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J. D. ROBB

PASSIONS

IN

DEATH



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J. D. Robb



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My fault, my failure, is not in the passions I have,
but in my lack of control of them.

—Jack Kerouac

The language of Friendship
is not words, but meanings.

—Henry David Thoreau

Chapter One

The party was a killer!

Erin Albright paused a moment in the madness to take it all in. The slash and crash of music designed to get your ass moving had those asses crowding the dance floor. Lights shifting from steamy red to electric blue to hot pink made it all so frigging sexy!

The bartender's generous pours on tonight's signature drink, Girl Power, didn't hurt a thing.

They'd chosen a Monday night at the Down and Dirty because they'd wanted the heat, the sexy, and an off night so they'd have plenty of room for the couple dozen friends they'd wanted to join in the celebration.

Plus, Monday nights at the D&D meant holo-bands, so people could jump on the stage and join right in.

And when they did, it added to the fun.

Shauna jumped up onstage—again—and someone made the mistake of giving her a mic. Shauna had a voice like a cat in heat, and she used it to screech out the lyrics to “Bang Me Hard.”

God, could she possibly be more adorable?

And in five days, only five more days, Erin thought, on August 20, 2061, she'll be my wife, and I'll be hers.

Together forever.

At five-two, Shauna Hunnicut made Erin think of a sexy fairy, one with a wild tangle of red hair and big, beautiful blue eyes. And that smile? Another killer.

The hair had caught her eye that first time, and the eyes had dazzled. But oh, that smile. It had simply done her in from the get-go.

She'd walked into Fancy Feet for a pair of shoes, and walked out completely infatuated. She, the no-strings, live-life-for-today street artist had fallen, and hard, for the shoe store manager.

Who'd have thought that fifteen months, three weeks, and two days later, they'd promise each other lifetimes?

She couldn't wait to make that promise, to hear Shauna make it to her.

Shauna's friend Becca—her friend, too, now—grabbed Erin's hand.

“Gotta shake it, baby!”

She shook it with Becca on the dance floor, and like everyone else, joined in on the chorus.

“Bang me, bang me harder. Oh! Bang me, bang me harder. Oh. Oh. Oh!”

“This is so much fun!” Becca shouted, and shoved her swing of strawberry blond—now sweaty—hair back from her pretty face. “Why haven't I ever been here before?”

“Because it’s a sex club and you’re an upstanding young professional and executive at a stuffy Madison Avenue marketing firm?”

“Junior executive at a stuffy Madison Avenue marketing firm.” Becca executed a spin. “Woo! And I might not be so upstanding after tonight! You and Shauna have to get married more often!”

“One and done for me.” She looked back as Shauna wound up for the finish. “God, isn’t she cute? Is anybody more adorable than my soon-to-be wife?”

“Loved her for years—in a straight-girl kind of way. I’m so happy for her. For you, too!” A little bit drunk, and sweaty with it, Becca wrapped her arms around Erin.

Cheers erupted. Erin added her own as Shauna threw her hands in the air.

“I’m going to go get my girl before she decides to do an encore.”

Waving her own hands in the air, Erin wove her way through bodies to the stage. “Come down and dance with me, you sexy thing!”

“Anytime, anywhere.” Face glowing, Shauna dropped down to her butt, then scooted the rest of the way off the stage. “This is so much fun!”

In her tiny blue dress and mile-high heels, she wrapped around Erin.

“You have the best ideas.”

“My best idea ever was deciding to try on those wild pink shoes I saw in the window. Pink shoes led me to you. I love you, baby.”

“I’m the luckiest woman in this club, in this city, possibly the world. Because I have you.”

Swaying to the music, wrapped tight, they kissed. Soft, sweet, even as music boomed out a frantic beat.

Who knew, Erin thought again. Who knew she’d find the woman of her dreams—dreams she hadn’t thought to dream? A woman who’d open her life to love, to plans, to the future.

Everything before Shauna had been the now. Always just the right now, forget tomorrow.

Now she loved, and wanted thousands of tomorrows.

So they danced, then danced some more as a couple, in groups. More cheers blasted as the next holo-band stripped down to G-strings. Becca rushed the stage, stripped off her short, slinky dress, and danced.

More cheers.

“We’ve corrupted her.” Eyes full of delight, Shauna laughed. “She was the poster girl of straitlaced in high school. A complete doof. Now she’s drunk and dancing in her underwear in a sex club.”

“It’s pretty underwear.”

On another laugh, Shauna gave Erin another kiss. “Buy me a drink, gorgeous.”

“You got it.”

They made their way to the bar tended by the owner. Crack, a big, muscular, tattooed Black man, wore a leather vest over his bare chest. He shot them a wide grin.

“Another round, brides-to-be?”

“Girl Power!” Shauna shouted, pumping fists in the air.

