

# 1

AFTER A LONG, TEDIOUS DAY—THE FIRST HALF SPENT IN court, the second half with paperwork—Lieutenant Eve Dallas prepared to shut it all down.

At the moment all she wanted out of life was a quiet evening with her husband, her cat, and a glass—or two—of wine. Maybe a vid, she thought as she grabbed her coat, if Roarke hadn't brought too much work home.

Tonight—do the happy-time boogie—she was bringing home none of her own.

She could extend that wish list, she decided as she dug out the scarf her partner had made her for Christmas. Maybe a swim, and pool sex. She figured no matter how many deals Roarke needed to wheel, he could always be talked into pool sex.

She found the silly snowflake cap in another pocket of her long leather coat. Since the sky was heaving down ice, she tugged it on. She'd sent her partner home, had a couple of detectives out in the cold, working a hot. They'd contact her if they needed her.

She reminded herself she had another detective, newly minted—whose induction ceremony was slated for the next morning.

But right now, on a particularly ugly January evening, she had nothing on her plate.

Spaghetti and meatballs, she decided. *That's* what she wanted on her plate. Maybe she'd beat Roarke home, and actually put that together for both of them. With wine, a couple candles. Right down in the pool area—no, she corrected as she started out. Maybe at the dining room table, like grown-ups, with a fire going.

She could program a couple of salads, use a couple of his half a zillion fancy plates.

And while the ice snapped and crackled outside, they'd—  
“Eve.”

She turned, spotted Mira—the department's shrink and top profiler—all but leaping off a glide and rushing toward her, pale blue coat flying open over her deep pink suit.

“You're still here. Thank God.”

“Just leaving. What's the deal? What's wrong?”

“I'm not sure. I . . . Dennis—”

Instinctively Eve reached up to touch the snowflake hat, one Dennis Mira had snugged down on her head in his kind way on a snowy day in the last weeks of 2060.

“Is he hurt?”

“I don't think so.” The normally unflappable Mira linked her fingers together to keep them still. “He wasn't clear, he was upset. His cousin—he said his cousin's hurt, and now is missing. He asked for you, specifically. I'm sorry to spring this on you, but—”

“Don't worry about it. Is he home—at your place?” She had already turned away, called for the elevator.

“No, he's at his grandparents'—what was their home—in SoHo.”

“You're with me.” She steered Mira into the elevator, crowded

with cops going off shift. “I’ll make sure you both get home. Who’s his cousin?”

“Ah, Edward. Edward Mira. Former Senator Edward Mira.”

“Didn’t vote for him.”

“Neither did I. I need a moment to gather my thoughts, and I want to let him know we’re coming.”

As Mira took out her ’link, Eve organized her own thoughts.

She didn’t know or care much about politics, but she had a vague image of Senator Edward Mira. She’d never have put the bombastic, hard-line senator—sharp black eyebrows, close cropped black hair, hard and handsome face—on the same family tree as the sweet, slightly fuddled Dennis Mira.

But family made strange bedfellows.

Or was that politics?

Didn’t matter.

When they reached her level in the garage, she pointed toward her slot, strode to the unremarkable-looking DLE her husband had designed for her. Mira hurried after her, hampered by spike-heeled boots and shorter legs.

Eve moved fast—sturdy boots and long legs—slid behind the wheel, a tall, leanly built woman with choppy brown hair currently under a watch cap with a sparkling snowflake emblem she, cop to the bone, wore because it had been an impromptu gift given by a man she had a helpless, harmless crush on.

“Address?” she asked when Mira, in her elegant winter coat and fashionable boots, got in beside her.

Eve plugged the address into the computer, pulled out of the slot. And bulleted out of the garage, hitting lights and siren.

“Oh, you don’t have to . . . Thank you,” Mira said when Eve merely flicked her a glance. “Thank you. He says he’s fine, not to worry about him, but . . .”

“You are.”

The DLE looked like your poky uncle’s economy vehicle—and drove like a rocket. Eve swerved around vehicles whose drivers considered the sirens a casual suggestion. She hit vertical to leapfrog over others until Mira simply closed her eyes and hung on.

