

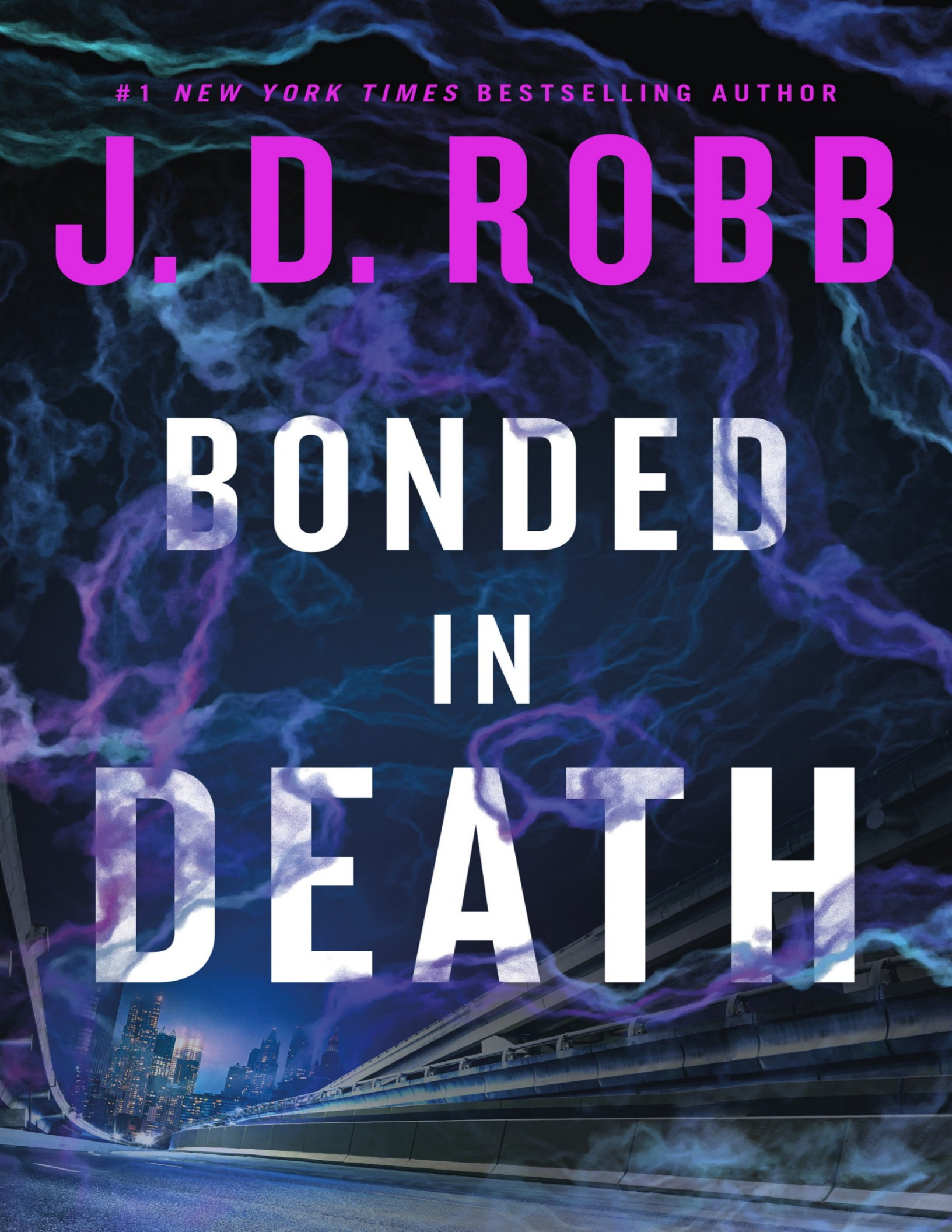
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J. D. ROBB

BONDED

IN

DEATH



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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.

XII

New York

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 duskiest 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 home late.

So many lives, she thought, in so many places, stacked, spread, scattered.

And someone was always taking one, ending one.

For so many reasons.

She guided her DLE to the underpass, where the traffic above came in a muffled roar.

She frowned when she saw the pair of uniforms beside the long, shining black stretch limo.

Unexpected, she admitted.

She got out, turned on her recorder, flipped up her badge.

She got out her field kit before walking toward the limo.

“Lieutenant Dallas, sir.”

The cop on the left, male, Black, early forties, had a mirror shine on his hard shoes. He stepped slightly to the side.