“You got that going.” He mixed drinks with his big, experienced hands. “Brought me a wild bunch tonight.”

“More than a few out there would go for a handsome kick-ass dude like you,” Erin told him.

“Got me a one-in-ten-million woman be waiting when I get home.”

“Hey, I didn’t know you had a serious going on.”

“Ain’t been in my place for a while, have you?”

“I guess not.” Erin tipped her purple-streaked shaggy blond bob to Shauna’s mass of red. “Because I’ve got my own one in ten million now.”

“Aw.” Shauna kissed her again. “But we’re coming back, bunches, because I *love* this place. I thought we’d get all glammed up and go to an upscale bar and ... I didn’t mean your place isn’t upscale.”

He sent her a wicked flash of a grin. “Honey, it ain’t the Down and Dirty for nothing. Now, if any of the chicks and slicks in my place hassle any of your group how you don’t want to be hassled, you let me know and—”

“You’ll crack their heads together,” Erin finished. “It’s how he got his name.”

“For serious?”

Face fierce, Crack made a head-banging gesture with his hands.

“We don’t be upscale, but we got standards.” He slid the drinks toward them. “Drink up. This round’s on me.”

Shauna toasted him, then drank a third of the glass in one go. “God, this is so good, and I’m going to get so wasted. Let’s dance some of this buzz off!”

Within twenty minutes, Shauna jumped back onstage to scream out another song, and this time stripped down like Becca.

Astonished in the best possible way, Erin watched her shimmy and shake. A couple others, inspired, climbed up to join in.

Erin checked the time and, pleased she’d estimated when the party would hit peak, sent a text, smiled at the response.

Then slipped away from the dance floor.

She’d planned this surprise, a winner, every detail, including that timing. Her accomplice would be waiting in the privacy room she’d rented.

She intended to make her bride’s every dream come true, starting now.

The love of her life’s dream? Hawaii.

She’d worked her ass off to sell enough paintings to afford the trip—something they’d started saving for, for later.

This time? Forget later. Now would shine.

She’d kept this secret for nearly three weeks—and that hadn’t been easy for her. But she’d let Shauna think they’d hold off on that dream honeymoon for a year, maybe two, as they’d agreed.

Even her trusted accomplice—actually, her backup accomplice—didn’t know. She’d just needed someone to smuggle in her overnight case holding the grass skirt, coconut bra, leis, and the crazy pink shoes that had started it all.

And those tickets to Maui.

Once she’d changed, she’d take the stage!

She headed toward the back. The privacy rooms weren’t a hot ticket on a Monday night—she knew from previous experience. Dimmer lights, soundproofed doors offered an option for those who wanted a quick round between drinks.

She didn’t regret that her days of those quick rounds had passed.

She’d already slipped her accomplice the swipe, so pressed the buzzer that would flicker the lights inside.

The door opened, and she entered the darkened room.

“Really appreciate this,” she said as she walked in, then turned to close the door so the

privacy locks clicked behind her. “She doesn’t have a clue! Oh, she’s going to go crazy! I’m going to need more light to—”

Something thin and sharp circled her neck, cutting off her air. Blood dribbled down her throat as it broke through the skin.

She flailed, tried to scream, struggled to drag the wire away. When her head slammed against the door, she saw stars.

As the wire cut deeper, the stars went out.

★ ★ ★

The communicator woke her out of a dead sleep. Lieutenant Eve Dallas cursed it, then pushed up in bed as her husband ordered lights at ten percent.

She shoved a hand through her short, choppy brown hair, nudged at the fat cat on her other side. Galahad just rolled.

“Dallas.”

Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. Probable homicide. Nine-one-one caller requested you. Report to ...

When she heard the address, Eve rolled over the cat and out of bed. “The Down and Dirty?”

Affirmative.

“Name of nine-one-one caller?”

Wilson Buckley, identified as the owner.

“I’m on my way, and will contact Detective Peabody. Dallas out.”

“I’m with you,” Roarke said, and had already pulled on jeans. “It’s Crack’s place. I’m with you.” After a look at her face as she sprinted to her closet, he added, “If it had been Rochelle, he’d have contacted you directly.”

“You’re right. That sounds right.” She grabbed what came to hand out of her closet. Black trousers, a white tee, a black jacket, belt, boots.

As she pulled on clothes, Roarke stepped in, already dressed, with her weapon harness.

“Thanks.” She strapped it on. “Monday night—it’s Monday night, right?”

“Just tipped over into Tuesday morning.”

“Should be a slow night for the D&D. That’s how I met him.” She rushed out to snag her badge, her ’link, the communicator.

“DB across the street from his place. Nothing to do with his place, or him, but that’s how I met him. Since you’re coming, you drive. I’ll contact Peabody, get her ass up and moving.”

Other than herself, she trusted him most to drive like a wild thing all the way downtown.

