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By J. D. Robb

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Lieutenant Eve Dallas soon discovers a lineup of women who were loved and left by the narcissistic gym rat. While Dallas sorts through the list of Ziegler's enemies, she's also dealing with her Christmas shopping list—plus the guest list for her and her billionaire husband's upcoming holiday bash.

Feeling less than festive, Dallas tries to put aside her distaste for the victim and solve the mystery of his death. There are just a few investigating days left before Christmas, and as New Year's 2061 approaches, this homicide cop is resolved to stop a cold-blooded killer.

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Festive in Death By J. D. Robb Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #88579 in Books
- Brand: J.D. Robb
- Published on: 2015-03-03
- Released on: 2015-03-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.81" h x .93" w x 4.19" l, .40 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 368 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“Tis the season for holidays and murder in the next installment of Robb’s incomparable *In Death* series...From kick-ass murder cop to society hostess, thankfully for readers Eve’s life is never dull!”—*RT Book Reviews*

“J. D. Robb continues to do a fine job balancing Eve the woman against Eve the career homicide detective...That may be why the series works for adventure after adventure after adventure.”—*New York Journal of Books*

More Praise for the *In Death* series

“Robb is a virtuoso.”—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“It’s *Law & Order: SVU*—in the future.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

“J. D. Robb’s *In Death* novels are can’t-miss pleasures.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Harlan Coben

“Anchored by terrific characters, sudden twists that spin the whole narrative on a dime, and a thrills-to-chills ration that will raise the neck hairs of even the most jaded reader, the J. D. Robb books are the epitome of great popular fiction.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Dennis Lehane

About the Author

J. D. Robb is the pseudonym for a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of more than 200 novels, including the bestselling *In Death* series. There are more than 500 million copies of her books in print.

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Men, Sima thought, can’t live with them, can’t beat them to death with a nine iron.

But a girl could exact some revenge, and she was a girl bent on just that.

Nobody deserved a good dose of revenge—or a beating with a nine iron—as much as Trey Ziegler. The fuckball had booted her out of the apartment they’d shared, even though she had the same territorial rights to the place as he did.

In the seven and a half weeks of their unofficial cohabitation, she’d paid half the rent, half the expenses, including food and beverage. She’d done *all* the cleaning (lazy bastard), all the marketing. And in that seven and a half weeks had given him the best years of her life.

Plus sex.

After considerable thought, in-depth conversations with close friends and confidants, two ten-minute

sessions of meditation and six tequila shots, she'd outlined precisely how, where, and when to exact her revenge.

The *how* involved that nine iron, an extensive collection of cashmere socks, and itching powder. The *where* was that one-bedroom apartment over Little Mike's Tattoo and Piercing Parlor in the West Village.

The *when* was right fucking now.

He wouldn't have changed the locks—cheap bastard—and didn't know she'd given a copy of her swipe to one of those friends and confidants, who also happened to be her boss, right after they'd moved in together.

And if he had changed the lock, her friend said she knew people who knew people, would tag one up, and it would be done.

Sima wasn't sure she wanted to know the people who knew people or how they would gain access to the apartment. But she knew she wanted in.

So with her friend beside her for moral support, she pulled out her swipe key to open the main door to the apartments over the tat parlor.

Her tequila-fueled grin spread wider when the locks clicked open.

"I *knew* it! He'd never bother springing for the money to have me deactivated."

"Maybe not on *this* door. We still have to see about the apartment." Her friend gave her a long, hard look. "You're abso-poso he's not in there?"

"Totally. His supervisor sprang for the weekend seminar, been in the works for weeks. No way he'd blow it off. Free hotel room, free food, and a chance to show off for two days."

Sima turned toward the skinny elevator, started to take off her gloves.

"We'll walk up. Leave your gloves on, remember? No fingerprints."

"Right, right. It's my first break-in." With a nervous giggle Sima started up the stairs.

"It's not a break-in. You have a key, *and* you paid the rent."

"Half."

"*He* said it was half. Did you ever check for sure how much the rent was?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Sima, you've got to stop letting yourself get pushed around. What you were paying for the squeeze box up here probably covered the whole cha-cha."

"I know. I know."

"You're going to feel a lot better after you cut out the toes in his socks. Remember the plan—one sock from each pair, a little nip so it starts to unravel. You start on that while I put the itching powder in his moisturizer. Then we replace the golf club with the toy one, and we book. We don't touch anything else. In and out."

“And he won’t know what the hell. He’s not going to golf until he gets somebody to pay the indoor fee, so that can’t come back on me. The socks will make him crazy.”

“He’ll figure it happened at the dry cleaners. He deserves it. A guy who has his socks dry-cleaned deserves it.”

