



Indulgence in Death - Excerpt
Chapter 4

It was good to be home. driving downtown to Cop Central through ugly traffic, blasting horns, hyping ad blimps, belching maxibuses just put her in a cheerful mood.

Vacations were great, but to Eve's mind New York had it all and a bag of soy chips.

The temperature might have been as brutal as a tax audit, with sweaty waves of heat bouncing off concrete and steel, but she wouldn't trade her city for any place on or off planet.

She was rested, revved, and ready for work.

She rode the elevator up from the garage, shuffling over as more cops squeezed in on every floor. When she felt the oxygen supply depleting, she pried her way out to take the glides the rest of the way up.

It smelled like home, she thought—cop, criminal, the pissed off, the unhappy, the resigned. Sweat and bad coffee merged together in an aroma she wasn't sure could be found anywhere but a cop shop.

And that was fine with her.

She listened to a beanpole of a man in restraints mutter his mantra as a pair of uniforms muscled him up the glide.

Fucking cops, fucking cops, fucking cops.

It was music to her ears.

She stepped off, angled toward Homicide, and spotted Jenkinson, one of her detectives, studying the offerings at Vending with a hopeless expression.

"Detective."

He brightened slightly. "Hey, Lieutenant, good to see you."

He looked as if he'd slept in his clothes for a couple days.

"You pull a double?"

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“Caught one late, me and Reineke.” He settled on something that looked like a cheese Danish if you were blind in one eye. “Just wrapping it up. Vic’s in a titty bar over on Avenue A, getting himself a lap dance. Asshole comes in, starts it up. The titty doing the lap dance is his ex. Gives her a couple smacks. The guy with the hard-on clocks him. Asshole gets hauled out. He goes home, gets his souvenir Yankees baseball bat, lays in wait. Vic comes out, and the asshole jumps him. Beat the holy shit out of him and left his brains on the sidewalk.”

“High price for a lap dance.”

“You’re telling me. Asshole’s stupid, but slippery.” Jenkinson ripped the wrapping off the sad-looking Danish, took a resigned bite. “Leaves the bat and runs. We got wits falling out of our pockets, got his prints, got his name, his address. Slam-fucking-dunk. He doesn’t go home and make our lives easier, but what he does, a couple hours after, is go to the ex’s. Brings her freaking flowers he dug up out of a sidewalk planter deal. Dirt’s still falling off the roots.”

“Classy guy,” Eve observed.

“Oh, yeah.” He downed the rest of the Danish. “She won’t let him in—stripper’s got more sense—but calls it in while he’s crying and banging on the door, and dumping flower dirt all over the hallway. We get there to pick him up, and what does he do? He jumps out the freaking window end of the hall. Four flights up. Still holding the damn flowers and trailing dirt all the way.”

He shifted to order coffee with two hits of fake sugar. “Got the luck of God ’cause he lands on a couple chemi-heads doing a deal down below—killed one of them dead, other’s smashed up good. But they broke his fall.”

Deeply entertained, Eve shook her head. “You can’t make this shit up.”

“Gets better,” Jenkinson told her, slurping coffee. “Now we got to chase his ass. I go down the fire escape—and let me tell you smashed chemi-heads make one hell of a mess—Reineke goes out the front. He spots him. Asshole runs through the kitchen of an all-night Chinese place, and people are yelling and tumbling like dice. This fucker is throwing shit at us, pots and food and Christ knows. Reineke slips on some moo goo something, goes down. Hell no, you can’t make this shit up, LT.”

He grinned now, slurped more coffee. “He heads for this sex joint, but the bouncer sees this freaking blood-covered maniac coming and blocks the door. The bouncer’s built like a tank—so the asshole just bounces off him like a basketball off the rim, goes airborne for a minute and plows right into me. Jesus. Now I’ve got blood and chemi-head brains on me, and Reineke’s hauling ass over, and he’s covered with moo goo. And this asshole starts yelling police brutality. Took some restraint not to give him some.

“Anyway.” He blew out a breath. “We’re wrapping it up.”

Was it any wonder she loved New York?

“Good work. Do you want me to take you off the roll?”

“Nah. We’ll flex a couple hours, grab some sleep up in the crib once the asshole’s processed. You look at the big picture, boss? All that, over a pair of tits.”

“Love screws you up.”