As they jogged downstairs, she tried not to resent that he looked as if he’d had eight solid hours of sleep, probably with a massage beforehand. The impossibly blue eyes alert, that black silk mane of hair somehow perfect.

He wouldn’t have given a moment’s thought to the clothes he’d put on, and yet they looked exactly right on that tall, rangy frame.

It could be a pisser to wake up after less than an hour down beside an Irish god.

He'd already remoted her vehicle from the garage, so it waited outside the Irish god's castle.

After strapping into the passenger seat, she gave another finger swipe to her hair, then pressed the heels of her hands to her long, whiskey-colored eyes.

Everything felt like a pissar, she admitted as he all but flew down the long drive to the gates that opened on his approach.

Coffee would fix that.

She programmed two—strong and black—from the in-dash AutoChef.

At that first life-giving glug, some of the clouds lifted. She reminded herself she'd recently had a long weekend on Roarke's private island.

Just the two of them and sun, surf, sand, sex.

What did she have to bitch about?

Having a friend report a dead body at not quite one in the morning? Yeah, bitch-worthy, but that was the job.

Plus, she got to give her partner the same treatment.

She drank more coffee, let it perform its miracles, then contacted Peabody.

"Yeah, Peabody. What?"

"Jesus, block video. I don't need to see your tits."

"They're quite lovely," Roarke commented, and earned the hard eye from Eve.

"Oh, sorry, block video. We got caught up purging and packing for the Big Move. We practically just went down. Who's dead?"

"Don't know the who, but the where is the Down and Dirty."

Eve clearly heard McNab—EDD ace and the second half of Peabody's "we"—curse.

She supposed there were Friendship Rules just like there were Marriage Rules. She'd have two detectives on scene.

"Is Crack okay?"

"He called it in. Pull it together, get there."

She clicked off, gauged the speed and distance. She calculated even though Peabody and McNab lived downtown, Roarke would get there first.

"He doesn't have cams," Eve remembered. "No cams, in or out. Goddamn it."

"It's a sex club, Eve. You'd thin out your clientele considerably with door or interior cams. And you didn't need them to deal with Casto when he attacked you at the D&D the night before our wedding."

He'd given her a shiner, though. She still resented it.

"I wonder how that corrupt asshole former cop likes prison."

Despite the speed, Roarke glanced at her, smiled. "I suspect not a bit."

"It's hard to see this being a fight gone south. Crack has a rep for dealing with trouble and troublemakers for a reason." Then she shook her head. "No point in thinking about who and why. Best to go in cold. But you know what part of the problem is?"

"You know too many people."

She shot him a hard look. "I was going to say that. How did you know I was going to say that?"

He didn't bother to glance over, but he did smile. "I know my cop's mind."

"Well, I do." She chugged down the rest of her coffee. "If I didn't know too many people, I'd still end up driving like a maniac to a crime scene at damn near one in the morning because that's the job, but I wouldn't know so many people somehow connected if I didn't know too

many people in the first place.”

She tipped her head back. “How did that happen?”

“Your magnetic, people-loving personality?”

“Oh, bite me.”

“Didn’t I do that earlier?”

He had, she recalled, and in just the right way.

“It’s probably your fault. I don’t know how exactly, but probably. And who hangs out at a downtown sex club on a Monday night?”

“People lovers?” he suggested.

“Somebody sure as hell didn’t love somebody this Monday night.”

She spotted the police cruiser, then the uniform on the door when Roarke pulled up.

A quick summer storm had rolled through about the time Roarke had been biting her in just the right way. Damp pavement and puddles gleamed in the streetlights. When she stepped out, the air steamed with August.

In the steam bath, the uniform’s face gleamed like the puddles.

“Officer.”

“Lieutenant. Sir, my partner’s inside with the DB. We received the dispatch at zero hours, sixteen minutes, and arrived on scene approximately three minutes later. Female victim, discovered by one of the staff in a privacy room. From our visual it’s apparently a strangulation. Roughly eighty people inside, including staff. About two dozen of those are part of a single party. The victim was with that party, identified by others as Erin Albright.”

Pausing, the uniform used the back of her wrist to wipe a dribble of sweat from her temple.

“A hen party, sir. A girl party to celebrate an upcoming wedding. Albright was one of the brides. Crack—Mr. Buckley—”

“I know Crack,” Eve interrupted.

“Then you know he got things under control quickly. Blocked off the room, blocked the exits, even before we got on scene. He has the other bride, Shauna Hunnicut, and a couple of her friends in his office. She’s upset, sir, to put it mildly.”

“Got it. My partner— Never mind, here she comes.”

Peabody, in pink sneakers, khakis, with her red-streaked black hair bundled back in a short tail, hustled down the sidewalk. Beside her, McNab put on his usual show in red-and-blue-striped baggies, red airboots, and a blue tee that displayed a big red heart over his bony chest.

