
Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

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Purity in Death

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We bow our heads before Thee, and we laud
And magnify thy name Almighty God!
But man is thy most awful instrument
In working out a pure intent.

—William Woodsworth

In friendship false, implacable in hate,
Resolv'd to ruin or to rule the state.

—John Dryden

Prologue

The heat was murder. July flexed her sweaty muscles, eyed the goal, and drop-kicked New York into the sweltering steambath of summer. Some managed to escape, fleeing to their shore homes where they could sip cold drinks and bask in ocean breezes while they did their business via telelink. Some loaded up on supplies and hunkered down inside their air-cooled homes like tribes under siege.

But most just had to live through it.

With humatures into the triple digits, and no end in sight, moods turned surly, deodorants failed, and petty annoyances elbowed even the mildest of souls toward violence.

Emergency medical centers were jammed with the wounded soldiers of summer, 2059. Many who, under normal conditions, wouldn't so much as jaywalk saw the inside of police stations and holding tanks, forced to call lawyers to explain why they had attempted to throttle a coworker, or shove a complete stranger under the wheels of a Rapid Cab.

Usually, once cooled off, they didn't know why but sat or stood, blank-faced and baffled, like someone coming out of a trance.

But Louie K. Cogburn knew just what he was doing, why he did it, and how he intended to keep right on doing it. He was a small-time illegals dealer who primarily hawked Zoner and Jazz. To increase his profit margin, Louie cut the Zoner with dried grass scored from city parks, and the Jazz with baking powder he bought in warehouse-sized bins. His target clientele were middle-class kids between the ages of ten and twelve in the three school districts closest to his Lower East Side apartment.

This cut down on travel time and expense.

He preferred straight middle-class as the poor generally had their own suppliers within the family ranks, and the rich copped to the grass and baking powder too quickly. The target age group fit Louie's brand of logic. He liked to say if you hooked 'em young, you had a client for life.

So far this credo hadn't proved out for him as Louie had yet to maintain a business relationship with a client through high school graduation.

Still, Louie took his business seriously. Every evening when his potential clients were doing their homework, he did his. He was proud of his bookkeeping, and would certainly have earned more per annum as a number cruncher for any midlevel firm than he did dealing. But he was a man who felt that men worked for themselves.

Just lately if there'd been a wash of dissatisfaction, a touch of irritability, a jagged edge of despair

after he spent an hour running his business programs on his third-hand desktop, he put it off to the heat.

And the headache. The vicious bastard of a headache no dose of his own products could ease.

He lost three days of work because the pain had become the focus of his world. He holed up in his studio flop, stewing in the heat, blasting his music to cover up the raging storm in his head.

Somebody was going to pay for it, that's all he knew. Somebody.

Goddamn lazy-assed super hadn't fixed the climate control. He thought this, with growing anger while his beady, reddened eyes scanned numbers. He sat in his underwear, by the single open window of his one-room apartment. No breeze came through it, but the street noise was horrendous. Shouts, horns, squealing tires on pavement.

He turned up the trash rock he played out of his ancient entertainment unit to drown out the noise. To beat at the pain.

Blood trickled out of his nose, but he didn't notice.

Louie K. rubbed a lukewarm bottle of home-brew over his forehead. He wished he had a blaster. If he had a goddamn blaster he'd lean out the goddamn window and take out a goddamn city block.

His most violent act to date had been to kick a delinquent client off his airboard, but the image of death and destruction fueled him now as he sweated over his books and madness bloomed in his brain like black roses.

His face was pale as wax, rivulets of sweat pouring down from his matted brown hair, streaming down his narrow cheeks. His ears rang and what felt like an ocean of grease swayed in his belly. Heat was making him sick, he thought. He got sick, he lost money. Ought to take it out of the super's hide. Ought to.

His hands trembled as he stared at the screen. Stared at the screen. Couldn't take his eyes from the screen.

He had an image of himself going to the window, climbing out on the ledge, beating his fists at the hot wall of air, at the noise, at the people below. A blaster in his hands, doling out death and destruction as he screamed at them. Screamed and screamed as he leaped.

He'd land on his feet, and then . . .

The pounding on his door had him spinning around. With his teeth bared he climbed back in the window.

"Louie K., you asshole! Turn that fucking music down in there!"

"Go to hell," he muttered as he hefted the ball bat he often took to recreation areas to insinuate

himself with potential clients. “Go to hell, go to hell. Let’s all go to hell.”

