to take him down dressed like this? And a foot pursuit in these stilts? Forget about it.

It was a hell of a getup for a cop, to her way of thinking. The flimsy excuse for a dress left most of her exposed. And she glittered. You couldn't have diamonds hanging all over you and blend.

Of course, you couldn't go to any sort of snazzy function with Roarke and blend.

The only advantage to the ridiculous damn shoes that she

could see was the fact that they boosted her up so that she and Roarke were eye-to-eye.

They were stupendous eyes, bold and brilliantly blue. A look from them could give her a tingle in the belly—even after nearly two years of marriage. The rest of him didn't suck either, she reflected. The black silk fall of hair framed a billion-dollar jackpot of a face. Even now, as he glanced at her that sculpted, delicious mouth curved up in a slow, secret smile.

All she had to do, Eve reminded herself, was tolerate the goddamn shoes a couple more hours, then she'd have that mouth—and the rest of the package—to herself. Screaming arches were probably a small price to pay.

“Darling.” Roarke took a glass of champagne from the waiter passing them, and handed it to her. Since the glass he'd traded it for had still been half full, she interpreted it as a signal to tune back in.

*Okay, okay*, she thought. She was here as Roarke's spouse. It wasn't as if he demanded she gear up like this and attend excruciatingly boring parties every day of the week. He was smooth about it—and as the man had more money than God and nearly as much power and position—the least she could do was play the part when they were doing the public couple thing.

Their hostess, one Maxia Carlyle, glided over in some kind of floaty number. The wealthy socialite was—by her own words—kicking into New York for a few days to catch up with friends. All of whom, Eve supposed, were wandering around Maxia's expansive tri-level hotel suite gorging on canapés and sloshing down champagne.

“I haven't had a minute to talk to you.” Maxia put her hand on Roarke's arm, tipped her face to his.

They looked, Eve decided, like an ad for the rich and the gorgeous.

“And how've you been, Maxi?”

“Oh, you know how it goes.” She laughed, shrugging one perfect bare shoulder. “It's been about four years, hasn't it, since we've seen each other. Never seem to land in the same

place at the same time, so I'm especially glad you could make it tonight. And you," she added with a sparkling smile for Eve. "I was hoping I'd get the chance to meet you. Roarke's cop."

"Mostly the NYPDS considers me theirs."

"I can't even imagine it. What it must be like. Your work must be so fascinating and exciting. Investigating murders and murderers."

"It has its moments."

"More than moments, I'm sure. I've seen you on screen from time to time. The Icove case in particular."

And wasn't that one going to dog her forever? Eve mused.

"I have to say you don't look anything like a police-woman." Maxia's perfect eyebrows arched as she gave Eve's dress a quick scan. "Leonardo dresses you, doesn't he?"

"No, I usually do it myself."

Roarke gave her a little elbow poke. "Eve's oldest friend is married to Leonardo. Eve often wears him."

"Mavis Freestone is your oldest friend?" Now, in addition to interest and curiosity, considerable warmth infused Maxia's face. "I love her music, but my niece is a slathering fan. I took her to one of Mavis's concerts, in London, and arranged for a backstage pass. She was so sweet with my niece, and I've been the undisputed champion of aunts ever since."

She laughed, touched Eve's arm. "You *do* have a fascinating life. Married to Roarke, friends with Mavis and Leonardo, and chasing killers. I suppose it's mostly head work, isn't it? Studying evidence, looking for clues. People like me glamorize it, think about policework the way it is on screen and at the vids. All danger and action, chasing madmen down dark alleys and firing off your weapon, when in reality it's brain and paperwork."

"Yeah." Eve controlled the urge to smirk. "That's about it."

"Being married to Roarke's action enough. Are you still dangerous?" Maxia asked him.

"Domesticated." He lifted Eve's hand, kissed it. "Entirely."

"I don't believe that for a minute. Oh, there's Anton. I need to snatch him away and bring him over to meet you."