“Fill me in. Do you know why they were at the grandparents’ house—who else would be there?”

“Their grandmother died about four years ago, and Bradley—Dennis’s grandfather—just seemed to fade away. He lived about a year after her death, putting his affairs in order. Though knowing him, most of them already were. He left the house in equal shares to Dennis and Edward—the two oldest grandsons. That maxibus—”

Eve whipped the wheel, sent the DLE up. And took a corner as if in pursuit of a mass murderer. “Is behind us. Keep going.”

“I can tell you Dennis and Edward have been at odds over the house. Dennis wants to keep it in the family, per Bradley’s wishes. Edward wants to sell it.”

“He can’t sell it, I take it, unless Mr. Mira signs off.”

“That’s my understanding. I don’t know why Dennis came down here today—he had a full day at the university, as one of his colleagues is ill and he’s filling in. I should have asked him.”

“It’s okay.” Eve double-parked, turning the quiet, tree-lined street into a battlefield of blasting horns. Ignoring them, she flipped up her On Duty light. “We’ll ask him now.”

But Mira was already out of the car, running in those treacherous heels across the slick sidewalk. Cursing, Eve bolted after her, grabbed her arm.

“You run in those things, I’m going to end up driving you to the ER. Nice place.” She let Mira go as they went through the gate and onto cleared ground. “In this neighborhood, it’s probably worth, what, five or six million?”

“I imagine. Dennis would know.”

“He would?”

Mira managed a smile as she hurried up the steps. “It’s important. He knows what’s important. I don’t remember the code.” She pressed the buzzer, used the knocker.

When Dennis, disheveled gray hair, baggy pine-colored cardigan, opened the door, Mira grabbed his hands. “Dennis! You *are* hurt. Why didn’t you tell me?” She took his chin, turned his head to study the raw bruise on his temple. “You angled this away so I wouldn’t see it on the link.”

“Now, Charlie. I’m all right. I didn’t want to upset you. Come in out of the cold now, both of you. Eve, thank you for coming. I’m worried about Edward. I’ve been all through the house. He’s just not here.”

“But he was?” Eve prompted.

“Oh, yes. In the study. He was hurt. A black eye, and his mouth was bleeding. I should show you the study.”

When he turned, Mira let out a sound as much of frustration as distress. “Dennis, your head’s bleeding.” He hissed when she reached up to feel the knot. “You come in the living room and sit down, right now.”

“Charlie, Edward—”

“You leave Edward to Eve,” she said, pulling him into a big space that had either been decorated in a severely minimalist style, or several pieces of furniture had been removed. What remained appeared comfortably used and cheerful.

Mira took off her coat, tossed it carelessly aside, then dug into her enormous purse.

Eve got her first real clue why so many women carried handbags the size of water buffalos when Mira pulled a first aid kit out of hers.

“I’m going to clean up these lacerations, and ask Eve to drop us off at the nearest emergency room so you can have this X-rayed.”

“Now, sweetie.” He hissed again when Mira dabbed at the wound with an alcohol wipe, but managed to reach back and pat her leg. “I don’t need X-rays or other doctors when I have you. I just have a bump on the head. I’m as lucid as I ever get.”

Eve caught his smile, sly and sweet, when Mira laughed at that.

“No double vision, no dizziness or nausea,” he assured her. “Maybe a little headache.”

“If, after we get home and I give you a thorough exam—”

This time he turned around, wiggled his eyebrows, and grinned in a way that had Eve swallowing an embarrassed laugh of her own.

“Dennis.” Mira sighed, and cupping his face in her hands, kissed him so softly, so tenderly, that Eve had to look away.

“Ah, maybe you could tell me where to find the study—where you last saw your cousin.”

“I’ll take you back.”

“You’re going to sit right here and behave until I’m finished,” Mira told him. “It’s straight back, Eve, and then on the left. Lots of wood, a big desk and chair, leather-bound books on shelves.”

“I’ll find it.”

She could see where more art had been removed, more furniture—in fact, she found a room empty but for stacks of packing boxes. Yet she didn’t see a single mote of dust, and caught the light scent of lemon as if someone had crushed their blossoms with the air.

