

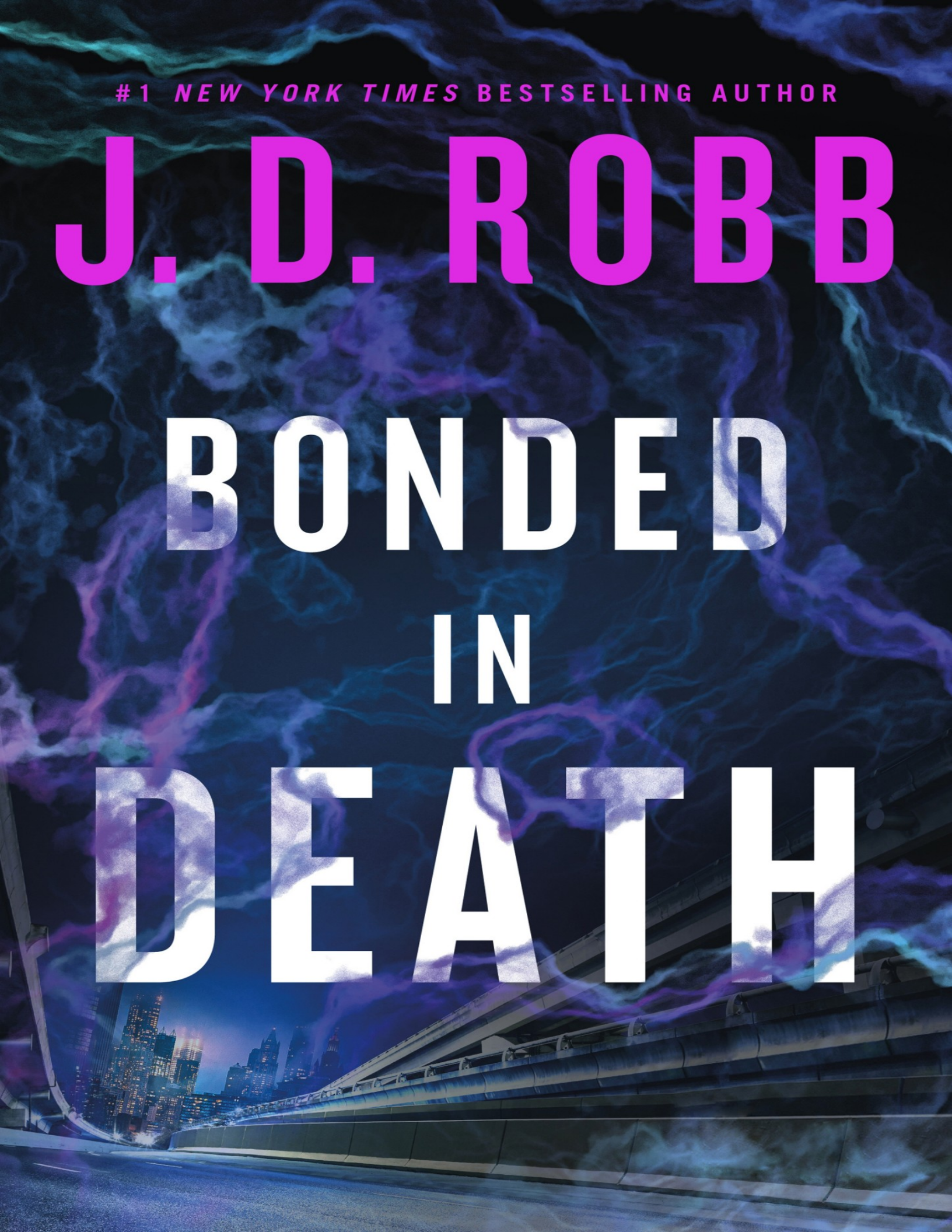
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**J. D. ROBB**

**BONDED**

**IN**

**DEATH**



BONDED  
IN  
DEATH

J. D. Robb



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The purple testament of bleeding war.

—William Shakespeare

Revenge is the poor delight of little minds.

—Juvenal

# Prologue

## **London—Urban Wars**

In war, life and death hung in tenuous balance. In war, taking a life in battle wasn't murder, but victory.