Eve took a long, long drink of champagne.

“We’ll meet this Anton, mingle another twenty,” Roarke said, the faint hint of Ireland in his voice, “and slip out and away.”

Eve felt a tingle of joy, right down to her numbed toes. “Seriously?”

“I never intended to stay above an hour or so. And certainly owe you for the points I’m making by bringing a Homicide cop to the party.”

“It’s all paperwork,” Eve said dryly.

He skimmed a finger down her arm, where a knife had slashed only days before. “Yes, your work is nothing but tedium. But I have to agree with Maxi. You don’t look very coplike tonight.”

“Good thing I don’t have to chase down any psycho killers. I’d fall off these stupid shoes and embarrass myself.” She curled her toes in them—or attempted to while she flicked a hand at the short, choppy crop of brown hair she’d recently taken the scissors to herself. Old priceless diamonds dripped from her ears. “I don’t get parties like this. People standing around. Talk, talk, talk. Why do they have to get all dressed up to do that?”

“To show off.”

She thought about that over another sip of wine. “I guess that’s it. At least I don’t have to gear up like this for the shower deal for Louise. Still, another party. More talk, talk, talk.”

“It’s a ritual, after all. When a friend’s about to marry, her friends gather together, with gifts, and . . . well, I have no idea what happens then.”

“If it’s anything like mine, some of them drink till they puke, and others strip it off and dance.”

“Sorry I’ll miss it.”

“Liar.” But she grinned at him.

“Here we are!” Maxia came back, towing a portly, mustachioed man somewhere on the shady side of sixty. On his arm like a whippy vine twined a woman well shy of thirty with full, pouty lips, a bored expression, and a short red dress that covered very little of her expansive breasts.

"You simply must meet Anton and his lovely companion. It's Satin, isn't it?"

"Silk," the bored blonde corrected.

"Of course it is."

Eve caught the quick glint in Maxia's eyes and understood she'd *mistaken* the name deliberately. And liked her better for it.

"Actually we met a few years ago." Anton stuck out a wide, pudgy hand. "At Wimbledon."

"It's nice to see you again. My wife, Eve."

"Yes, the American cop. A pleasure, Detective."

"Lieutenant." Eve glanced down at Silk's sky-high heels. Just heels, she noted, with the feet arched into them bare on top. "I heard about those." She pointed. "People are actually wearing invisible shoes."

"They're not available to the public for another three weeks." Silk tossed her long mane of hair. "Sookie pulled some strings." She plastered herself against Anton/Sookie.

"Anton's produced several films about crime and police and so on," Maxia commented. "So I thought he'd enjoy meeting one of New York's Finest."

"British-style procedurals." Anton patted Silk's hand as she tugged at him like a petulant child. "What we like to think of as crackling whodunits—with plenty of sex and violence," he added with a laugh. "And a slight connection with reality, as you'd know. I have been thinking about using an American setting, so I—"

"I don't see why a girl would want to be a cop." Silk frowned at Eve. "It's not very feminine."

"Really? It's funny because I don't see why a *girl* would want to be a bimbo—"

"What is it you do?" Roarke cut Eve off, smoothly—giving her only the slightest pinch on the ass.

"I'm an actress. I just finished shooting a major role in Sookie's next vid."

"Victim, right?" Eve asked.

"I get to die dramatically. It's going to make me a star, isn't it, Sookie?"

“Absolutely, sweetheart.”

“I want to go. There’s nothing happening here. I want to go dancing, go some place with some *action*.” She tugged hard enough to pull Anton back a few steps.

“He used to be such a sensible man,” Maxia murmured.

“Guys of a certain age are especially vulnerable to bimboitis.”

Maxia laughed. “I’m so glad I like you. I wish I wasn’t due in Prague in a couple of days so I could get to know you better. I should mingle, make sure everyone isn’t as bored as Linen over there.”

“I think that’s Polyester. Definitely manmade fibers.”