“You hear me? Goddamn it!”

“Yeah, I hear you.” There were spikes, big iron spikes drilling into his brain. He had to get them out. On a thin scream, he dropped the bat to tear at his own hair. But the pounding wouldn’t stop.

“Suze is calling the cops. You hear me, Louie? You don’t turn that shit down Suze is calling the cops.” Each word was punctuated with a fist against the door.

With the music, the pounding, the shouts, the spikes all hammering in his head, the sweat drowning him, Louie picked up the bat again.

He opened the door, and started swinging.

Chapter 1

Lieutenant Eve Dallas loitered at her desk. She was stalling, and she wasn't proud of it. The idea of changing into a fancy dress, driving uptown to meet her husband and a group of strangers for a business dinner thinly disguised as a social gathering had all the appeal of climbing in the nearest recycler and turning on Shred.

Right now Cop Central was very appealing.

She'd caught and closed a case that afternoon, so there was paperwork. It wasn't *all* stalling. But all the bevy of witnesses had all agreed that the guy who'd taken a header off a six-story people glide had been the one who'd started the pushy-shovey match with the two tourists from Toledo, it wasn't much of a time sucker.

For the past several days, every case she'd caught had been a variation on the same theme. Domestic violence where spouses had battled to the death, street brawls turned lethal, even a deadly combat at a corner glide-cart over ice cones.

Heat made people stupid and mean, she thought, and the combination spilled blood.

She was feeling a little mean herself at the idea of dressing up and spending several hours in some snooty restaurant making small talk with people she didn't know.

That's what you got, she thought in disgust, when you marry a guy who had enough money to buy a couple of continents.

Roarke actually liked evenings like this. The fact that he did never failed to baffle her. He was even a bit at home in a five-star restaurant—one he likely owned anyway—nibbling on caviar as he was sitting at home chowing down on a burger.

And she supposed as their marriage was approaching its second year, she'd better stop crabbing about it. Resigned, she pushed back from the desk.

"You're still here." Her aide, Peabody, stopped in the doorway of her office. "I thought you had some fancy dinner deal uptown."

"I got time." A glance at her wrist unit brought on a little tug of guilt. Okay, she was going to be late. But not very. "I just finished up on the glide diver."

Peabody, whose summer blues defied all natural order and managed to stay crisp in the wilting heat, kept her dark eyes sober. "You wouldn't be stalling, would you, Lieutenant?"

"One of the residents of our city, who I am sworn to serve and protect, ended up squished like a bug."

on Fifth Avenue. I think he deserves an extra thirty minutes of my time.”

“It must be really rough, forced to put on a beautiful dress, stick some diamonds or whatever all over you and choke down champagne and lobster croquettes beside the most beautiful man ever born on or off planet. I don’t know how you get through the day with that weight on your shoulders, Dallas.”

“Shut up.”

“And here I am, free to squeeze into the local pizza place with McNab where we will split the pie and the check.” Peabody shook her head slowly. The dark bowl of hair under her cap swayed in concert. “I can’t tell you how guilty I feel knowing that.”

“You looking for trouble, Peabody?”

“No, sir.” Peabody did her best to look pious. “Just offering my support and sympathy at this difficult time.”

“Kiss ass.” Torn between annoyance and amusement, Eve started to shove by. Her desk ’link beeped.

“Shall I get that for you, sir, and tell them you’ve gone for the day?”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up?” Eve turned back to the desk, took the transmission. “Homicide. Dallas.”

“Sir. Lieutenant.”

She recognized Officer Troy Trueheart’s face as it popped on-screen, though she’d never seen its young, All-American features so strained. “Trueheart.”

“Lieutenant,” he repeated after an audible swallow. “I have an incident. In response to . . . oh gosh, killed him.”

“Officer.” She pulled his location on-screen as she spoke. “Are you on duty?”

“No, sir. Yes, sir. I don’t know, exactly.”

“Pull yourself together, Trueheart.” She slapped out the order, watched his head jerk as if he’d felt it physically. “Report.”

“Sir. I had just clocked off shift and was on my way home on foot when a female civilian shouted for assistance from a window. I responded. On the fourth floor of the building in question an individual armed with a bat was assaulting the female. Another individual, male, was unconscious or dead in the hallway, bleeding from the head. I entered the apartment where the assault was taking place, and . . . Lieutenant, I tried to stop him. He was killing her. He turned on me, ignored all warnings and orders to desist. I managed to draw my weapon, to stun. I swear I intended to stun, but

he's dead."