And still, death won.

In war, planning the death and destruction of the enemy was strategy.

And still, death won.

Violence, like a virus, spread from city to city. A stray spark in Hanoi kindled a fire in Chicago. A fire set in Berlin burst into a blaze in Tokyo. Wild winds of fury carried flames to New York, to Moscow, to Brazil, to Hong Kong.

And cities across the globe burned.

The human race consumed itself in a conflagration of rich against poor, culture against culture, with some beating the drums of fanaticism, be it religion or politics or the gnawing hate of the other.

And so, death won.

The twelve who gathered in the bowels of the old stone church understood the horrors and miseries of war. They had taken lives in battle, through strategy, through guile and deceptions. And accepted that the blood on their hands would leave a stain.

It seemed peace couldn't win unless death won first.

Though they'd come from different walks of life, war had bonded them. They called themselves The Twelve, and each brought to the war room, in

what had been a place of worship, their own skills. Skills noted by the Underground.

They'd been recruited, then trained in other skills.

Killing skills.

Their number included a teacher, an actor, a dancer, a cop, a medic, a young scientist, technicians, a retired soldier called to duty once more, a thief, a mechanic, an heiress.

All spies now, all soldiers in a war that swept through cities around the globe and threatened to leave them in smoking rubble.

Deep under the streets where blood and death had become horribly normal, their headquarters included a large round table, like Arthur's of old. Counters held computers, listening devices, communication centers.

Weapons of war—the guns, the knives, the grenades, the explosives—they stored in racks and cabinets.

A room off the main was set up as a makeshift infirmary and dispensary. The medic treated wounds there when necessary, and dispensed the drugs—locked in another cabinet—for use against the enemy. Hallucinogens, sleeping powders, poisons, venoms.

Though each knew the names the others went by in this time of war, they called the medic Fox.

Another room held wardrobe, wigs, hairpieces, makeup, face putty, and more used in disguises. Though the actor continued to use her name as part of her cover, they called her Chameleon.

Yet another room served as a workshop to make explosives, the wiring, the timers, and the remotes used to detonate.

The teacher, who at the dawn of the wars had dug the broken and bloody bodies of her young students from the rubble of the bombed school, now made bombs. Her purpose, one she'd vowed when weeping over those broken and bloodied bodies, was to destroy those who would murder children.

She'd met the medic that day, the day that had changed her life forever. Out of the smoke and blood there had been a light.

They'd loved, they'd married and created a cherished child.

To keep her safe, they took the child out of harm's way in the care of a trusted friend.

They called the teacher Fawn.

She worked with the retired soldier most directly, the one they called Rabbit.

The others, due to his age and experience, considered him the de facto leader.

He stood now, gray hair shaggy, his face lined with time and duty, and scanned the table. All battle-scarred, he knew. Some physically, and every one of them in heart and mind. But they'd fight on. He trusted them as he trusted himself.

They'd become, over these ravaged years, family.

"Before we begin briefing on this mission, a bright spot. The intel on North America, and this has been confirmed by the Underground and MI6. While pockets of enemy activity remain, the tide's turned. Revolutionary headquarters in several major cities have been infiltrated or destroyed.

"Mole."

The heiress nodded. "I can confirm. My contact in New York reports the city is in the hands of our allies, enemy forces are surrendering. Washington, D.C., reports the same, as does Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, and up into Canada—Montreal, Toronto."

She brushed back her fall of icy blond hair. Though studs sparkled at her ears—she'd come from a dinner party—they pretended to be diamonds.

She'd sold most of her jewelry to buy food, medical supplies, weapons—whatever those suffering required. She glanced at the dancer they called Panther.

"My sources also confirm." Her accent came from Eastern Europe, her birthplace, and the birthplace of her illustrious career. "Cease-fires are being negotiated even now."

"Good news, but you wouldn't know it from London." The thief, Magpie, shrugged. His voice reflected his life on the streets.



“Not yet.” Under the table, Fox took Fawn’s hand. A connection of hope. “But North America stabilizes, Europe will follow, and the world follows that. I’ve treated more enemy wounded than our own these past weeks.”