Laughing again, Maxia shook her head. “Yes, I really like you. And you.” She rose to her toes to kiss Roarke’s cheek. “You look awfully happy.”

“I am. And awfully glad to see you again, Maxi.”

As Maxia started to turn, Silk’s strident voice whined out. “But I want to go *now*. I want to have *fun*. This party is *dead*.”

Someone screamed. Something crashed. As people stumbled back, as some turned, shoving through small packs of others, Eve pushed forward.

The man staggered like a drunk, and wore nothing but spatters and smears of blood. The knife clutched in his hand gleamed with it.

A woman in his path fainted, and managed to take out a waiter holding a full tray of canapés with her. As shrimp balls and quail eggs rained, Silk shrieked, turned, and in a sprint for the terrace bowled over guests like pins in an alley.

Eve flipped open the next-to-useless bag she carried, tossed it to Roarke as she pulled out her weapon.

“Drop it. Drop it now.” She sized him up quickly. About five feet, ten inches, roughly one-sixty-five. Caucasian, brown and brown. And the eyes were glazed and glassy. Shock or drugs—maybe both.

“Drop it,” she repeated when he took another staggering step forward. “Or I drop you.”

“What?” His gaze skidded around the room. “What? What is it?”

She considered and rejected just stunning him in a matter of seconds. Instead she moved to him, gripped the wrist of his knife hand, twisted. "Drop the goddamn knife."

His eyes stared into hers as his fingers went limp. She heard the knife hit the floor. "Nobody touch it. Stay back. I'm the police, do you get that? I'm a cop. What are you on?"

"I don't know. I don't know. The police? Can you help me? I think I killed someone. Can you help me?"

"Yeah. You bet. Roarke, I need a field kit ASAP, and for you to call this in. I need everyone else upstairs for now. I need you people to clear this room until the situation is contained. Move it!" she snapped when people stood, gaping. "And somebody check on that woman lying in the shrimp balls over there."

Roarke stepped up beside her. "I've sent one of the hotel staff down to the garage to get the field kit out of the boot of the car," he told her. "I've notified your Dispatch."

"Thanks." She stood where she was as the naked party crasher sat on the floor and began to shudder. "Just remember, you're the one who wanted to come tonight."

With a nod, Roarke planted a foot on the hilt of the knife to secure it. "No one to blame but myself."

"Can you get my recorder out of that stupid purse?"

"You brought a recorder?"

"If you need the weapon, you're going to need the recorder."

When he handed it to her, Eve pinned it to the frothy material over her breasts, engaged it. After reciting the basics, she crouched down. "Who do you think you killed?"

"I don't know."

"What's your name?"

"It's . . ." He lifted a blood-smeared hand, rubbed it over his face. "I can't think. I can't remember. I can't think."

"Tell me what you took."

"Took?"

"Drugs. Illegals."

"I . . . I don't do illegals. Do I? There's so much blood." He lifted his hands, stared at them. "Do you see all this blood?"

“Yeah.” She looked up at Roarke. “It’s fresh. I’m going to need to do a room-to-room, starting with this floor. He couldn’t have walked around for long like this. We start with this floor.”

“I can arrange that. Do you want security to start on that, or sit on him while you do the room-to-room?”

“Sit on him. I don’t want them to talk to him, touch him. What’s that room over there?”

“It would be a maid’s room.”

“That’ll do.”

“Eve,” Roarke said as she straightened. “I don’t see any wounds on him. If that blood’s someone else’s—that much blood—they can’t possibly still be alive.”

“No, but we push the room-to-room first.”

## Two

She needed to move fast. The amount of blood on her naked guy made it doubtful she'd find anyone alive—if she found anyone at all—so she couldn't putz around. While she didn't much like leaving her suspect with hotel security, even once she'd clapped on the restraints from her field kit, she couldn't afford to wait for her uniformed backup, or her partner.