His forest of colorful hoops gleamed along his earlobe. His long—currently red-streaked—blond tail bounced at his back.

“Take the door from inside, Officer.”

The uniform let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Lieutenant.”

Eve turned to Peabody. “Female vic, found in one of the privacy rooms. About eighty people inside, a good chunk of those with a pre-wedding party deal. The girl thing.”

“Golly, you had yours here.”

“Under duress. The vic was one of the brides.”

“Harsh,” said McNab.

“Yeah, it qualifies. Crack has the other bride with a couple friends in his office. We’re going to let her calm down some. McNab, since you’re here, you can start getting statements, contacts and releasing. Start with anyone not connected to the party. Peabody, you start with partygoers, and I’ll take the body.”

“What about Crack?” Peabody asked.

“We’ll talk to him. One of his people found the body, so we need that conversation. Then we’ll take the other bride. You and McNab start clearing the place out. Roarke can assist me with the body. We’ve got no electronics except the door of the privacy room, and Roarke can take that. No cams,” she muttered.

She glanced up at the glowing neon proclaiming DOWN AND DIRTY.

It probably would be.

Inside, the temperature dropped an easy ten degrees. No problem, she thought, separating those in the party group from those who’d come in for booze and boobs.

She supposed Crack had separated the brides’ party—lots of weeping or the glazed eyes of the shocked—from the just happened to be theres. Plenty of irritation, fascination, boredom on that side.

The big man himself strode across the room, straight to Eve. He didn’t look shocked, bored, or weepy. He looked furious.

“Somebody killed that girl in my place. You find who killed that girl. I knew that girl.”

“Understood. We’re going to do our job, starting right now. We’re going to talk to you in a bit, and we need to talk to the person who found her.”

“I’ve got him. He’s pretty goddamn shook. I mixed her and Shauna drinks. I mixed Erin a fucking drink not two hours ago. And somebody killed that girl in my place.”

“Crack, I need to go take care of her now.”

He nodded, scrubbed his hands over his face. “I asked for you because I knew you’d take care of her. I knew all of you would take care of her. I’ll show you where she is.”

“Get started,” Eve told Peabody and McNab, and followed him.

It brought on a flashback where the club blasted with music, lights flashing. Still-in-uniform Peabody gloriously drunk, pre-Oscar-win-and-bestseller-status Nadine Furst doing a striptease onstage. The shock of seeing the elegant Dr. Mira shaking her ass on the dance floor.

It would’ve been along those lines, Eve thought. Noisy, pretty drunk, happy women, shaking asses, bouncing around.

Why had one of the brides gone into a privacy room? Lured in, she wondered, as she herself had been by someone she’d considered—not a friend, in her case—but a colleague?

“Who rented the room?”

“She did—added it on when she booked the party like two, maybe three weeks ago. Between that,” he decided. “Don’t know why, but she said she had a surprise deal for Shauna, and not to tell anyone she had the room. I let her have it for the whole night. Mondays are slow.”

And wouldn’t you know it, she thought when they turned down the dim corridor. The same damn privacy room.

Crack handed her a swipe. “That’s my master. Hers is in there, on the floor.”

“You go take care of your people. We’ll take care of her.”

“I’m here when you want me.”

She waited until he’d walked away, turned her recorder on, then swiped open the door.

The victim lay on her back, brown eyes staring at the ceiling. Blood from the neck wound had run down her throat to soak the bodice of a short, shiny green dress. One of her shoes had slipped off, and one arm lay outstretched. The swipe card swam in a pool of her blood just beyond her fingers.

One of those tiny, useless handbags lay open on her other side.

“Seal up,” she told Roarke.

He’d already opened her field kit, and handed her the can of sealant. “You first.”

“No jewelry,” she noted as she coated her hands, her boots. “Somebody wanted us to say robbery. Somebody thinks we’re stupid.”

She handed him the sealant, took the field kit, then stepped around the blood to the body.

“She’s got a fresh wound on her forehead, and blood on the inside of the door—that’s going to be from that. So the killer was inside the room. Prepared to kill.”

“Because?”

“I don’t know why yet, but that’s a thin wound on her neck, and a deep one. Piano wire, maybe. Some sort of garrote. You don’t have that handy if you’re looking to mug. You’ve got a sticker maybe, a stunner, a sap. Fresh manicure,” she added as she crouched. “But two of her nails are broken, scratches on her neck where she tried to drag the wire away.”

Eve lifted one of the victim’s hands. “Skin and blood under the nails. That’s going to be hers, too. Took her from behind, that’s how you do it. Whip the wire around and pull, give her a good knock against the door to daze her. She’d have been drinking on top of it. Party time, happy time. So reflexes are slower than sober.”

She glanced up at Roarke. “I hadn’t been drinking when Casto went for me in here because, hey, getting married the next day. That was his mistake.”