"Trueheart, look at me. Listen to me. Secure the building, call in the incident through Dispatch and inform them that you've reported to me and I'm on my way. I'll call for medical assistance. You hold the scene, Trueheart. Hold it by the book. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I should've called Dispatch first. I should've—"

"You stand, Trueheart. I'm on the way. Peabody," Eve commanded as she strode out the door.

"Yes, sir. I'm with you."

There were two black-and-whites, nose-to-nose, and a medi-van humped between them at the curb when Eve pulled up. The neighborhood was the type where people scattered rather than gathered when cops showed up, and as a result there was no more than a smattering of gawkers on the sidewalk who had to be told to stay back.

The two uniforms who flanked the entrance eyed her, then exchanged a look. She was brass, and the one who could well put one of their own rank's balls in the blender.

She could feel the chill as she approached.

"Cop shouldn't get hassled by cops for doing the job," one of them muttered.

Eve paused in midstride and stared him down.

He saw rank in the form of a long, leanly built woman with eyes of gilded brown that were as flat and expressionless as a snake's as they met his. Her hair, short and choppy, was nearly the same color and framed a narrow face offset by a wide mouth that was now firmed into one thin line. There was a shallow dent in a chin that looked like it could hold its own against a fist.

Under her stare he felt himself shrink.

"Cop shouldn't slap at a cop for doing hers," she said coldly. "You got a problem with me, Officer? Wait until I do that job. Then mouth off."

She moved into the shoe box lobby, punched a finger on the Up button of the single elevator. She was already steaming, but it had little to do with the oppressive heat. "What is it with some uniforms that they want to bite your throat when you're rank?"

"It's just nerves, Dallas," Peabody replied as they stepped onto the elevator. "Most of the uniforms out of Central know Trueheart, and you gotta like him. A uniform terminates on his own like this, Testing's going to be brutal."

"Testing's brutal anyway. The best we can do for him is to keep this clean and ordered. He's already

screwed up by tagging me before he called it in.”

“Is he going to take heat for that? You’re the one who pulled him out of the sidewalk scooper detail and into Central last winter. Internal ought to understand—”

“IAB isn’t big on understanding. So let’s hope it doesn’t go there.” She stepped off the elevator. Studied the scene.

He’d been smart enough, cop enough, she noted with some relief, not to disturb the bodies. Two men lay sprawled in the corridor, one of them facedown in a pool of congealing blood.

The other was faceup, staring with some surprise at the ceiling. Through an open doorway beside the bodies she could hear the sounds of weeping and groaning.

The door across was also open. She noted several fresh holes and dents in the hallway walls, splinters of wallboard, splatters of blood. And what had once been a baseball bat was now a broken club, covered with blood and brain matter.

Straight as a soldier, pale as a ghost, Trueheart stood at the doorway. His eyes still held the glassy edge of shock.

“Lieutenant.”

“Hold it together, Trueheart. Record on, Peabody.” Eve crouched down to examine the two bodies. The bloodied one was big and beefy, the kind of mixed fat and muscle build that could usually plow through walls if annoyed enough. The back of his skull looked like an egg that had been cracked with brick.

The second body wore only a pair of grayed Jockey shorts. His thin, boney frame showed no wounds, no bruising, no damage. Thin trickles of blood had seeped out of his ears, his nostrils.

“Officer Trueheart, do we have identification on these individuals?”

“Sir. The, um, initial victim has been identified as Ralph Wooster, who resided in apartment 42E. The man I—” He broke off as Eve’s head whipped up, as her eyes drilled into his.

“And the second individual?”

Trueheart wet his lips. “The second individual is identified as Louis K. Cogburn of apartment 43F.”

“And who is currently wailing inside apartment 42E?”

“Suzanne Cohen, cohabitation partner of Ralph Wooster. She called for aid out the window of said apartment. Louis Cogburn was assaulting her with what appeared to be a club or bat when I arrived on scene. At that time—”

He broke off again when Eve held up a finger. “Preliminary examination of victims indicates a mixed-race male—mid-thirties, approximately two hundred and thirty pounds, approximately six foot

one—has suffered severe trauma to head, face, and body. A bat, apparently wooden, and marked with blood and brain matter would appear to be the assault weapon. The second male, also mid-thirties, Caucasian, approximately one hundred and thirty pounds, approximately five foot eight, is identified as the assailant. Cause of death as yet undetermined. Second vic bled from ears and nose. There is no visual trauma or wound.”