Like Panther, Fox’s accent spoke of his homeland in Ukraine.

“Some are deserting, retreating,” Fawn added. “Running out of London.” Her hand tightened on her husband’s.

“Our baby’s fine,” he assured her. “If they run, they don’t run to fight but to survive.”

Because they were a family there, he lifted her hand to his lips. “We’ll see our girl very soon. And your sons, Panther. We’re grateful you gave us a safe place for our daughter.”

“Fawn hid my sons here before London became too dangerous for them. We—we all—look out for each other.”

“And the innocent,” the scientist called Owl added.

“Always.”

The tech called Wasp lifted a hand. “And Italy? I haven’t heard from my brother in Rome for more than a week. My wife and my mother in Tuscany can’t reach him.”

“The fighting is intense in Rome,” Panther told him. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thank you.”

“I spoke with my sister this morning.” The other tech, Cobra, lit a cigarette. “She says, as does Fox, she’s treating more of them than us.”

Beside him, the detective constable known as Shark lit his own cigarette. “My intel says the same. On the run, outnumbered. Supply line issues on all sides, but we’re used to that. We may not have hit flash point yet, but we’re close.”

“We’ll be closer when we complete our next mission,” Rabbit said. “Wasp, if you will.”

He rose to man a computer.

“If we could have the map on-screen. Our target is here. Beneath these buildings, evacuated early in the conflict, is Dominion’s London

headquarters.”

A murmur went around the table.

“This is confirmed?” Fox demanded. “Our last intel indicated the West End was more likely.”

“Misinformation—likely deliberate.” Chameleon pressed her lips together. “I don’t like being duped. If we’d moved on it, as I pushed for—”

“Your cover would’ve been blown.” Shark gave her a cheeky grin. “Cooler heads, my lovely.”

“Normally I say bollocks to cooler heads, but in this case...” Now she shrugged, tossed back her bold red hair. “I can’t, yet, confirm the target.”

“I saw what I saw, heard what I heard.” Magpie spoke up. “And no, I wasn’t seen, I wasn’t heard. Scavenging, scouting out a new area, and I stumbled on a tunnel that shouldn’t have been there. Happened on some air ducts, a handy way to get around. They’ve got a war room, at least twice this size. Well-equipped, well-manned. An armory—and I was tempted there, but the well-manned discouraged me. Better to report back and live another day.”

“We need to go back, get the full scope.”

“I got a pretty full scope, Fox, and sent the old SOS to Rabbit.” Magpie used his finger in the air to draw an *X* and two *I*s—the symbol for twelve.

“And that’s why we’re here. Part of that full scope is a prison.”

“In the HQ?” Mole asked. “I’ve been hearing about a prison in Whitechapel.”

“And you hear well and true,” Rabbit told her. “Magpie was able to take photos of that building and location while slithering through the duct system.

“The prison is the second part, simultaneous with the first. The first, destroy enemy HQ; the second, take control of the prison and release our people.”

He looked at Magpie. “One more trip through for you, mate, photos if you can get them, any additional information. Fawn, Hawk, and I will build the explosives, Fawn and Hawk will place them.”

“Team Two—Fox, Panther, Chameleon, Wasp as tech—will hit the prison, using the explosion as cover and as signal to move in.

“Mole and Owl, lookouts for team two. Magpie and Shark, lookouts for team one. Cobra and I will run communications here.”

★ ★ ★

For days they worked on details, on timing, on weapons, approaches, escape routes.

When it was done, when Command green-lighted the mission, they suited up, sat around the table once more for a final briefing.

And Rabbit passed a bottle of whiskey around the table.

“A drink before the war. This is our flash point, the turning point in this long, hard battle. And we will succeed. Tonight we take lives, and we save countless others. Remember what we fight for. Not ourselves, but the innocent.”

He looked at Owl.

“Our children.”

Then at Fox and Fawn, at Panther.

“Not just for England, but for all. To The Twelve.”

They drank, not knowing that one who drank with them was a traitor.

# Chapter One

Wasp had gone by many names in his life. But when he flew from Rome to New York in September of 2061, he traveled under the name he'd been born with.