For lack of better, she set her suspect on the floor of the maid's room, ran his prints.

“Jackson Pike.” She crouched down on his level, looked into the glazed brown eyes. “Jack?”

“What?”

“What happened, Jack?”

“I don't . . .” He looked around the room, dazed and stoned. “I don't . . .” Then he moaned in pain and clutched his head.

“Uniformed officers are on their way,” she said to the pair from security as she straightened. “I want him exactly where I've left him, and those people upstairs contained until I get back. Nobody comes in except NYPSP officials. Nobody goes out. Let's move,” she said to Roarke.

“Guy’s a doctor,” she continued as they started out the door. “Thirty-three years old. Single.”

“He didn’t walk in off the street like that.”

“No. Your hotel. Find out if a Jackson Pike, or anyone with a variation of that name’s registered. How’s this floor set up?”

Roarke pulled out his ’link as he gestured. “Four triplexes, one on each corner. One minute.”

While he spoke to the hotel manager, Eve turned left. “Well, he left a trail. That’s handy.” Moving quickly, she followed bloody footprints over the lush carpet.

“No Jackson Pike, or any Pikes for that matter,” Roarke told her. “There’s a Jackson, Carl, on thirty-two. They’re checking. On this floor Maxia has 600. Six-oh-two is occupied by Domingo Fellini—actor—I saw him at the party.”

“Pike didn’t come from there, trail’s down this way.” She picked up the pace as they started down the long corridor. “It’s the sixtieth floor. Why isn’t it 6002?”

“The sixth floor is the health club, the pool, and so on. No guest rooms. The triplexes cater to those who can afford the freight, and we bill them as penthouses, or apartments. So it’s Suite 600. Perception.”

“Yeah, your perception’s pretty screwed with all this blood on your carpet. Anyone in 604?”

“Not tonight.”

“Empty suite’s a nice spot for bloody murder, but the trail heads off.” She kept moving, her weapon in her hand, her eyes scanning “Does every suite have the private elevator like Suite 600?”

“They do, yes. Those elevators in the center of the floor are also private, in that you need a key card or clearance for the trip up.”

Emergency exits, all four corners, she noted, via stairs. But Jackson Pike hadn’t used them. His trail led straight to the carved double doors of Suite 606.

Eve saw the faint smear of blood over the ornate zero.

Suite 666, she thought. Wasn’t that just perfect?

She signaled for Roarke to stay back, then tried the knob.

“Locked. I don’t have my master.”

“Lucky for you, you have me.” He drew a slim tool out of his pocket.

“Handy, but have you ever considered how a cop’s supposed to explain—should it come up—why her husband’s got burglary tools in his pockets?”

“For bloody emergencies?” He straightened. “Lock’s off.”

“I don’t suppose you’re carrying.”

He flicked her a look, his eyes very cool. “While I didn’t think it necessary to bring a weapon to a cocktail party, I got this from security.” He drew out a stunner. “Civilian issue. Perfectly legal.”

“Hmm. On three.”

It wasn’t their first time through a door. She went low, he went high into a large living area lit by hundreds of candles. In the flickering light blood gleamed as it pooled over the black pentagram drawn on the polished marble floor.

A body floated on that pool, the arms and legs spread to form an X at the center of the sign.

Gone, Eve thought, bled out. Throat slashed, multiple body wounds. She shook her head at Roarke, gestured to the left.

She moved right, in a suite the mirror image of Maxia’s. Sweeping her weapon, she cleared a dining room, a short hallway, a kitchen, a powder room, making the circle that brought her back to Roarke.

“Bed and bath clear, this level,” he told her. “Both were used. There’s considerable blood—smears not spatters. Hers, I expect.”

He wasn’t a cop, she mused, but he could think like one. “We’re going up.” She did a chin point toward the elevator and tried to ignore the stench—not just death, but a kind of burning on the air. “Can you block that? Shut it down?”

Saying nothing, he walked to it, took out his tool again. While he worked, Eve circled the pentagram to clear the terrace.