She straightened. “Peabody, I don’t want these bodies touched. I’ll do the field exam after I talk to Cohen. Officer Trueheart, did you discharge your weapon during the course of this incident?”

“Yes, sir. I—”

“I want you to surrender that weapon to my aide, who will bag it at this time.”

There were grumblings from the two uniforms at the end of the hall, but she ignored them as she held Trueheart’s gaze. “You are not obliged to surrender your weapon without representation present. You may request a representative. I’m asking you to give your weapon to Peabody so there’s no question as to the sequence of this investigation.”

Through the shock, she saw his absolute trust in her. “Yes, sir.” When he reached down for his weapon, she put a hand on his arm.

“Since when are you a southpaw, Trueheart?”

“My right arm’s a little sore.”

“Were you injured during the course of this incident?”

“He got a couple of swings in before—”

“The individual you were obliged to draw on assaulted you in the due course of your duties?” She wanted to shake him. “Why the hell didn’t you say so?”

“It happened awfully fast, Lieutenant. He rushed me, came in swinging, and—”

“Take off your shirt.”

“Sir?”

“Lose the shirt, Trueheart. Peabody, record here.”

He blushed. *God, what an innocent*, Eve thought, as Trueheart unbuttoned his uniform shirt. She heard Peabody suck in a breath, but whether it was for Trueheart’s undeniably pretty chest, or the bruising that exploded over his right shoulder and mottled the arm to the elbow, she couldn’t be sure.

“He got in a couple of good swings by the look of it. I want the MTs to take a look at you. Next time you’re hurt on the job, Officer, make it known. Standby.”

Apartment 42E was in shambles. Though from what was left of the decor, Eve imagined

housekeeping wasn't a high priority of its residents. Still, it was doubtful the place was normally a minefield of broken glass, or the walls decorated with surreal paintings of blood splatters.

The woman on the gurney looked like she'd known better days as well. A bandage streaked across her left eye, and above it, below it, the skin was raw.

"She coherent?" Eve asked one of the medical technicians.

"Just. Kept her from going all the way under since we figured you'd want a word with her. Make it snappy though," he told her. "We need to get her in. She's got a detached cornea, shattered cheekbone, broken arm. Guy whaled on her good and proper."

"Five minutes. Miss Cohen." Eve stepped up, leaned down. "I'm Lieutenant Dallas. Can you tell me what happened?"

"He went crazy. I think he killed Ralph. Just went crazy."

"Louis Cogburn?"

"Louie K., yeah." She moaned. "Ralph was pissed. Music up so loud you couldn't think straight. Fucking hot. Just wanted a couple of brews and a little quiet. What the hell? Louie K., he mostly play the music loud, but this was busting our eardrums. He's had it wailing for days."

"What did Ralph do?" Eve prompted. "Ms. Cohen?"

"Ralph went and banged on the door, told him to cut it back. Next I knew, Louie came busting out, swinging a bat or something. Looked crazy. Blood was flying, he was screaming. I was scared, really scared, so I slammed the door and ran to the window. Called for help. I could hear him screaming out there, and these awful thumping sounds. I couldn't hear Ralph. I kept calling for help, then he came in."

"Who came in?"

"Louie K. Didn't even look like Louie. Had blood all over him, and something was wrong with his eyes. He come at me, with the bat. I ran, tried to run. He was smashing everything and screaming about spikes in his head. He hit me, and I don't remember after that. Hit me in the face and I don't remember until the MTs started working on me."

"Did you see or speak with the officer who responded to your call for help?"

"I didn't see nothing but stars. Ralph's dead, isn't he?" A single tear slid down her cheek. "They won't tell me, but Louie'd never have gotten past him 'less he was dead."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. Did Ralph and Louie have a history of altercations?"

"You mean did they go at it before? Yelled at each other sometimes about the music, but they'd more likely have a couple brews or smoke a little Zoner. Louie's just a little squirt of a guy. He never

caused no problems around here.”

“Lieutenant.” One of the MTs moved in. “We’ve got to transport her.”

“All right. Send somebody in to take a look at my officer. He caught a couple solids in the arm and shoulder.” Eve stepped back, then moved to the door behind them. “Trueheart, you’re going to give me a report, on record. I want it clear, I want it detailed.”

“Yes, sir. I clocked off at eighteen-thirty and proceeded southeast from Central on foot.”

“What was your intended destination?”