“Yeah. And the itching powder? He’ll go screaming to the doctor, figuring he’s got a new allergy. Fuckball.”

“Fuckball,” her friend agreed, righteously, as they finally reached the fourth floor. “Moment of truth, Sima.”

On a long breath, Sima steadied herself. Climbing three flights, dressed in her winter coat, scarf, boots, hat—December 2060 was as bitter as her heart—she had worked up a little sweat.

She pulled out the key again, crossed the fingers of her free hand, swiped.

Locks thumped open.

Sima gave a triumphant hoot, and was immediately shushed.

“You want the neighbors poking out?”

“No, but—” Before she could finish, Sima found herself pushed inside with the door quietly, firmly closed behind her.

“Turn on the lights, Sim.”

“Right.” She hit the switch, then hissed, “Look at this mess! I haven’t been gone a week, and he’s already got crap tossed everywhere. Look in there!” She walked toward the kitchen bump as she pointed. “Dirty dishes, takeout boxes. I bet there’re bugs. Ew, I bet there’re bugs in here.”

“What do you care? You don’t live here, so you don’t have to pick up his mess or worry about bugs.”

“But still. And look at the living room. Clothes tossed all over, shoes just— Hey!” She marched over, picked up a scarlet-red high heel, then scooped up a bra with yellow polka dots over purple lace.

“I never noticed any tranny tendencies.”

“Because he doesn’t have any!”

“I know, Sim. It’s like we all told you. He only booted you because he sniffed up a new skirt. And jeez, it’s been like a week since he did the booting, so you have to figure . . . Don’t blubber,” she ordered as Sima started to do just that. “Get even! Come on.”

Focused on the task at hand, she pulled the shoe, the bra away, tossed them down again, took Sima’s arm.

“I’ll get you started on the socks.”

“I sort of loved him.”

“Sort of is sort of. He treated you like crap, so you pay him back, then you can move on. Trust me.”

Sima’s tears-and-tequila-blurred eyes tracked back to the bra. “I want to bust something up.”

“You’re not going to. You’re going to be smart and hit him where it hurts. Vanity and wallet, then we’re

going to go do some more shots.”

“Lots of them.”

“Bunches of lots of them.”

Sima squared her shoulders and nodded. With her hand in her friend’s—moral support—they started toward the bedroom she’d shared for seven and a half weeks with her cheap, cheating, callous boyfriend.

“He didn’t even put up any Christmas decorations. He has a cold heart.”

She couldn’t have been more right.

Trey Ziegler sat propped on the bed, the long chestnut-and-gold-streaked hair he was so proud of matted with blood. His eyes—most recently tinted emerald green—staring.

The kitchen knife jammed in his cold heart pinned a cardboard sign to his well-toned chest. It read:

Santa Says You’ve Been Bad!!!

Ho. Ho. Ho!

As Sima peeled off screams, her friend slapped a hand over her mouth, dragged her away.

“Trey! Trey!”

“Shut it down, Sima. Just shut it down a minute. Jesus, what a mess.”

“He’s dead. There’s blood. He’s dead.”

“I got that. Holy shit.”

“Whattawedo? Oh God! Whattawedo?”

Running away would be awesome but . . . Even buildings as lousy as this probably have some security. Or somebody might have seen them come in. Or heard them work out the plan over tequila shots. Or something.

“You’ve got to calm down some—and don’t touch anything. Not anything. I’ve got to tag up somebody.”

“You’re going to have somebody come get rid of the body?” Sima dragged her fingers down her throat as if she were being strangled. “Oh my God!”

“Grip reality, Sima. I’m tagging a cop.”

• • •

Two in the morning, two in the freaking morning in the frozen bowels of December, and she had to roll out of a warm bed beside a hot husband and deal with what might be a dead body—or a drunken prank by a woman who drove her crazy on the best of days.

In moments like this, being a cop sucked.

But Lieutenant Eve Dallas was a cop, so she pulled up in front of the dingy box of a building in the West

Village, grabbed her field kit—if there was an actual DB, it would save her coming back out for it—and stomped across the icy sidewalk.

She'd have used her master to swipe in, but the door clicked and buzzed as she reached for it.

She didn't much like the look of the elevator in the skinny, smelly lobby, but opted for it. The sooner to get this over.

She jammed her cold hands—she hadn't thought of gloves—in the pockets of her long leather coat and scowled with golden brown eyes at the numbers creeping from one to two to three, and finally to four on the dented panel.

When the doors opened, she strode out, a tall, lean, pretty pissed-off woman with a shaggy cap of hair nearly the same color as her eyes.

Before she could bang a fist on the door, it opened. There stood the woman who cut her hair—often whether Eve wanted the service or not. Who'd seen her naked—and that Eve *never* wanted.