“Fucking A.”

She turned into the bullpen, acknowledged “heys” from cops finishing up the night tour. She walked into her office, left the door open. Detective Sergeant Moynahan had, as she’d expected, left her desk pristine. Everything was exactly as it had been when she’d walked out her office door three weeks before, except cleaner. Even her skinny window sparkled, and the air smelled vaguely—not altogether unpleasantly—like the woods she’d

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walked through in Ireland.

Minus the dead body.

She programmed coffee from her AutoChef and, with a satisfied sigh, sat at her desk to read over the reports and logs generated during her absence.

Murder hadn't taken a holiday during hers, she noted, but her division had run pretty smooth. She moved through closed and open cases, requests for leave, overtime, personal time, reimbursements.

She heard the muffled clump that was Peabody's summer air boots, and glanced up as her partner stepped into the open doorway.

"Welcome home! How was it? Was it just mag?"

"It was good."

Peabody's square face sported a little sun-kiss, which reminded Eve her partner had taken a week off with her squeeze, Electronic Detectives Division ace McNab. She had her dark hair pulled back in a short, but jaunty tail, and wore a thin, buff-colored jacket over cargo trousers a few shades darker. Her tank matched the air boots in a bright cherry red.

"It looks like DS Moynahan kept things oiled while I was gone."

"Yeah. He sure dots every 'i,' but he's easy to work with. He's solid, and he knows how to ride a desk. He steers clear of field work, but he had a good sense of how to run the ship. So, what did you get?"

"A pile of reports."

"No, come on, for your anniversary. I know Roarke had to come up with something total. Come on," Peabody insisted when Eve just sat there. "I came in early just for this. I figure we've got nearly five before we're officially on the clock."

True enough, Eve thought, and since Peabody's brown eyes pleaded like a puppy's, she held up her arm, displayed the new wrist unit she wore.

"Oh."

The reaction, Eve thought, was perfect. Baffled surprise, severe disappointment, the heroic struggle to mask both.

"Ah, that's nice. It's a nice wrist unit."

"Serviceable." Eve turned her wrist to admire the simple band, the flat, silver-toned face.

"Yeah, it looks it."

"It's got a couple of nice features," she added as she fiddled with it.

"It's nice," Peabody said again, then drew her beeping communicator out of her pocket. "Give me a sec, I . . . hey, it's you." Mouth dropping, Peabody jerked her head up. "It's got a micro-com in it? That's pretty mag. Usually they're all fuzzy, but this is really clean."

"Nano-com. You know how the vehicle he rigged up for me looks ordinary?"

"Ordinary leaning toward ugly," Peabody corrected. "But nobody gives it a second look or knows that it's loaded, so . . . same deal?"

Automatically Peabody dug out her 'link when it signaled, then paused. "Is that you? It's got full communication capability? In a wrist unit that size?"

"Not only that, it's got navigation, full data capabilities. Total data and communications—he programmed it with all my stuff. If I had to, I could access my files on it. Waterproof, shatterproof, voice-command capabilities. Gives me the ambient temp. Plus it tells time."

Not to mention he'd given her a second with the exact same specs— only fired with diamonds. Something she'd wear when she suited up for fancy.

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“That is so utterly iced. How does it—”

Eve snatched her wrist away. “No playing with it. I haven’t figured it all out myself yet.”

“It’s just like the perfect thing for you. The abso perfect thing. He really gets it. And you got to go to Ireland and Italy and finish it up at that island he’s got. Nothing but romance and relaxation.”

“That’s about it, except for the dead girl.”

“Yeah, and McNab and I had a really good time—what? What dead girl?”

“If I had more coffee I might be inclined to tell you.”

Peabody sprang toward the AutoChef.

Minutes later, she polished off her own cup and shook her head. “Even on vacation you investigated a homicide.”

“I didn’t investigate, the Irish cop did. I consulted—unofficially. Now my serviceable yet frosty wrist unit tells me we’re on duty. Scram.”

“I’m scrambling, but I want to tell you about how McNab and I took scuba lessons, and—”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, but I liked it. And how I did these interviews on Nadine’s book, which is still number one in case you haven’t been checking. If we don’t catch a case, maybe we can have lunch. I’ll buy.”

“Maybe. I’ve got to catch up.”