“In this room?”

“Yeah. Ten bucks says Peabody’s going to talk about white saging it.”

She took a sample of the matter under Erin’s nails, sealed it, labeled it. Then pressed a finger to her Identi-pad.

“Victim is identified as Erin Albright, age twenty-seven, mixed-race female, resides on Twelfth Street—only a few blocks from here—with cohab Shauna Hunnicut.”

She bagged both hands. “Maybe she got a piece of him. Doubtful, but maybe.”

Before she reached in her kit for microgoggles, Roarke handed them to her.

Fitting them on, she leaned close to the neck wound. “Yeah, some sort of wire. Piano wire, steel guitar string, what’s it—baling wire. Victim was garroted, with force.”

She took out gauges. “Enough force the neck wound is a sixth of an inch deep at its deepest point. The forehead wound is fresh, a strike against the inside of the door, again with some force, but not a killing blow.”

As she replaced gauges, took out others, she scanned the body. “The victim is five foot five. From the angle of the wound, the killer was several inches taller, pulling back and up on the wire. ME to confirm.

“Time of death, twenty-three-forty-six.” Eve sat back on her heels. “Crack called it in at sixteen past midnight. Take a few minutes off for the one who found her to send up the alarm—and Crack’s going to come back here and check to be sure. So nobody missed her for a good twenty minutes or more. That gave her killer some room. See what’s in her purse, will you?”

He walked around the body, crouched down as Eve was. “Lip dye, breath mints, her ID, and ... three swipes in a swipe case.”

“No ’link, no cash or credits.” Eve nodded. “Staging it.”

Rising, she crossed over to open a black, top-handle case on the bed.

“Okay, this is weird. Is this a grass skirt?”

Roarke straightened and turned as she held it up.

“It certainly appears to be.”

“And there’s one of those boob deals out of half coconuts, those flower necklaces—two of them. A pair of pink heels, glittery, butterflies on the straps. Wait, something else. A card.”

Eve loosened the flap, slid it out. “Got a scan of two tickets to Maui, leaving on Sunday. And the card reads: ‘I want to spend a lifetime making your dreams come true. This is just the beginning. I love you, Erin.’”

She slipped the card and contents back in the envelope.

“She wanted the room so she could change into this getup. The shoes mean something—I’ll find out what—but the rest is clear enough.”

Frowning, she studied the black overnight.

“Why didn’t he take the bag? Doesn’t even open it to see what was in it? Because he already knew. Either he didn’t care, or panicked after the kill and forgot.”

She paced around the body and the blood. “How did he get in? Did she let him in? Why would she? A friend, a colleague. ‘Great, you can help me change for the big surprise.’

“But I don’t think so. I don’t think so. Look at the position of the body, the blood on the door. He was in here, already in here. How did he get in here?”

“I took a look at the locks while you tended to her. I don’t see any sign of tampering.”

“If I’m wrong, he might have followed her, come in after. But not by force. She would’ve let him—or her—in, so that’s trust. But the whole thing reads like her killer was already in the room.”

“Someone had to bring the bag.”

“Yeah, and if she didn’t bring it in herself, her killer did. Something else to find out.”

She pulled out her ’link. “I’ll bring in the morgue and the sweepers. Then we’ll start finding out.”

Chapter Two

When she went out, she saw McNab had cleared most of his side.

“Some Monday night regulars,” McNab told her. “They come in on a slow night for the boobies and brew, maybe try to get lucky. Crack verified. A table of tourists from Topeka, doing some club-hopping. Came in because of the name. They were pretty trashed, and their story checked. Working my way through, hit on a few hard cases, but nobody rings.”

“All right. Finish it out.”

She signaled Peabody.

As she walked to Eve, Peabody’s sympathetic face went to cop face. “They’re a mess, Dallas. They’re all either friends of one bride or the other, most of them both. None of them, so far, knew anything about a privacy room, and nobody noticed the victim leaving the club area. Some of them, including the other bride, were onstage with the holo-band. A lot of them stripped down to their underwear—or less. According to the statements I’ve taken, they’d taken over the dance floor. Some not with the group came up, joined in. No problems. One guy even bought a round of drinks, but he left.”

“When?”

“Closest we’ve got is about midnight, maybe a little before that. He got some ’link numbers. Wade—no last name. Tall, blond, tanned, built.”

“TOD’s twenty-three-forty-six, so that’s cutting it close. But I want to know if he contacts any of them. I’ll see if Crack knows him. Dead wagon and sweepers on the way. Why aren’t any of them leaving?”

“Solidarity. They stay until they all can go. And they wait for Shauna. It’s a nice group of women, Dallas.”

“Nice people kill, too.”

She crossed to the bar where Crack stood waiting.

Fury still vibrated. “Handing out Sober-Up, water, coffee.”