He flushed a little. Color came and went in his face. “I was, ah, proceeding to the home of a friend where I had arrangements for dinner.”

“You had a date.”

“Yes, sir. As I approached this building, I heard calls for assistance and looking up saw a woman leaning out of the window. She appeared to be in considerable distress. I entered the building, proceeded to the fourth floor where I could hear the sounds of an altercation. Several individuals came to their doors, but no one attempted to come out. I called requests for someone to call nine-eleven.”

“Did you take the stairs or the elevator?” Details, she thought. She needed to take him through every detail.

“The stairs, sir. I thought it would be faster. When I reached this floor, I saw the male identified as Ralph Wooster lying on the floor of the corridor between apartments 42E and 43F. I did not, at that time, check him for injuries as I could hear screaming and breaking glass emitting from 42E. I responded to this immediately and witnessed the individual identified as Louis K. Cogburn assaulting a woman with what appeared to be a baseball bat. The weapon was . . .”

He paused a moment, swallowed hard. “The weapon was covered with what appeared to be blood and gray matter. The woman was unconscious on the floor, with Cogburn above her. He held the bat over his head as if preparing to strike another blow. I drew my weapon at this time, called for the assailant to cease and desist, identifying myself as Police.”

Trueheart had to stop now, and rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. The look he sent her was both helpless and pleading. “Lieutenant, it all happened fast from there.”

“Just tell it.”

“He turned away from the woman. He was screaming something about spikes in his head, about blasting out the window. Crazy stuff. Then he lifted the bat again, shifting so it looked like he was going to strike the woman. I moved in to prevent this, and he charged me. I tried to evade, to get the bat. He landed a couple of blows—I believe it broke at that time—and I fell back, knocked something over, hit the wall. I saw him coming at me again. I yelled at him to stop.”

Trueheart took a steadying breath, but it didn't stop the quaver in his voice. "He cocked the bat like he was swinging for home, and I discharged my weapon. It's set on low stun, Lieutenant, the lowest setting. You can see—"

"What happened next?"

"He screamed. He screamed like—I've never heard anything like it. He screamed and he ran out into the hall. I pursued. But he went down. I thought he was stunned, just stunned. But when I got down to put restraints on him, I saw he was dead. I checked his pulse. He was dead. I got jumbled up. Sir, I got jumbled up. I know it was incorrect procedure to tag you before calling—"

"Never mind that. Officer, were you at the time you deployed your weapon, in fear for your life and/or the lives of civilians?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I was."

"Did Louis K. Cogburn ignore any and all of your warnings to cease and desist and surrender his weapon?"

"Yes, sir, he did."

"You." Eve pointed to one of the uniforms down the hall. "Escort Officer Trueheart downstairs. Medical attention for his injuries has been called for. Put him in one of the black-and-whites until the MTs can see him. Stay with him until I'm done in here. Trueheart, call your representative."

"But, sir—"

"I'm advising you to call your representative," she said. "I'm stating here, for the record, that in my opinion, after a cursory examination of the evidence, after an interview with Suzanne Cohen, your account of this incident is satisfactory. The deployment of your weapon appears to have been necessary to protect your life and the life of civilians. That's all I can tell you until my on-scene investigation into this matter is complete. Now I want you to go, get off your feet, call your rep and let the MTs take care of you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Come on, Trueheart." The other uniform patted Trueheart on the back.

"Officer? Any of the beat cops know these dead guys?"

The uniform glanced back at Eve. "Proctor has this sector. He might."

"Get him," she said as she sealed up and walked into 43F.

"He's awful shook," Peabody said.

"He'll have to get over it." She scanned the room.

It was a filthy mess, smelling ripely of spoiled food and dirty laundry. The cramped kitchen area consisted of a two-foot counter, a mini-AutoChef and minifridge. A huge tin sat on the counter. Eve lifted her brows as she read the label.

“You know, I just don’t see our Louie K. baking a lot of cakes.” She opened one of the two cupboards and perused the neat line of sealed jars. “Looks like Louie was in the illegals line. Funny, everything in here’s neat as Aunt Martha’s, and the rest of the place is a pigsty.”

She turned around. “No dust on the furniture though. That’s funny, too. You wouldn’t figure a guy who sleeps on sheets that smell like a swamp would bother chasing dust.”

She opened the closet. “Tidy in here, too. Clothes show a lack of fashion taste, but they’re all clean. Look at that window, Peabody.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Glass is clean, inside and out. Somebody washed them within the last couple weeks. Why do you wash your windows and leave—what the hell is this?—unidentified spilled food substance all over the floor?”