“Done.”

“What’s the layout on the second floor?”

“Bed and bath, small sitting room to the left. Master

suite—living area, powder room, dressing area, bed and bath to the right.”

“I’ll take the right.”

The place felt empty, she thought. It felt dead. The metallic reek of the blood, the sickly sweet overlay of death mixed with candle wax smeared the air. And something more, that burning and a kind of . . . pulsing, she thought. Spent energy, the shadows of it still beating.

Together they cleared the second level, then the third.

She found evidence of sexual frenzy, of food, of drink, of murder. “The sweepers are going to be hours in here, if not days.”

Roarke studied the glasses, plates, half-eaten food. “What kind of people do murder, and leave so much of themselves behind?”

“The kind who think they’re beyond or above the law. The worst kind. I need to seal this place off, all three levels, until crime scene gets here. Who was registered in this suite?”

“The Asant Group.” On the steps, he stared down at the body posed on the pentagram. “Jumble the letters, and you’ve got—”

“Satan. God, I hate this kind of shit. People want to worship the devil, be my guest. Hell, they can have horns surgically implanted on their forehead. But then they’ve just got to slice somebody up for their human sacrifice and drag me into it.”

“Damned cheeky of them.”

“I’ll say.”

“Naked Jack didn’t do this on his own.”

“Nope. Let’s go see if his memory’s a little clearer.”

The uniforms had taken over. Eve directed them to take names and contact info from the guests, then clear them out.

She sat on the floor with Jackson. “I need a sample of the blood you’re wearing, Jack.”

“There’s so much of it.” His body jerked every few seconds, as if in surprise. “It’s not mine.”

“No.” She took several samples—face, arms, chest, back, feet. “What were you doing in 606?”

“What?”

“Suite 606. You were in there.”

“I don’t know. Was I?”

“Who’s the woman?”

“There were a lot of women, weren’t there?” Again he shuddered in pain. “Were you there? Do you know what happened?”

“Look at me, goddamn it.” Her voice was like a slap, shocked him back to her. “There’s a woman in 606. Her throat’s slashed.”

“Did I do it? Did I hurt somebody?” He pressed his forehead to his knees. “My head. My head. Somebody’s screaming in my head.”

“Do you belong to the Asant Group?”

“I don’t know. What is it? I don’t know. Who are you? What’s happening?”

With a shake of her head, Eve rose as the med-techs she’d ordered stepped in. “I want him examined. I want a blood sample. I need to know what he’s on. When you’re done, he’ll be transported to Cop Central.”

“Whose blood is it?”

“You’re too late for her.” She walked back into the living area to leave them to it just as her partner came in the main door.

Peabody’s hair was pulled back in a stubby little tail that left her square face unframed and seemed to enlarge her brown eyes. She wore baggy dark pants and a white tee with a red jacket tossed over it. She carried a field kit.

“Who died?”

“An as yet unidentified female. Prime suspect is in there.” Eve jerked her head. “Naked and covered with what is most likely her blood.”

“Wow. Must’ve been a hell of a party.”

“It happened on the other side. Let’s go work the scene.”

Outside the doors of 606 they coated hands and feet with Seal-It while Eve gave Peabody the rundown.

“He just walked into the cocktail party? And doesn’t remember anything?”

“Yes, and so it seems. He doesn’t come off as faking it.

Both pupils are big as the moon. He's disoriented, motor skills are off, and he appears to have one major headache."

"Stoned?"

"Be my first guess, but we'll see what the MTs have to say about it." Eve unsealed the door, and now used the key Roarke had acquired for her.

When she stepped in, the sturdy Peabody blanched. "Man. Oh crap." She bent over at the waist, pressed her hands to her thighs and took long, slow breaths.

"Don't you boot on my crime scene."

"Just need a minute. Okay." She kept breathing. "Okay. Black magic. Bad juju."