Giovanni Rossi.

He'd retired nearly eight years before, and now spent his days in his garden, enjoying his grandchildren, sipping wine in the evening with his wife.

He'd gone soft in the middle, and didn't mind a bit. Gone was the whip-lean tech, the slippery spy, the reluctant soldier who hated war.

He looked like what he was, a man inching toward eighty and comfortable with his life. There were times, still times, when he flashed back in dreams to when the world went mad.

But he woke beside his wife, safe in his bed, and in good weather—even not such good weather—enjoyed his breakfast on their little terrace as Rome came awake.

Next to his family, the city where he'd been born, had lived for decades was the love of his life.

He would miss waking beside his wife in the morning, and his terrace, and Rome. But the signal had come, and he'd taken a vow that bloody,

treacherous night.

He'd packed lightly—if he needed more, New York would provide. So he rolled a small case behind him, and had a bag on his shoulder.

He saw the uniformed driver holding a sign with his name on it, and smiled.

“I am Giovanni Rossi.”

“Signore Rossi, let me take your bags. Do you have more luggage?”

“No, this is all.”

“Please follow me.”

The man spoke with an American accent, and with deference as he asked how the flight had been, and hoped Rossi enjoyed his visit to New York.

Giovanni hadn't expected a limousine, but wasn't surprised. After all, Fox worked for a very important and wealthy man.

The driver opened the door for him, and Giovanni slid into luxury seats of smooth leather, flowers in bud vases, a bottle of wine already opened for his pleasure.

“With traffic, I'm afraid the drive will take about twenty minutes. There's music programmed if you like.”

“*Grazie.*”

“Please let me know if you need anything.”

Though Giovanni wouldn't have minded company or conversation, the privacy shield slid silently into place.

He poured the wine, settled back to enjoy the ride.

It had been nearly a quarter century since he'd seen New York, and seen it as an operative of Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna.

Interesting times, he thought as he sipped, and looked out the window at the lights sparkling in the city that, like Rome, had come back from a brutal beating.

Frowning, he thought of the message, encrypted, he'd received.

Do not contact me under any circumstances.  
Transportation will be waiting at the international shuttle  
station on your arrival.  
Your ticket is attached to this message.  
Urgently, Fox

How long had it been since they'd communicated? At least ten years, he thought. How those years flew by. And what could he possibly do, a man of his age, soft in the middle?

But a vow was a vow. And he'd taken that vow with blood still fresh on his hands.

A little sleepy from the trip, the wine, he sat back, closed his eyes. And, drifting just a bit, caught the taste of something in the air, something that wasn't the flowers in the vase, the wine in the glass.

He was a man over seventy, retired for nearly a decade, but training kicked in.

He bolted up, dropping the glass, spilling the wine.

But the window didn't open, the door refused to budge. Levering back, he kicked viciously at the privacy shield, but it held.

It took only a few minutes for him to slip into unconsciousness, barely that much again to die.

★ ★ ★

The driver took his time, enjoying himself, humming along to the music he'd programmed as he watched Rossi's death on the small monitor. He knew exactly how long the gas took to debilitate a man of Rossi's size, how long it took to kill.

He'd been trained, after all, in the art of war.

For the next steps, he lowered the rear right window a half inch, engaged the fan so the gas would slowly filter harmlessly away.

After it cleared, he pulled into a garage of a house he'd purchased over a year before. His mission required patience, and he'd honed that virtue over decades in a cage.

A cage Rossi had played a part in locking behind him.

He got out of the car, and from the trunk removed a breathing mask. A precaution, as he'd given the gas time to dissipate.

But miscalculations, small mistakes—and *impatience*—had cost him dearly in the past.

He opened the passenger door and studied his work.

Rossi lay crumpled on the smooth leather seat. The knuckles of his hands, still fisted, showed scrapes, bruises, blood where he'd beaten them uselessly against the windows, the privacy shield.

He looked, his killer decided, like a dead walrus with his ridiculous mustache and pouchy belly. And with his mouth open, eyes bulging, appeared to be waiting to have someone toss him a fish.

His killer found that delightfully amusing.

After checking Rossi's pockets, he withdrew the printout of the message he'd sent and placed it in his own.