“We’ll clear them out as soon as we can.”

“Shit, it ain’t that, skinny white girl. We get trouble in here sometimes. I crack heads, kick some asses. You get people puking, passing out.” He shrugged that off. “Had a guy last month—had to be ninety—shaking it like a kid out on the dance floor till he drops with a goddamn heart attack. Got the MTs in quick, but Siri—she’s working her way through medical school—already had him back when they got here.

“Nobody ever died in my place. Nobody ever got murdered. I keep an eye, try to keep a good eye, but I didn’t see her leave. Didn’t notice how long she was gone. Mondays are slow, and we

usually close down by one. Hell, I don't usually take the stick on Mondays, but I knew Erin, and I wanted to be here, make sure it went smooth for her. The way the girls were going, I figured we'd give them till two, so I texted Ro, just so she'd know I'd be home later than usual. I figured she'd be sleeping, but she was up. So I was texting with my lady, and I didn't keep a good eye."

"I'm going to tell you something while you make me some of that bullshit you call coffee in here."

"Don't drink that swill, girl. I got Pepsi."

"Better. I'm going to tell you whoever did this wouldn't have looked threatening, wouldn't have stood out to your good eye. My first instinct is Erin knew them."

Crack's gaze skimmed over the partygoers. "Not one of these girls. No fucking way."

"There's always a way, but I don't know yet. Who else knew about the room?"

"Just me, far as I know." He put a tube of Pepsi on the bar. "She was real insistent on that."

"You gave her the swipe."

"Yeah, she came in right around noon, picked it up. Said it was real cloak-and-dagger stuff. She was so fucking happy. The happy just bounced off her."

"Did she come alone?"

"Yeah, just Erin. And in and out, like she had an appointment."

"How about tonight? Did she come in by herself?"

"No, her and Shauna together, and a couple of others right behind them."

"Did she have a case, like a small overnight bag?" Eve held out her hands to indicate size. "A black case."

"I saw that, that case on the bed. No. She wasn't carrying it, or anything but that little purse."

"Did you notice her go out at any point?"

"Outside." He frowned, rubbed at his neck. "Don't think so. She and Shauna got here early, maybe nine-thirty. Most come in closer to ten, or some after."

"You had to take a break or two. You don't work the stick straight through."

"Took fifteen about ten-thirty maybe, gave it over to Renee. Shit, she's good on the bar, but doesn't have a sharp eye, not so much."

"I'd like to talk to her, and to the one who found Erin."

"That's Pete. I got him calmed down some. You want a room?"

"No, here's fine."

"I'll get Renee first, give him a little more calm time. Get you something?" he asked Roarke.

"I'm good. He'll carry this," Roarke added when Crack walked away. "Thinking he should've seen something."

"I can wish he had, but it's not on him."

A woman came out, dark skin, red lips, some fear in her eyes. And built, like all of the staff.

"I'm Renee. Crack said you needed to talk to me."

"You were tending bar when Crack took his break."

"Yeah, yeah." She pushed a hand over a cap of rainbow-colored hair. "He had me relieve him, I don't know, about ten-thirty. Thereabouts."

"Did you notice anyone leaving, or coming in when you were on the stick?"

"Um. Um."

"Those are lovely earrings," Roarke commented.

Some of the fear died away as she lifted a hand to one of the fist-sized silver stars. "Thanks. They're my favorite. Erin— Oh God."

Fear trickled back as she put a hand to those red lips.

“I didn’t really know her, except tonight. I started working here a couple months ago, but Crack said we should make sure the brides got whatever they wanted. So she came up to the bar with her empty glass. She said like, hit me again, and how I should tell Shauna, if she asked, she went to the ladies’. And gave me a wink.”

“Did she?”

“Yeah, I guess. But just a few minutes.”

“When?”

“Um, right after I took the stick. I mixed her drink, had it waiting. She came back—just a few minutes—and—and—and—she looked so happy.”

“Did you notice anyone come in during that time, when she came back?”

“No, but ... Crack says to keep an eye, but—the ladies were having so much fun. Some of them onstage, half-naked, singing, dancing. On the floor, dancing with each other. I was watching them because they were having so much fun, and they weren’t like our usuals.”

“Did you see anyone with a black case, about this big? Black with a handle on the top?”

“No, ma’am, I sure didn’t.”

Considering the damp fear in those eyes, Eve let the *ma’am* slide.

“Okay. I appreciate it. I’d like to speak with Pete.”

“He’s with Crack, I’ll tell Crack. Can I go home? It’s just, my mom’s watching my little boy, and I didn’t want to tell her what happened. I get home by one on Mondays.”

“Yeah, you can go.”

“Door, back door,” Eve murmured. “John’s down that way. She could’ve let someone in the back, whoever brought the case. Doesn’t want anyone looking for her. Give them the swipe so they can put the case in the room.”