"Don't start that shit. We've got a bunch of assholes who had an orgy, topped it off with ritual murder using Satan as an excuse. Used the private elevator," Eve added, gesturing toward it, "most likely, coming and going. We'll want the security discs for that. Cleaned up after they did her. Evidence of that in the bathrooms, of which there are six in this place. Beds show signs of being used, and food and drink were consumed. Since I doubt the pentagram is part of the room's original decor, somebody drew it on the floor. A question might be 'Why?' Why use a fancy, high-dollar hotel suite for your annual satanic meeting?"

"Let's get her prints, get an ID and a time of death." Since Peabody still looked pale, Eve opted to take the body herself. "Do a run on Pike, Jackson. His prints came up with age thirty-three, and an addy on West Eighty-eighth. He's a doctor. See if he's got a sheet."

Eve stepped over to the body, doing what she could to avoid the blood. Not to preserve her shoes, but the scene. The air chilled, teased gooseflesh on her arms, and once more she felt, sensed, a pulsing.

She lifted the victim's hand to the Identi-pad, scanned the prints.

"Marsterson, Ava, age twenty-six, single. Mixed-race female with an address on Amsterdam. Employed as office manager at the West Side Health Clinic."

Eve tipped her head at the tattoo—a red and gold serpent

swallowing its own tail—that circled the left hip. “She’s got a tat on her hip, and it’s not listed on her ID. Maybe a temp, or maybe fresh.”

She took out her gauge. “TOD, twenty-two-ten. That’s nearly an hour before Pike crashed the party down the hall.” She replaced the gauge and studied the body. “The victim’s throat is deeply slashed, in what appears to be a single blow with a sharp blade, right to left, slightly downward angle. A right-handed attacker, facing. He wanted to see your face when he sliced you open. Multiple wounds, slices, stab wounds, over shoulders, torso, abdomen, legs. Varying sizes and depths. Various blades held in various hands? Victim is posed, arms and legs spread, in the center of a black pentagram drawn directly onto the floor. Bruising on the thighs. Possible rape or consensual sex, ME to determine. No defensive wounds. None. Didn’t put up a fight, Ava? Did they just take you down by slashing your throat, then have a party on you? Tox screen to determine presence of alcohol and/or drugs.”

At the knock on the door, Eve called out for Peabody.

“I got it.” Peabody hustled over, used the security peep. “It’s Crime Scene.”

In minutes the room filled with noise, movement, equipment, and the somehow cleaner smell of chemicals. When the crew from the morgue rolled in, Eve stepped away from the body.

“Marsterson, Ava. Bag and tag. Peabody, with me. Run this Asant Group,” she ordered. “We’re going in to shake what we can out of Pike.”

“There had to be at least a dozen people in there, Dallas. Twelve, fifteen people by the number of trays and the glasses. Why come here to do this? You can’t cover it up this way, and hey, party down the hall going on at the same time with a cop right there. By the way, you look totally mag. The shoes are up to wicked.”

Eve frowned down at the shoes she’d forgotten she was wearing. “Shit, shit. I’ve got to go into Central in this getup.” She’d also, she realized, forgotten Roarke.

He leaned against the wall outside Maxia's suite doing something that entertained or interested him on his PPC. And looked up as she approached.

"Sorry. I should've told you to go home."

"I assumed you'd want the code for the car since it's not one of yours. I had the garage bring it out front. Hello, Peabody."

"Hey. You guys look superior. It's really too bad the evening got screwed for you."

"It got screwed bigger for Ava Marsterson," Eve commented. "Maxia?"

"Took a soother and went to bed. I'll get myself home." He caught Eve's chin in his hand, skimmed his thumb down the dent, then kissed her. He handed her a mini memo cube. "Code's on it. Take care, Lieutenant. Good night, Peabody."

Peabody watched him walk away. "Boy, sometimes you just want to slurp him up without a straw." She wheeled her eyes to Eve. "Did I say that out loud?"