Alone, she considered it. She wouldn’t mind hanging for lunch, she realized. It would be a kind of bridge between vacation and the job, screwing around and the routine of work.

She didn’t have any meetings scheduled, no actives on her plate. She’d need to go over some of the open cases with the teams assigned, touch base with Moynahan mostly to thank him for his service. Other than that—

She scanned the next report, answering her ’link. “Lieutenant Dallas, Homicide.”

Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve.

So much, she thought, for bridges.

Jamal Houston died with his chauffeur’s hat on behind the wheel of a limo of glittery gold, long and sleek as a snake. The limo had been tidily parked in a short-term slot at LaGuardia.

Since the crossbow bolt angled through Jamal’s neck and into the command pad of the wheel, Eve assumed Jamal had done the parking.

With her hands and boots sealed, Eve studied the entry wound.

“Even if you’re pissed off you missed your transpo, this is a little over the top.”

“A crossbow?” Peabody studied the body from the other side of the limo. “You’re sure?”

“Roarke has a couple in his weapons collection. One of them fires these bolts like this. One question is just why someone had a loaded crossbow in a limo to begin with.”

Houston, Jamal, she mused, going over the data they’d already accessed, black male, age forty-three, co-owner of Gold Star transportation service. Married, two offspring. No adult criminal. Sealed juvie. He’d been six feet one and one-ninety and wore a smart and crisp black suit, white shirt, red tie. His shoes were shined like mirrors.

He wore a wrist unit as gold as the limo and a gold star lapel pin with a diamond

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winking in the center.

“From the angle, it looks like he was shot from the right rear.”

“Passenger area is pristine,” Peabody commented. “No trash, no luggage, no used glasses or cups or bottles, and all the slots for the glassware are filled, so the killer and/or passenger didn’t take any with him. Everything gleams, and there are fresh—real—white roses in these little vases between the windows. A selection of viewing and audio and reading discs all organized by alpha and type in a compartment, and they don’t look like they’ve been touched. There are three full decanters of different types of alcohol, a fridge stocked with cold drinks, and a compact AutoChef. The log there says it was stocked about sixteen hundred, and it hasn’t been accessed since.”

“The passenger must not have been thirsty, and didn’t want a snack while he didn’t listen to music, read, or catch some screen. We’ll have the sweepers go over it.”

She circled the car, slid in beside the body. “Wedding ring, pricey wrist unit, gold star with diamond pin, single gold stud in his earlobe.” She worked her hand under the body, tugged out a wallet.

“He’s got plastic, and about a hundred fifty cash, small bills. It sure as hell wasn’t robbery.” She tried to access the dash comp. “It’s passcoded.” She had better luck with the ’link, and listened to his last transmission, informing his dispatcher he’d arrived at LaGuardia with his passenger for the pickup, and suggesting the dispatcher call it a night.

“He was supposed to pick up a second passenger.” Eve considered. “Picked up the first, second passenger coming in, transpo on time according to this communication. So he parks, and before he can get out to open the door for passenger one, he takes one in the neck. Time of death and the ’link log are only a few minutes apart.”

“Why does somebody hire a driver to go to the airport, then kill him?”

“There’s got to be a record of who hired the service, where they were picked up. One shot,” Eve murmured. “No muss, but a lot of fuss. Add in what you’d call an exotic weapon.”

She took a memo book from his pocket, his personal ’link, breath mints, a cotton handkerchief. “He’s got a pickup listed here at the Chrysler Building, ten-twenty p.m. AS to LTC. Passenger initials. No full name, no full addy. This is just his backup. Let’s see if we can find anyone who saw anything—ha ha—get crime scene in here. We’ll go check in with the company first.”

Gold Star ran its base out of Astoria. Peabody relayed the salient data as they drove. Houston and his partner, Michael Chin, had started the business fourteen years before with a single secondhand limo, and had run it primarily out of Houston’s home, with his wife serving as dispatcher, office dogsbody, and bookkeeper.

In less than fifteen years, they’d expanded to a fleet of twelve—all gold, high-end luxury limos with premier amenities, and had earned a five-diamond rating every year for nearly a decade.

They employed eight drivers, and an office and administrative staff of six. Mamie Houston continued to keep the books, and Chin’s wife of five years served as head mechanic. Houston’s son and daughter were listed as part-time employees.