“And her killer goes straight there, inside.”

“That’s one way. Odds are good nobody sees them. After it’s done, go out the same way. In and out the back. No cams to worry about.”

“Why don’t I go check the door?”

“Do that. I’ll have the sweepers check for prints. They couldn’t be stupid enough to leave any, but we’ll check.”

As Roarke headed off, Crack came out again, this time with a man in a tight, sleeveless black tee that showed off impressive biceps. Eve gauged him as early twenties, currently pale as a summer cloud. His curling mass of bronze hair framed a chiseled, square-jawed face.

He shook like a leaf in a windstorm.

“Pete, why don’t you go around and sit down there by Dallas. Lieutenant Dallas,” Crack corrected.

“Okay. Okay, but can you stick with me?”

Eve gave Crack a nod. With his arm around Pete’s muscled shoulders, Crack led him around the bar.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?” Eve began.

“I found her. I served her drinks earlier. They had a table, and she and the other—the one getting married—they danced on the table. Then I found her.”

“How long after you served the drinks before you found her?”

“Oh. I don’t know exactly. An hour? Maybe more.”

“It was just some after midnight when you took your break,” Crack prompted.

“Right, right. Okay.” Pressing his fingers to his eyes, Pete rubbed. “Crack said I could use one of the privacy rooms to crash for thirty. I’m taking some summer classes, going for my MBA. It’s finals week, and I’ve been cramming it. I guess it showed. Sorry.”

“Don’t hand me that bullshit. He needed a break,” Crack said to Eve. “I told him to take thirty, gave him a swipe. We only had the one room booked anyway.”

“Got it. So shortly after midnight, you went back to crash for thirty.”

“Yeah. Set the alarm on my ’link. I can show you.”

“No need. And when you went into the privacy area?”

“Okay, I was walking by, and I saw the room—not mine, the one a couple up from it—wasn’t locked. See, Crack wants the privacy rooms locked, occupied or not, right? We don’t want anybody sliding in one of them without paying. Or if someone’s using one, the door has to be secured or it’s a violation.”

“But this door wasn’t secured.”

“No. The green light was on—that’s open. So I pushed the door open and—”

“You pushed the door open? It wasn’t closed all the way.”

“I…” Frowning, he rubbed his eyes again. “Um, wait. I was heading down, I saw the green light, and I ... Yeah, yeah, I just pushed on the door. It wasn’t all the way closed. I didn’t say that before. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I didn’t think of it. I—”

“Pete.” Eve put a hand on the solid wall of his arm. “Take a breath. You’re doing fine. You pushed open the door.”

“I didn’t tell the other cop that. I didn’t think about it, but yeah. I just gave it a little nudge. And she was ... God, God, there was so much blood. I’ve never seen that much blood, not for real.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed when he swallowed.

“And she was just lying there in all the blood. I couldn’t stop staring, then things went sort of gray. I pulled the door closed. I didn’t want anyone to see that. I’m always going to see that, all the blood, and her lying in it. I pulled the door closed, and I went and got Crack.

“I fucked up. I didn’t handle it like I should. I left her lying in all the blood.”

“You handled it exactly right,” Eve corrected.

He gave her a pitifully hopeful look. “I did?”

“If you’d gone in, you’d have compromised the scene, made it harder for us to find who did that to her. You closed the door, and if you hadn’t, maybe someone else would’ve gone in. You got help. You did exactly the right thing.”

He covered his face with his hands. “I kind of knew her. She used to come in a couple times a month. Not lately, not for a while, I guess. But she used to, so I kind of knew her.”

“How long have you worked here, Pete?”

“A few years. Almost three.”

“So you’ve got a sense. Did you notice anybody paying too much attention to her?”

“Not the wrong kind. She—all of them—were really bashing it, so other customers watched some. And some of them got up and joined in. It’s like contagious, you know? The energy. It seemed like the ladies in the group weren’t interested in hooking up tonight, right?”

“Someone mentioned a man named Wade got some of their contacts.”

“Yeah, well, Wade would.”

He said it with his first shaky smile.

“He’s a player,” Crack told her. “Comes in most every week, targets some of the ladies. Goes

smooth, not pushy.”

“Got a last name? We need to check all the boxes.”

“I can get it. He always runs a tab.”

“Okay. Pete, when you went back for your break, when you pushed open the door, did you see anyone, or anything that seemed off besides the unsecured door?”

“I didn’t see anything but her. Swear to God. All I could see was her.”

“All right. If you think of anything else, you can contact me. You’ve been very helpful.”

“You go on home now, Pete.” Crack patted his back. “You take yourself another soother or whatever you need, and get some sleep.”

“I’m afraid I’ll see her in my sleep.”

“You saw her dancing on the table,” Eve reminded him. “Put that in front. See her like that.”