“If you're fucking with me, I'm hauling your ass in for filing a false report.”

“Hand to God.” Trina shot up a hand—fingers tipped in swirls of holiday red and green—then used the other to yank Eve inside. “His name's Trey Ziegler, and he's really dead in the bedroom.”

“Who's that?” Eve demanded, jerking a head toward the woman with an explosion of red curls smashed under a black watch cap who was currently holding some sort of red-and-blue plastic golf club and blubbering.

“That's Sima. His ex. She lived here.”

“You live here?” Eve asked Sima.

“Yes. No. I did, but he—then he . . . He's . . . he's . . . he's . . .”

When Sima dissolved, Eve turned back to Trina. “Stay here, don't touch anything. Don't let her touch anything.”

She took the short five steps to the bedroom door, looked in.

Okay, that was a dead man.

She set down her field kit to pull out her 'link. She called it in, arranged for her partner to be notified.

“You.” She pointed at Sima. “Sit over there. Don't touch anything.” Then she gestured Trina over to the kitchen bump. “If she doesn't live here, how did you get in?”

“She still has her swipe. Or the copy she made for me when she hooked into the place with him. He only kicked her out a week ago.”

“Why did the two of you come here—and you're both lit. I can see it, hear it, smell it.”

“About half lit,” Trina corrected with the faintest smirk. Eve's flat, narrow gaze had her shifting side to side, giving her tower of hair—swirled in the same color and pattern as her nails—a little toss.

“Okay, look, full disclosure, right? Trey dumped her. She came home from work and he’d packed her stuff, said they were done and to get out.”

“They had a fight.”

“Hell no. She’s got the spine of a worm—can’t help it—so even though she’s been paying the rent, he said half but I know what this dump should go for and it was plenty more than half. *And* she paid for December, so she paid *this* month’s rent, and she has rights. Right?”

“Just keep going,” Eve ordered.

“Okay. So she just starts crying, takes her stuff and goes. Anyhow, she got a flop for about a week, doesn’t tell me or any of us ’cause she said she was all embarrassed, then finally spills it. I have her at my place, on the pullout until she can get it together.”

“And?”

“And?”

“Let us wind around to tonight and the dead man.”

“Right. Well, tonight, a bunch of us were hanging after work, and there was tequila. And we got this idea about payback. He’s supposed to be in Atlantic City for a couple days, so we bought the toy golf club and some itching powder. We were going to unravel the toes of his socks, put the powder in his face cream, replace one of his clubs with the toy, then book. That’s it. We came in, headed back there, saw him. I pulled her out, tagged you.”

“Itching powder?”

“Serious shit.” Trina nodded wisely. “He’d’ve wanted to scratch his face down to the bone. He deserved it. Look at her.”

Sima sat, head bowed, tears dripping.

“Jesus Christ. Did you know this guy?”

“Yeah, some. Massage therapist, personal trainer. He worked at Buff Bodies, the fitness place near my salon. Most of the staff there use my salon. Sima works for me. That’s how they met.”

“Did you ever roll with him?”

“Shit no.” Trina’s eyes—a bold Christmas green lidded with gold glitter—reflected both insult and disgust. “Guy was a prick and a player. I can do better. Sim didn’t think she could. Self-esteem issues, you know?”

“Whose red shoes, whose underwear?”

“No clue. Not Sim’s.”

“Stay here.”

“Hey, Dallas, go easy on her. She’s a real sweetie, and I talked her into this. I thought giving him a punch would make her feel, you know, empowered. Otherwise, somebody else would’ve found him, and she

wouldn't have that in her head.”

“For all I know the two of you did him, and pulled me in to cover it up.”

Trina snorted out a laugh, sobered instantly at Eve's stony stare. “Shit. Really? Come on!”

“Stay here.”

She walked back over to where Sima sat quietly hiccuping through tears.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Trey's dead. Somebody killed him.”

“Before that. How did you and Trina end up here?”

“Oh, well, after work we—me and Trina and Carlos and Vivi and Ace—we all went to Clooney's.”

“Clooney's?”

“It's a bar. We hang there sometimes. Their twisted onions are pretty good, so we got some and some cheesy bits and some margaritas. Then we did some shots because I was feeling bad about Trey dumping me. So Ace said—I think it was Ace, or maybe Vivi, how I should get some of my own back, then somebody said I should come over and toss his stuff out the window, but Trina said no. She said that was too obvious, and I could get in trouble. I should do something more subtle-like. Then we went and bought the trick club and the powder, and we came here, and—and—*Trey!*”

“Okay.” Eve held up a hand, hoping to ward off hysterics, then quickly wound Sima back, pulling out details.

Details, she thought, that lined up with Trina's statement.

“Did he ever knock you around, Sima?”