When Eve pulled up in front of the streamlined building with its mammoth garage, a man of about forty in a business suit was watering a long window box full of red and white flowers. He paused, turned his pleasant face toward them with an easy smile.

“Good morning.”

“We’re looking for Michael Chin.”

“You’ve found me. Please come in, out of the heat. Barely nine in the morning and

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already sweltering.”

Cool air and the scent of flowers greeted them. A counter held the flowers and a compact data-and-communications unit. On a table glossy brochures fanned out. A couple of cozy scoop chairs ranged beside it while a gold sofa and a couple more chairs formed a conference area.

“Can I get you something cold to drink?”

“No, thanks. Mr. Chin, I’m Lieutenant Dallas, and this is Detective Peabody. We’re with the NYPSD.”

“Oh.” His smile remained pleasant, but edged toward puzzled. “Is there a problem?”

“I regret to inform you your partner, Jamal Houston, was found dead this morning.”

His face went blank, like a switch turned off. “I’m sorry, what?”

“He was found in one of the vehicles registered to this company.”

“An accident.” He took a step back, bumped into one of the chairs. “An accident? Jamal had an accident?”

“No, Mr. Chin. We believe Mr. Houston was murdered at approximately ten-twenty-five last night.”

“But no, no. Oh, I see. I see, there’s been a mistake. I spoke with Jamal myself shortly before that time. Minutes before that time. He was at the airport, at LaGuardia, driving a client, and picking up the client’s wife.”

“There’s no mistake. We’ve identified Mr. Houston. He was found in the limo, parked at LaGuardia, early this morning.”

“Wait.” This time Chin gripped the back of the chair, swayed a little. “You’re telling me Jamal is dead? Murdered? But how, how? Why?”

“Mr. Chin, why don’t you sit down?” Peabody eased him into the chair. “Can I get you some water?”

He shook his head, kept shaking it as his eyes, a brilliant green behind a forest of black lashes, filled. “Someone killed Jamal. My God, my sweet God. They tried to steal the car? Was that it? We’re supposed to cooperate in a jacking. It’s firm company policy. No car is worth a life. Jamal.”

“I know this is a shock,” Eve began, “and it’s very difficult, but we need to ask you some questions.”

“We’re having dinner tonight. We’re all having dinner tonight. A cookout.”

“You were here last night. You were running dispatch?”

“Yes. No. Oh, God.” He pressed the heels of his hands to those wet, brilliant eyes. “I was home, running dispatch from home. He had this late run, you see. He took it because Kimmy had two night runs in a row, and West was on an early one this morning, and it was Peter’s son’s birthday, and . . . it doesn’t matter. We flipped a coin, winner chooses dispatch or the run. He took the run.”

“When was it booked?”

“Just that afternoon.”

“Who was the client?”

“I . . . I’ll look it up. I don’t remember. I can’t think.” He dropped his head into his hands, then jerked it up again. “Mamie, the children. Oh, God, oh, God. I have to go. I have to get my wife. We have to go to Mamie.”

“Soon. The most important thing you can do for Jamal right now is give us information. We believe whoever was in the car with him killed him or knows who did. Who was in the car, Mr. Chin?”

“Wait.” He rose, went to the unit on the counter. “It doesn’t make sense. I know it

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was a new client, but he just wanted to surprise his wife by picking her up in style at the airport, then taking her out to a late supper. I remember that. Here, here it is. Augustus Sweet. The pickup was in front of the Chrysler Building. He was going to work late, and wanted to be picked up at his office. I have his credit card information. We always take that information in advance. I have everything here.”

“Can you make me a copy?”

“Yes, yes. But he was going to pick up his wife at the airport. He did request our best driver, but he didn’t even know Jamal, so I don’t understand. I could have been driving. Any of us could have. It was just . . .”

The flip of a coin, Eve thought.

He fell apart when Eve allowed him to call his wife in. Sobbed in her arms. She was six inches taller with flaming red hair, and was hugely pregnant.

Eve watched tears run down her cheeks, but she held together.

“We need to go with you,” she said to Eve. “She shouldn’t hear this from strangers. I’m sorry, that’s what you are. She needs family with her. We’re family.”

“That’s fine. Can you tell us the last time you saw or spoke with Mr. Houston?”