“I’ll try.”

Crack waited until Pete walked out. “Gonna mess him up for a while, but he’ll get through it. I’ll get you Wade’s name and all, but I’m saying he’s a player, smooth with it, and sex is his game. Don’t see him killing anybody.”

“Have to check those boxes.”

“Got that. You want Shauna now?”

“I’ll go to her, but I want Peabody with me. One thing. You’ve got a back exit. People can get in that way. No security there?”

Crack shrugged. “We got no cover. Make the scratch on the drinks, privacy tables, and rooms. I don’t care how people come in, as long as they cough up the scratch. When we’ve got live music and a slamming crowd, Big Tiny and I rotate off the door to bounce any assholes out. I don’t bring him in on slow nights.”

“One more. No monitor for unsecured privacy doors?”

Now he sighed. “I got the e’s for that right under the bar, and another in my office. I missed it. Texting with Ro, maybe. If I’d caught it, I’d’ve gone back and spared that boy the trauma.

“You think he came in the back?”

“It’s my most probable at this time.”

“Fuck it. I guess I gotta break down and put a cam on the back door.” He glanced over. “I guess he’s the one to ask about it.”

She turned, watched Roarke walk back to the bar.

“No tampering,” he said, then looked at Crack. “My friend, I know you keep the doors unsecured during club hours, but Christ Jesus, you need better security than what you have when you’re closed. A toddler could get through your locks.”

“Nobody does ’cause they know who owns the place.” His lips spread in a wide, fierce grin. “But we’re going to do just that. How about you work something up for me?”

“I’ll do that.”

“No cams on the front. The bulk of our clientele’s going to find someplace else to patronize we get cams on the front door.”

“Why don’t I work something up that won’t show, even to that clientele?”

“You got something like that?”

“He’s got every-damn-thing,” Eve said.

“You work it up. Want me to take you back to Shauna?”

“Give me a few.”

When Eve rose, walked over to Peabody, Roarke sat.

“Any whiskey in stock that won’t burn through my esophagus?”

Crack smiled again. “I got my private stash of the good stuff.”

“I’ll take three fingers of that, if you’ll join me.”

When McNab joined them, Crack lifted the bottle. “Whiskey? It’s the good stuff.”

McNab sent a longing look at the label. “It sure as hell is. The Scot in me says, ‘Set me up, mate.’ But I’m a cop on duty. I don’t guess you’ve got any fizzies.”

With an owlish stare, Crack took a sip of the good stuff. “Bony white boy, does this place look like a fizzy bar?”

“Ginger ale maybe?”

“I can get you that.”

Crack started to pour one, then paused when the morgue team came in. “Hell. Fucking hell. Is she going to Morris, do you know?”

“Dallas would’ve asked for him.” McNab took the glass.

“It’s not right. None of this is right.” Crack came around to sit. “She’ll catch who did this.”

Roarke nodded as Eve led the morgue team to the body. “She won’t stop until she does. Get you a drink, Peabody?” he asked when she came over.

“Cold caffeine—not your coffee. I want to be able to keep my stomach lining intact. Dallas is having them take the victim out the back so her friends don’t have to see. They won’t budge until Shauna’s released. McNab, Dallas wants you to direct the sweepers when they get here.”

“On that. Totally on it, since here they come.”

“Sit,” Roarke said to Peabody as she downed that cold caffeine.

“Better not. Got another round to go.”

She downed more when Eve came back into the club. Eve paused a moment, had a word with the head sweeper before signaling Peabody.

Crack pushed off the stool. “I’ll take you back. Ginger ale,” he added when she took a hard look at McNab’s empty glass.

“Go home,” she told Roarke.

He lifted his glass. “I’m enjoying some of the good stuff.”

“Whatever. With me, Peabody.”

The door behind the bar led to a half-assed kitchen where they generated half-assed bar snacks. Though it shined clean, she figured if she’d been trapped in a cave for a week with no food or water, she might have, just maybe might have, risked eating something not hermetically sealed from that space.

A short, skinny corridor led to another door where Crack stopped.

“I gave her a soother earlier. Can’t say if it helped much.”

When he opened the door, the three women huddled together on chairs he’d obviously brought in from the club froze.

Like hers, his office ran small, but he’d managed to wedge in two more chairs.

And like hers, his office space said business, not socializing. A desk, his data and communication center, a big desk chair for a big man, a mini-AC, and a speed bag.

She immediately wondered if she could put a speed bag in her office.

“This is Lieutenant Dallas and Detective Peabody.” Crack eased over to take the middle woman’s hands. “They’re the best there is. I promise you that, Shauna. The best.”

“Will they let me see her?” Her voice, like her eyes, was dull. “No one will let me see her.”

“Ms. Hunnicut,” Eve began, “the chief medical examiner is taking care of Erin now. There’s