She found the study, and at a glance decided nothing—or nothing much—had been taken out of this space.

Organized, attractive with its heavy wood trim, its sturdy masculine furniture and deep tones.

Burgundy and forest, she mused, taking a long look from the doorway. Family photos in black or silver frames, polished plaques from various charitable organizations.

The desk itself still held a coffee-colored leather blotter, matching accessories, and a slick little data and communication center.

Beside the fireplace with its thick mantel stood a bar—small, old, certainly valuable. On it sat two crystal decanters, half full of amber liquid, with silver labels. Whiskey. Brandy.

She moved from the wood floor to the rug stretched on it. The softly faded pattern told her it was likely old and valuable like the bar, like the crystal, like the pocket watch on display under a glass dome.

She saw no sign of struggle, no indication anything had been stolen. But when she crouched down, examined the space before the fringe of the rug brushed over wood, she saw a few drops of blood.

She circled the room slowly, carefully, touching nothing as yet. But she began to see . . . maybe.

She started back, paused at the doorway of the living room to see Mira competently applying ointment to her husband's temple.

"Don't go in there yet," Eve said. "I'm just going out for my field kit."

"Oh, it's nasty out. Let me get that for you."

"I've got it," she said quickly when Dennis started to rise. "Just give me a minute."

She went back into the icy rain, got her field kit out of the trunk. As she went back she studied the neighboring houses, and pulled out her own 'link to send Roarke a quick text.

Got hung up. Will explain when I get home.

And considered she'd obeyed the Marriage Rules.

When she came back in, she set the kit down to take off her coat, scarf, hat. "Okay, let's take this by the numbers. Have you tried to contact your cousin?"

"Oh, yes. I did that right away. He didn't answer his 'link. I did try

him at home as well, and reached his wife. I didn't want to alarm her," Dennis added, "so I didn't mention any of this. She told me he wasn't home, and would probably be running late. She may not know about his appointment here, but if she did, she wouldn't tell me."

"Appointment?"

"Oh, I am sorry. I haven't explained any of this." He gave Mira one of his absent smiles. "I tried to reach him earlier today, to see if the two of us could just . . . sit down and discuss our differences about the house. I got an assistant who seemed a little harried at the time. Otherwise she might not have mentioned he had an appointment here with a Realtor to assess the house for sale. It . . . Well, it set me right off. He shouldn't have done that behind my back."

Eve nodded, opened her kit to take out a can of Seal-It. "Pissed you off."

"Eve," Mira began, but Dennis patted her hand.

"Truth is best, Charlie. I was very upset. He wouldn't answer his personal 'link, so when I finished my last class, I came here. Terrible traffic conditions. Something should be done."

"Yeah, I think that all the time. When did you get here, Mr. Mira?"

"Oh, I'm not at all sure. Let me see. I finished my last class . . . it must have been about four-thirty. My TA and a couple of students had questions, so that took a bit of time. Then I had to get my papers together, and it may have been five or so before I left. Then getting here." He added that sweet, vague smile, but his eyes, that dreamy green, held worry. "I couldn't really say exactly."

"Good enough," Eve told him, as clearly trying to determine the timing distressed him. "There's security on the house. Was it active?"

"It was. I have the passcode, and a swipe. My palm print is authorized."

"There's a cam."

"Yes!" The idea obviously delighted him. "Of course there is! It would show my arrival—and Edward. I never thought of it."

“Why don’t we take a look at that first? Do you know where the security station is?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll show you. Never thought of it,” he said again, shaking his head as he rose. “If I’d just looked for myself, I’d have seen Edward coming and going. You relieve my mind, Eve.”

“Mr. Mira, you were attacked.”

He stopped, blinked. “I suppose I was. That’s very upsetting. Who would have done that?”

“Let’s see if we can find out.”

He led her back, made a turn, then showed her a large, modern kitchen with some old-fashioned touches that suited the house.

It all looked . . . comfortable, and reminded her in some ways of the Miras’ house uptown.