“Yesterday, about five, I guess. I’d gone over to Mamie’s because she was watching Tige—our son. His babysitter needed the day off. He came in just as we were leaving. He had that run later, and he went home for a few hours first. And I guess you need to know, because that’s the way it is. Michael got home about six-thirty, and we had dinner with our boy. Michael gave him his bath and put him to bed just before eight, because I was tired. He ran the dispatch from home. He came to bed about eleven. I know because I was still awake. I was tired,” she added, rubbing her belly. “The baby wasn’t. I don’t know the exact times, but that’s close.”

Eve ran them through a few more routine questions, but she already had the picture, had a sense.

The Houstons had a large and pretty suburban house with big windows, a rolling lawn, and a front garden that made Eve think of Ireland. Mamie Houston, a wide-brimmed straw hat protecting her face from the sun, stood snipping long-stemmed blooms and putting them in a wide, flat basket.

She turned, started to smile, to wave. Then the smile froze, and her hand dropped slowly to her side.

She knows something’s wrong, Eve thought. She’s wondering why her friends, her partners would drive to her house with a couple of strangers.

She dropped the basket. Flowers spilled out on the green lawn as she began to run.

“What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“Mamie.” Michael’s voice cracked. “Jamal. It’s Jamal.”

“Has there been an accident? Who are you?” she demanded of Eve. “What’s happened?”

“Mrs. Houston, I’m Lieutenant Dallas with the NYPSD.” As Eve spoke, Kimmy Chin moved to Mamie’s side, put an arm around her. “I regret to inform you your husband was killed last night.”

“That’s not possible. That can’t be true. He’s out for his run, or at the gym. I . . .” She patted her gardening pants. “I don’t have my ’link. I always forget my ’link when I come out to work in the garden. Michael, use yours, will you? He’s just gone out for his run.”

“He came home?”

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“Of course he came home.” She snapped it at Michael, then bit her lip. “I . . .”

“Mrs. Houston, why don’t we go inside?”

She rounded on Eve. “I don’t want to go inside. I want to talk to my husband.”

“When’s the last time you did?”

“I . . . When he left last night for work, but—”

“Weren’t you concerned when he didn’t come home?”

“But he must have. It was late. He was going to be late and said I shouldn’t wait up, so I went to bed. And he got up early, that’s all. He got up early to take his run and go by the gym. We have a gym in the house, but he likes to go there, to socialize. You know how he likes to take his run, then go to the gym to gossip, Kimmy.”

“I know, honey. I know. Let’s go inside. Come on now, we’re going inside.”

Inside, Kimmy sat beside her, holding her close in a sun-washed living area. Mamie stared at Eve, eyes glassy and unfocused.

“I don’t understand.”

“We’re going to do everything we can to find out what happened. You can help us. Do you know anyone who’d want to cause your husband harm?”

“No. He’s a good man. Tell her, Kimmy.”

“A very good man,” Kimmy soothed.

“Any trouble with employees?”

“No. We’ve kept it small. Exclusive. That . . . that was the whole point.”

“Has anything been troubling him?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Any money problems?”

“No. We have a good life, the business has given us a good life. We like the work—that’s why he still drives, why I keep the books. He’s always wanted to be his own boss, and the business is everything we wanted. He’s proud of what we’ve all built. We have two children in college, but we planned for it, so . . . the children. What will I tell the children?”

“Where are your children, Mrs. Houston?”

“Benji’s taking summer classes. He’s going to be a lawyer. He’ll be our lawyer. Lea’s at the beach for a couple days with friends. What should I tell them?” She turned to weep on Kimmy’s shoulder. “How can I tell them?”

Eve kept at it a while longer, but—for now at least—there was nothing here but shock and grief.

Stepping out into the drenching heat was a relief.

“Let’s check out the business financials, get a background on the partner and his wife, the rest of the employees. We’ll check this gym, verify his early-morning habit.”

“I’ve got it started. Doesn’t feel like it’s there,” Peabody commented. “They really do seem like family.”

“We closed a case recently where everybody was friends and partners with the dead guy.”

“Yeah.” Peabody sighed. “It can sure make you cynical.”

“Did you run this Augustus Sweet?”

“Yeah. He’s a senior VP, internal security, Dudley and Son, pharmaceuticals. Chrysler Building HQ.”

“Let’s go pay him a visit.”