He replaced this with another, boldly printed on a carefully replicated business card, and this he slid between the index and middle fingers of Rossi's right fist.

**HERE LIES THE DEAD WASP.  
HE JOINS FAWN, HAWK, RABBIT.  
XII ARE NOW VIII.  
SOON THERE WILL BE ONLY I.**

"They'll come, oh yes, they'll all come."

In the house, in the room designated for disguise, he removed the chauffeur's uniform, the short brown wig. Slowly, a bit painfully, he peeled off the skin mask that, while uncomfortably tight, wiped two decades off his age.

Once he'd removed that, he massaged cream into his skin, all but felt it absorb like a thirsty man drinks water.

He took out the colored contacts, cleaned the makeup off his hands that matched them to the dusky tone of the skin mask.

He changed the black dress shoes with their two-inch lifts for black kicks.

He covered his hair—dyed raven black to remove the gray—with a lighter brown wig long enough for a short tail. He added a few pounds to his girth under a simple T-shirt and casual pants.

He drove east out of the garage.

He carefully drove the limo he'd stolen a week before until he parked it beneath an underpass.

He abandoned it there—such a trick would only work once—and strolled away. He walked easily for four blocks, enjoying the stubborn heat of late summer.

He had a car, a luxury sedan he'd treated himself to shortly after his arrival in New York. He paid the parking fee and drove home again.

After removing his last disguise, he replaced everything, organized, inventoried in the room on the second floor, a room he kept secured at all times.

In the well-appointed kitchen with its river view, he fixed himself a snack. Some olives, cheese, thin crackers. He poured a cognac.

He took the tray into what he considered his parlor, one he'd outfitted with comfortable, streamlined furniture and a large entertainment screen.

As his mood was jovial, he chose a comedy for his entertainment.

He would prize, always, the freedom to eat what he wished when he wished, to come and go as he pleased.

Seven remaining, he thought as he settled in. He still thought it a pity Rabbit had died quietly at home, surrounded by his family. But that didn't mean he couldn't extract payment there, too.

When the rest was done, he could select a member of that family as a stand-in.



Plenty of time, he thought. He had nothing but time, while for the rest of The Twelve, oh yes, their clocks were ticking.

★ ★ ★

Lieutenant Eve Dallas slept quiet, slept deep in the big old four-poster beside her husband, with the cat curled against the small of her back.

If she dreamed, the dreams stayed quiet, too.

She didn't hear Roarke rise for the day, awakened by his personal internal clock.

The sound of his shower brought a waterfall into her sleeping mind, its waters blissfully warm and as wildly blue as Roarke's eyes.

They swam there together, bodies sleek and naked. Wet, his mane of black hair gleamed in the moonlight, that full moon dazzled on the water, and into the wonderful wild blue of his eyes.

When she swam under the warm, clear water, the sand below lay smooth and pure white.

And when she rose up, he reached for her. Their legs tangled and locked together as their mouths met, and the pleasure shimmered through.

Something bit her ankle.

She woke with a jolt, with her communicator buzzing.

"Damn it. Jesus." She snatched it up. "Dallas."

*Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. Report to underpass FDR Drive at Ninetieth Street. DB in vehicle. See the uniforms on scene.*

"Acknowledged. Contact Peabody, Detective Delia. Dallas out. Lights on, twenty percent," she ordered.

Then sat a moment, scrubbing her hands over her face.

With a white towel slung around his waist, his hair still damp from the shower, Roarke stepped into the bedroom.

He took one look at her. "Well then," he said.

"Dead body, Upper East Side. Why are you up?"

“It’s nearly half-four, and I’ve a meeting.” As he spoke, Ireland weaving through the words, he moved to the cabinet holding the AutoChef. “I’d say it’s coffee for two then.”

“Yeah. Hell.” She started to get up, then frowned at him. Mostly naked, hair wet. “I think I was having a sex dream.”

He brought her coffee, strong and black, looked into her sleepy whiskey-colored eyes. “I hope I made an appearance.”

“Yeah. You were wet. I was wet.” Shaking her head, she gulped coffee. “Then dead body—for real.”