“Officer Mitgy. My partner, Officer Blane.”

Blane, female, white, about a decade younger than her partner, just nodded.

“We've got the nine-one-one caller in the patrol car,” Mitgy continued. “He states he spotted the vehicle, and curious, knocked on the driver's side door, then opened it. Upon seeing the body in the back, called it in. He admits he waited in hopes there might be a reward.”

“He's a little stoned, Lieutenant,” Blane put it.

“He appears mildly impaired,” Mitgy corrected. “We responded at zero-four-ten. Took the caller's statement, then opened the rear door of the vehicle and determined, visually, he is deceased.”

“And has your card in his hand.”

Eve frowned at Blane. “My card?”

“Lieutenant Eve Dallas. Homicide. NYPSD. Cop Central. Your badge and 'link numbers.”

“That's correct. We determined something was printed on the back of said card, but would have disturbed the body by removing it to read fully.”

““Here lies the dead Wasp,” Blane said. “There's more after that, but we couldn't be sure what.”

“All right, let's have a look.”

She sealed her hands, her boots, then opened the passenger door.

The victim lay, mouth agape, eyes wide—the white showed streaks of red under the film of death. He had a faint blue tinge to his lips. He wore a light jacket, a collared shirt beneath, tan pants, brown loafers.

He wore a wedding band on his left hand, a ring with a blue stone on his right.

A wineglass lay on the carpeted floor, and the stain on the carpet, a splatter on the door panel looked more like wine than blood.

His hands, fisted, looked as if he'd fought something or someone. The card stuck up between his clenched fingers.

“The victim, as yet unidentified, is male. Hair gray, eyes brown. About ... fifteen, approximately two hundred pounds. He's got a business card—what appears to be one of my business cards in his right hand. I'm removing it.”

She tugged it out, and it took a tug.

“Appears to be my card, but it's not. The paper's thicker than mine. There's printing on the back—all bold, all caps.

“Here lies the dead Wasp,” she began, and recording it visually, read out the message.

“Someone wants me to know he killed this guy, and intends to keep at it. Who the hell is the vic?”

She took out her Identi-pad, managed with some effort to turn the victim's thumb onto it.

“The vic is identified as Giovanni Rossi, Rome, Italy. Age seventy-nine. No New York address or U.S. address. Mitgy, check the trunk. Seal up first.”

She backed out enough to toss him her can of Seal-It, then her master.

She slid back in, began to go through the victim's pockets.

“Got a passport. And a 'link, a wallet. He's wearing two rings and a wrist unit. Killer didn't bother to help himself. Not even,” she noted when she checked the wallet, “to about three K in USD, and, ah, that again in euros.”

“There's a suitcase, Lieutenant, and a shoulder bag in the trunk.”

“Just came in, didn't you, Rossi? Just flew into New York tonight, from Rome. Limo picked you up. Wasp, what the hell does that mean? Wasp, Fawn, Hawk, Rabbit.”

And where the hell was Peabody?

“Blane, run the limo's plates. Mitgy, check international flights, Rome to New York City.”

She found the 'link passcoded—not a surprise.

She checked the body for wounds.

“No injuries visible other than the knuckles, both hands.”

She frowned at the window. “Looks like a little blood on the glass.”

“Lieutenant, a vehicle of this description was reported stolen seven days ago. Executive Transportation.”

“A week. Couldn’t have it on the street for a week. Had it stashed somewhere. Had adjustments to make.”

She climbed out. On the off-chance, she hit the ignition. It purred to life. “He didn’t bother to lock the ignition. Didn’t bother with the code. Done with it.”

She hunted and found the mechanism for the privacy screen, lifted it.

Rounding to the back again, she studied the screen from the victim’s side. “Blood traces, and it looks like he tried to kick it out.”

She looked back at Rossi.

“You’re trapped.” She tried to lower the window, and it didn’t budge. Tried the door handle. It stayed firmly in place. “Locked in. Pro job, all the markings of a pro. But why the card, my card, the message?”

“TOD, zero-forty-six,” she said when she inserted her gauge. “COD, ME to determine. Poison leads my pack. Slow-acting enough for him to try to get the hell out.”

“Lieutenant, a flight from Rome landed at the international station at zero-eighteen hours. Giovanni Rossi was on the manifest.”

She didn’t need to be a math whiz to figure the killer hadn’t waited long. Under a half hour from landing? Barely time to get off the shuttle, through Customs, get into the limo, and pour that glass of wine.