“There are viewing stations in several rooms,” Dennis explained as he opened a door off the kitchen. “So my grandparents or the staff could see who was at the door. But this is the main hub.”

He looked at it, gave everything a vague glance. “I’m afraid I’m not very good with complex electronics.”

“Me, either.” But she walked over to where she was damn sure a component should be. “But I can tell you somebody took the whole damn deal—the drive or whatever the hell it is, the discs.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah. Who else has access to the house?”

“Besides Edward and myself? The housekeeper—her mother worked for my grandparents for decades, and she’s helped us out for several years. She would never—”

“Understood, but I’m going to want her name so I can talk to her.”

“Is it all right if I make tea?” Dr. Mira asked.

“Sure, go ahead. Mr. Mira, I want you to walk me through exactly what happened. The cab dropped you off?”

“Yes. Right out front. I left my briefcase—so careless—but the driver

called me back for it. I was angry and upset. I let myself in. It's a push-pull coming here. The memories are strong and good, but it's hard to know it's not the same, and can't be. I set my briefcase down, and I heard voices."

"More than one?" Eve prompted.

"Well . . . I think so. I expected to find Edward and the Realtor he'd engaged. I assumed they were talking. I called out to him. I didn't want to startle them. I started back, and when I got to the study, I saw him sitting in Granddad's desk chair. Black eye, the blood. He was frightened. I saw the fear, and I started forward to help him. I must have been struck from behind. It's never happened to me before, but I believe that's what happened."

"It knocked you out."

"The injuries are consistent with a strike from a heavy object, back of the skull." Mira brought Dennis a mug, wrapped his hands around it. "And with his right temple hitting the floor when he fell."

"I'm not questioning that, Dr. Mira."

"I know you're not." She sighed, then leaned into Dennis to gently kiss his bruised temple. "I know you're not."

"What did you do, Mr. Mira, when you came to?"

"I was disoriented, very confused initially. Edward wasn't there, and though we haven't been on the best of terms in a long time, he would never have left me on the floor that way. I called for him—I think—and I looked. I'm afraid I wandered around the house for a while, still a little confused, until it came to me something terrible had happened to Edward. I contacted Charlotte so she wouldn't worry, and asked her if you could come and look into it all."

He gave Eve a look with those soft, dreamy eyes that made her want to kiss his temple as Mira had. It mortified her.

"I realize now I should have simply contacted nine-one-one rather than bothering you."

“This isn’t a bother. Are you up to taking a look at the study? Seeing if anything’s missing or out of place?”

“Anything I can do.”

When they walked back, she sealed her hands, her feet. “It’s better if you don’t touch anything. You’ve already been in there, and through the house, so sealing up’s beside the point. But let’s keep it to a minimum.”

She paused at the doorway. “So your cousin was in the desk chair. Behind the desk.”

“Yes, he was—oh, not behind it. The chair was in front of the desk.” He frowned a moment. “Why would that be? But, yes, he was sitting in the chair, in front of the desk. On the rug.”

“Okay.” That jibed with her observations. “Hold it a minute.”

She took what she needed from her kit, crouched down to take a swab of the blood from the floorboards, sealed it. Then meticulously swabbed an area of the rug.

She added drops of something from a small bottle to the swab, nodded. “Blood here. Somebody cleaned it up, but you don’t get it all with a quick run of household cleaner.”

She bent down, sniffed. “You can still smell it.” She put on microgoggles, peered close. “And if you’re looking, you can see it, and the faint pattern where the chair rolled out and back, sat here with weight in it.”

“Edward’s weight.”

“Looks that way. Another minute.” She moved behind the desk, started an inch-by-inch exam of the chair.

“They missed some. Just a drop here.” She swabbed again, carefully, leaving enough for the sweepers to take their own sample. “Was he restrained, Mr. Mira?”

“I . . .” He closed his eyes. “I don’t think so. I don’t think he was. I’m sorry. I’m not at all sure. I was so shocked.”

“Okay. Black eye, bloody mouth. So someone assaulted him, put him in the chair, but out here, more in the center of the room. Scared him

enough to keep him there. A stunner maybe, a knife, a weapon anyway, or the threat of more physical violence.”