She got up, which had the cat rolling over to sprawl. With the coffee, she walked to, then into, the forest of clothes that was her closet.

“Summer’s hanging on,” he told her. “You’ll want to keep that in mind.”

She grabbed a white T-shirt—unless it was cream, or oatmeal, or another of the myriad shades of white with stupid names. Gray trousers seemed good enough. But when she started to reach for a gray jacket, all those damn shades defeated her.

Too early for this crap, she decided, and went with a navy jacket.

Black boots seemed like too many colors, and God knew Roarke made sure she had a zillion to choose from. She grabbed navy there, and dressed in the closet so it would be done before he could point out the error of her fashion-declined ways.

And somehow when she carried the jacket out to grab her weapon harness, he already wore a sharply cut gray suit, a shirt in a deeper tone of gray with the slightest sheen, and a perfectly knotted tie with hints of burgundy against the gray.

“I guess when you were stealing your way across the planet, the quick change came in handy.”

He smiled. “It didn’t hurt. You’ll eat something.”

“I need to—”

“Are uniforms on scene?”

“Yeah, but—”

“And the victim’s already dead. So you can take five minutes for food. Sit. Five minutes.”

She sat, but started the countdown in her head even as Roarke handed her a plate holding ham, eggs, cheese tucked into a golden-brown biscuit.

She took the first bite—good!—and glanced at the still sleeping cat.

“Looks like it’s too early for Galahad to try to steal some breakfast. What about you?” she asked as he sat beside her with his coffee.

“Just the coffee for now. I may wander downstairs after the meeting and see what Summerset’s having.”

She only grunted at the name of Roarke’s majordomo, father figure, and most usual pain in her ass.

“Brain’s waking up, and it seems to me Carmichael and Santiago were top of the roll. Must’ve already caught one. People are always murdering people in the middle of the damn night. And in broad daylight,” she added. “Who’s the meeting with?”

“Sydney.”

“Sydney who?”

“Australia, darling. I can reschedule if you want me to go with you.”

“No. I’ve got the dead body, you’ve got the world domination.”

“It’s good to play to our strengths. Now, about this sex dream.”

“I think we were swimming in a river. Why would we be swimming in a river?”

“To be wet and naked?”

“There was that. But other things swim in rivers, like fish and water snakes. And, depending, alligators. I don’t see getting wet and naked with alligators.”

“They would take the mind off sex.”

“So do dead bodies.” She rose, walked over to strap on her weapon harness, gather up her badge, her ’link, and all the rest.

After shrugging on her jacket, she dragged a hand through her short brown hair and considered it groomed.

“I’ve gotta go.”

“As do I. I’ll walk with you.”

“Why didn’t they take the vehicle?” she wondered. “Had their own? Can’t drive?”

“You’ll find out.”

Before he made the turn toward his office, he drew her in, kissed her. “See you take care of my cop.”

“I got that.” She laid a hand on his cheek. “I’d rather be swimming in a river with you.”

“With alligators?”

“No. That’s a deal-breaker.”

She kissed him again, then he watched his long-legged, lanky cop walk away to hunt a killer.

In the car, she programmed more coffee from the in-dash AC, then drove across town. One advantage of driving across Manhattan at not quite five in the morning? Barely any traffic. No hawking ad blimps overhead, advantage two, she decided.

She spotted a trio of street LCs hanging in for one more john or jane before calling it a night. She imagined when they did, they’d hike in their tiny skirts and mile-high heels to the all-night deli a block away for some fake coffee, a bagel and schmear.

Along her way she saw a quartet of twenty-somethings that had obviously put in a full night clubbing. Their voices, laughter—more than a little drunk—carried through her open car windows.

A café for them, she decided. Something with pricier fake coffee—most likely flavored—omelets from egg substitute, sides of pretend bacon that had never been part of a pig.

She drank some of her very real Roarke coffee with gratitude.

The towers and lofty homes of the Upper East took over. She could hear the whoosh of cars on the FDR, but those tucked inside their minor palaces wouldn’t.

A few lights glimmered here and there. Early risers—she sure as hell had married one of those—insomniacs, maybe a light left on for someone coming