She picked up the wineglass, sniffed it before bagging it.

And heard the clomp of her partner’s favorite boots—pink cowboy boots Eve had been weak enough to buy for her.

“Sorry, Dallas, sorry. It took forever. Lower West is like a different world from Upper East.”

Eve glanced back.

Peabody had her red-streaked black hair in a high bouncy tail. She had a white shirt with thick pink stripes under a light blue jacket.

At least she wore sensible black pants.

“McNab with you?”

“They said vehicle, so we didn’t see the point in him coming all the way up here, then back to Central again. Do you need him?”

Eve figured Peabody’s man, and one of NYPSD’s e-detectives, could slide through the vic’s passcoded link in minutes. But it could wait.

“No.” She bagged the ’link, passed it to Peabody. “Passcoded. EDD will open it up.”

She held up another evidence bag, the one holding the business card. “Vic had this stuck in his fist. The killer stuck it there.”

“Your card.”

“Made to look like it. This is better paper than what we get.” She turned the bag around.

“Code, you think? Animal names. Well, a wasp isn’t an animal. And Roman numerals. Why leave you a message you wouldn’t understand? Unless—did you know the vic?”

“No. He just flew in from Rome. Look, the nine-one-one caller’s in the patrol car. Get his statement, his name, contact. Low odds he’s in this. I want to contact Morris myself. I can’t give a COD on this one. I’ll call the sweepers. We’re going to need the limo taken in, and taken apart. He rigged it. The killer rigged it to trap the victim in the back.”

“I’ll take the nine-one-one caller now.”

Eve stepped away, pulled out her ’link.

The chief medical examiner answered clothed as Roarke had been—before the suit. He wore nothing but a towel—a black one in Morris’s case—hung low on his hips.

His long black hair spilled damply down his back nearly to his waist. He had swimmer’s shoulders, and though he only operated on the dead, the hands of a surgeon.

He smiled. “So, we wake to the dead?”

“Yeah. I got a male victim—age seventy-nine, dead in the back of a stolen limo. Only visible wounds his hands—smears of blood on the privacy screen, the window. I got most of a bottle of red wine, and whatever was in the glass, and didn’t go in the vic, spilled on the floor. Vic flew in from Rome tonight.”

“A poor end to a long trip.”

“He had a facsimile of my card in his hand, and a cryptic—you gotta say cryptic—message on the back.”

She held it up for Morris to read.

“That would reach the cryptic level. So our victim would be the Wasp. One way to dispense with wasps is poison.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking, but can’t confirm. He’s otherwise known as Giovanni Rossi, out of Rome. I’ve still got some work to do here, but wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“I’ll contact the dead wagon for you, and be in-house as soon as possible.”

“Appreciate it.”

“I assume, until tonight, you were unacquainted with Signore Rossi.”

“Don’t know the name, don’t know the face. Something might jog when I notify next of kin. Maybe I know his killer. He’s the one who made the card.”

“Well, we love a mystery, don’t we? I’ll see Rossi soon, and you when you come in.”

She pocketed the ’link, then walked back to go through the victim’s luggage.

She found nothing out of line. No weapons, no secret compartments. Just the clothes and toiletries of a man on a trip. Along with a photo of the victim with a woman she assumed had put the wedding ring on his finger.

Peabody came over. “Caller’s Trevor Stash, age twenty-two. He lives a couple blocks from here. I let him go, Dallas. He was a little high, or had been. Admitted it. Blubbered a little, never seen a dead body before, but he could tell dead when he did see it. Figured the guy had a heart attack or something, and maybe the limo driver went for help.”

“Did he touch anything?”

“He says not, and I’d believe that.”

“And he was here because?”

“Cut through here after partying with friends. He gave me a list of names, clubs. Then the name and address of the girl he left the last club with, got lucky with.

“Said he was feeling really good, and just tried to be a good person. Thought, at first, maybe the limo had some trouble, then he saw the body in the back. Also admitted he started to just take off, all shaken up, but wanted to do the right thing. And maybe there’d be a reward. Called it in, waited for the cops.

“Comes off true, Dallas.”

“Yeah, he’s not in it. Vic had jewelry, had cash, it’s still there.”

Night began to give way to day as she stood, shoved her hands in her pockets.

Who the hell was Giovanni Rossi, and why did he come to New York? What did he plan to do? Who did he plan to see?

More, why did his killer want her on the case?