She circled the room again. “Voices. So they were talking. Wanted something from him, most likely. But before they can get it, or finish, you come in. You call out, so that gives them time to threaten him to keep it shut, to move out of sight. They don’t stun you, if they have a stunner. You stun somebody, it takes a few seconds, and maybe you see them before you go down. Bash from behind. But they don’t finish you off, or take you with them. You’re not important in this. You’re just an inconvenience. But they go to the trouble of cleaning up, putting the chair back behind the desk.

“Why?”

“It’s fascinating, the science and art of what you do.”

“What?”

“What you do,” Dennis said, “it’s a science, and an art. The observational skills are so polished, and—I think—innate. Sorry, my mind wandered.” He smiled. “You asked why. I think I might understand that. If they knew Edward, they might know me. Some people would say, as my mind will wander, I simply fell and struck my head. And imagined the rest.”

“Some people would be stupid,” Eve said, making him smile. “Anything not here that should be, Mr. Mira, or out of place?”

“We’ve kept this almost exactly as he left it. My grandfather. Some of what’s here comes to me, to my children, to others. But they were content to leave it like this for now. Everything’s here. I don’t think anything’s been taken or moved.”

“All right. You came to the doorway, saw him. You froze for a second—people do. You’re focused on your cousin, and you move forward to help him.”

She went to the doorway, paused, took a quick step in. Then scanned the shelves.

She picked up a stone bowl, brilliantly polished, frowned, set it down again. Tested the weight of an award plaque, dismissed it. Then she curled her fingers around the uplifted trunk of large glass elephant in jubilant blues and greens. Had weight, she mused, and that handy grip.

“Dr. Mira?”

Mira moved forward, and like Eve examined the elephant. “Yes, yes, the legs. They’re consistent with the wound.”

As Eve got another swab, Mira turned to Dennis. “I will never, this is an oath, never complain about your hard head again.”

“Cleaned it up, but we’ve got a little blood. Attacker steps back, side of the doorway. This is handy, heavy. You come in, *whack*, down you go. He, she, they—it’s going to be they, one to deal with Edward, one to deal with you and the cleanup. So one of them gets rug cleaner, whatever, cleans things up, gets the hard drive, the discs. And they take him, leave you. I’m going to go through the house, make sure they didn’t stuff him somewhere—sorry,” she said immediately.

“No, don’t be.”

“I’m going to have sweepers come in, go over all this. I can contact Missing Persons, expedite there.”

“Could you . . .”

“Will you take lead on this?” Understanding, Mira took Dennis’s hand. “Both of us would feel easier if you remained in charge.”

“Sure, I can clear that. Why don’t you go back and sit down, let me get things rolling.”

Eve bagged the elephant, contacted Crime Scene, ordered up some uniforms to canvass. Someone had walked in the house, most likely invited in by Edward Mira. She’d check on this Realtor. And someone had walked back out again, either carrying Edward’s body or forcing him to leave with them.

They’d need transportation.

Not a burglary, she thought, and not a straight kidnapping, or why

rough him up first? The chair in the middle of the room struck her as an interrogation.

Somebody wanted something from Edward Mira. Chances were he'd stay alive until they got it.

She went back to the living room. They'd turned on the fire, and sat together on a sofa, drinking tea.

Eve sat on the coffee table facing them, as it made a tighter connection.

"I need some information. The Realtor—name, contact?"

"I have no idea. I'm sorry. The assistant didn't mention it, and I was too upset to ask."

"Okay, I'll get that from his office. Where's his office?"

"He retired from Congress to create and head a political think tank," Mira told her. "He has an office in their headquarters, in the Chrysler Building."

"Prime real estate."

"Status is very important to Edward," Dennis said. "His organization, the Mira Institute, takes two floors, and owns a pied-à-terre in East Washington for Edward's use or when one of the other executives needs to be there."

"Need that address, too, and his home address. I'm going to talk to his wife when I leave here. How was their relationship?"

Dennis glanced at his wife, sighed.