“Maid’s week off?”

“Yeah, somebody’s week off. That’s about how long this underwear’s been piled here.” She glanced at the door when a uniform stepped in.

“You Proctor?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know those two dead guys?”

“I know Louie K.” Proctor shook his head. “Shit—sorry, Lieutenant, but shit, this is some mess. That kid Trueheart’s down there puking his guts out.”

“Tell me about Louie K., and let me worry about Trueheart and his guts.”

Proctor poked up. “Small-time Illegals rat, went after schoolkids. Gave them samples of Zoner and Jazz to lure them in. Waste of air, you ask me. Did some time, but mostly he was pretty slick about it, and the Illegals guys never got much out of the kids.”

“He a violent tendency?”

“Anything but. Kept a low profile, never gave you lip. You told him to move his ass along, he moved it. He’d give you a look now and then like he’d like to do more, but he never had the guts for it.”

“Had guts enough to open Ralph Wooster’s head, bash a woman and assault a uniform.”

“Must’ve been sampling his own product’s all I can think. And that’s not profile either. He maybe smoked a little Zoner now and then, but he was too cheap to do more. What’s out there looks like Zeus,” Proctor added with a jerk of the thumb toward the corridor. “Little guy like that going nutso. But he never handled anything that hot I heard about.”

“Okay, Proctor. Thanks.”

“Guy sells illegals to schoolkids, world’s better off without him.”

“That’s not our call.” Eve dismissed him by turning her back. She moved to the desk, frowned at the computer screen.

ABSOLUTE PURITY ACHIEVED

“What the hell does this mean?” she asked aloud. “Peabody, any new shit on the streets going by the name Purity?”

“I haven’t heard of it.”

“Computer, identify Purity.”

INVALID COMMAND.

Frowning, she entered her name, badge number, and authorization. “Identify Purity.”

INVALID COMMAND.

“Huh. Peabody do a run on new and known illegals. Computer, save current display. Display last task performed.”

The screen wavered, then opened a tidy, organized spreadsheet detailing inventory, profit, loss, and coded customer base.

“So, according to the last task, and time logged, Louie was sitting here, very efficiently doing his books when he got a bug up his ass to bust his neighbor’s head open.”

“It’s hot, Dallas.” Peabody looked over Eve’s shoulder. “People can just get crazy.”

“Yeah.” Maybe it was just that simple. “Yeah, they can. Nothing on his inventory named Purity.”

“Nothing on the current illegals list by that name either.”

“So what the hell is it, and how was it achieved?” She stepped back. “Let’s take a look at Louie K. see what he tells us.”

Chapter 2

He didn't tell her as much as she'd have liked.

The best she could determine on-scene with her field kit was that Louie K. had died due to neurological melt-down. That wasn't exactly the sort of term that elicited sage nods from the brass.

She passed the body off to the ME, flagged for priority.

Which meant, due to summer hours and summer glut, she'd be lucky if she got a confirmed pathology by the first frost.

She meant to push, calling in chips with the chief medical examiner.

Meanwhile she spoke with Trueheart's departmental rep via 'link, and danced the bureaucratic dance. She sent the still shaken rookie home, and ordered him to stand by for Testing.

Then she went back to Central to write, and rewrite, a detailed report on the incident that had resulted in two deaths and one critical injury.

And though her stomach curdled, she followed procedure and copied Internal Affairs.

By the time she got home, it was well past the dinner hour.

The lights were on, so that the urban fortress Roarke had built glowed like a beacon in the night. Green shadows from grand and leafy trees threw patterns on velvet grass and slid softly over rivers of flowers that were bright and bold by day.

The Lower East Side neighborhood that had eaten up most of her evening was a world away from this private paradise of wealth, of privilege, of indulgence.

She was almost accustomed to straddling worlds now without losing her balance. Almost.

She left her vehicle at the base of the stone steps and jogged up them more out of a desperate desire to shrug off the weight of heat than out of hurry.

She'd barely stepped in, taken that first breath of cool, clean air, when Summerset, Roarke's majordomo, appeared in the foyer like an unwelcome vision.

"Yes, I missed the dinner," she said before he could open his mouth. "Yes, I'm a miserable failure as a wife and a poor example of a human being. I have no class, no courtesy, and no sense of decorum. I should be dragged naked into the streets and stoned for my sins."

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