"I'll take this. Mandy is a realist who enjoys the life she leads. She excelled on the campaign trail, continues to excel at fund-raisers and committees. The fact that Edward cheated, often? She considers that part of the whole, and not particularly important, as he's discreet. She's discreet as well, and uses the services of a licensed companion. Both their children are grown, of course, and while each play the game in public, neither have much affection for their parents or the choices their parents have made."

“The world’s made up of all manner of parts, Charlie,” Dennis murmured.

“I’m aware. My professional opinion is Mandy would do nothing to unbalance her world. She would never hurt Edward, and in her way, she’s fond of him. In his way, he’s both grateful for her contributions to his career, and proud of her standing socially.”

“He’d have enemies.”

“Oh, scores. Politically, as you’d expect.”

“And personally?”

“He can and does charm—it’s part of politics, again. He also believes himself right on whatever stand he takes, politically and personally, and that can cause friction. This house is an example,” Mira continued. “Edward decided it needed to be sold, so to him, it will be.”

“He’s wrong,” Dennis said quietly, “and it won’t be. But that’s not important right now. Someone hurt him, and there’s been no mention of ransom.” He looked at Eve now. “You haven’t mentioned ransom.”

“I’ll talk to his wife about that. Mr. Mira, I want you to know I believe everything you’ve told me. And I don’t believe, not for a second, you’d do anything to hurt your cousin. Or anyone.”

“Thank you.”

“But I have to ask what I’m going to ask, or I’m not doing my job. If I’m not doing my job, I’m not helping you.”

“I understand. You need to ask me when I saw Edward last, how things were between us. If keeping this house in the family is so important to me, I might hire someone to frighten him.”

He nodded, set his tea aside. “We saw each other over the holidays. For form, really, I’m sorry to say. Charlotte and I attended a cocktail party at his home. When was that, Charlie?”

“On the twenty-second of December. We only stayed about an hour, as Edward tried to corner Dennis about selling the house.”

“I didn’t want to argue, so we left early. He sent me an e-mail shortly

after the first of the year, outlining his reasons, again, and his plan of action.”

“You didn’t tell me that, Dennis.”

“You get so angry with him.” Dennis took Mira’s hand again. “And there was nothing new in it. I don’t like bringing that discord into our home. I answered him briefly that I didn’t agree, and intended to keep my promise to our grandfather. When he responded immediately, I knew he was very angry. He would usually wait as if too busy to deal with such matters. But he responded right away, and said he would give me time to be reasonable, and warned he would be forced to take legal action if I insisted on clinging to sentiment. And . . . he claimed there had been no promise, that I—as I tend to do—had mixed things up.”

“The hell with him!”

“Charlie—”

“The hell with him, that coldhearted bastard. I mean it, Dennis!” Outraged fury deepened her color, flashed in her eyes. “If you want to look at someone who’d have wanted to hurt him, look right here.”

“Dr. Mira,” Eve said coolly, “cut it out. I’m going to have EDD access those e-mails. That was your last communication?”

“Yes, it was. I didn’t respond. It was a cruel thing to say, and it was a lie. We made a promise.” Eve saw his baffled sorrow as clearly as Mira’s outraged fury. “I didn’t contact him again until today, but he didn’t answer.”

“All right.” She couldn’t help herself, and touched a hand to his knee. “You don’t mix up anything that’s important. I’ll find the answers to all this. I promise.”

She rose, grateful when the bell rang. “That’s going to be for me. I’m going to put the sweepers on the study first, and I’m going through the house personally. I’ve got uniforms who’ll knock on doors, see if any of the neighbors saw anything. I’m going to have a uniform take you home.”

She pulled out her 'link. "Would you put all the names and contact data I asked for on here?"

"Charlie should. I'm terrible with electronics."

"So am I." She passed her 'link to Mira. "It's going to be okay."

Dennis rose. "You're such a smart woman. Such a good girl," he added to her baffled surprise. Then he kissed her cheek, sweetly, leaving a faint tickle from the stubble he'd probably missed when shaving. "Thank you."

Eve felt that tickle work its way into her heart as she went to answer the door.