“What? Who? Trey?” Her tear-drenched eyes, outlined in shimmering blue and silver, widened to horrified saucers. “No! He'd never do that.”

“Not physically,” Trina said from across the room, and earned another stony stare. “I'm just saying. He didn't tune her up, but he picked at her self-esteem. He knocked that around plenty. He wasn't good to you, Sim.”

“Sometimes he was. He used to be.”

“Did he cheat on you?” Eve asked her.

“I didn't think so, but . . .” She pointed to the shoe and bra. “Those aren't mine.”

“Was he in trouble with anybody? Women, work, illegals, gambling?”

“No . . . I don't think. He, I guess, was sort of distant lately, and spending more time at work or on his computer working on routines for clients and stuff. I asked him if something was up at work, since he was there late a lot, but he said no. And how I should mind my own business.”

“He was up to something.” When the comment got Trina another stare she tossed her hands in the air. “I can hear you over here, and it’s stupid to pretend I can’t. He was up to something.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know such as, I just know something. A lot of my people—staff, clients—use BB, and some of them use Trey for personal training, or for massages. Word was going around he was acting weird—more than usual—the past couple months maybe. Put a second lock on his locker at the gym, spent a lot of after-hours time there when he didn’t have a client. A couple mutual clients told me he was talking about opening his own place, like a high-class spa deal, maybe on St. Bart’s or Nevis or some shit.”

“You never told me!”

Trina shrugged at Sima. “I was going to, but then he dumped you. I didn’t see the point since it was only the rumor chamber. And I figured if we did the deed here tonight, maybe we’d see something lying around. Like confirmation.”

“Did he have any valuables?” Eve asked Sima. “Anything worth stealing?”

“Oh . . .”

“I see a mini-comp there—pretty high end, the entertainment screen, good-sized but portable. How about jewelry, art, cash?”

“He has a really good wrist unit for work—a sports model—and a really nice dress one. And, um, his collection of ear hoops, and a couple rings. One yellow gold, one white gold. He never wore them when he was working because they got in the way. He’s got the golf clubs, and like golf accessories. He didn’t keep any money around that I know of. We didn’t really have any art, except a couple photographs he had taken and framed.”

She gestured to the photographs—of the dead guy in sports skinwear, posing to show off his biceps, his delts. They flanked a shelf that held several trophies topped with a figure dressed the same, doing the same.

“Hold on.” Eve turned to open the door at the knock, then stepped out—leaving the door open—to instruct the two uniforms who’d reported to the scene.

“Okay, I need some information,” she said when she stepped back in, closing the door. “The name of his employer or immediate supervisor, a list of friends and/or coworkers. Did he have a live-in or serious relationship prior to you, Sima?”

“Oh, well, I guess. Sure.”

“He bounced around on Alla Coburn right before Sim,” Trina said helpfully. “Mutual client. She owns Natural Way, a health-food place near BB. And FYI, she was pretty ripped about their breakup. Put on the good-riddance face, but she didn’t mean it. I know what’s what with people who sit in my chair. Plus he banged a lot of his clients.”

“He stopped that when we got together,” Sim said, blinking at Trina’s look of frustrated sympathy. “He didn’t? But—but he said . . .”

“We’ll talk. Anyway, his supervisor’s Lill Byers, and she’ll talk to you straight. You’d do better with coworkers. He didn’t hang with anybody for long outside of work.”

Sensing there was more, Eve only nodded as she noted down the names. “An officer’s going to drive you home.”

“We can just go?” Sima asked.

“Stay available. You’re at Trina’s for now?”

“Well, I—”

“She’s with me until this all shakes out. You’re with me, Sim, don’t worry about it.”

That started fresh waterworks, so Eve opened the door. “Go down with Officer Cho,” she told Sima. “Trina will be right down.”

Once Eve got Sima out, she turned to Trina. “Spill.”

“Okay, I wanted to be careful around her. He was an asshole. I’m sorry he’s dead and all that, but that’s mostly for her. Look, he’d barely rolled off Alla before he rolled onto Sima. Guy was a player, and a user. Some of the stuff in here? It’s hers, but she didn’t think of saying hey, my stuff. She did all the work around here, you know what I’m saying? Picking up after him, stocking the AutoChef, seeing about the laundry and the dry cleaning. Fucker dry-cleaned his freaking socks.”

“Get out.”

“Hand to God! You’re going to find a lot of slick clothes in his closet, lots of top-drawer face, hair, body products. Asshole was a peacock. He looked good, I’ll give him that, but he swept women up, then swept them out after he got what he was after—and not just sex.”

“What else?”

“You can bet he didn’t buy those wrist units for himself, or half that slick wardrobe. He scouted out rich, older women. Clients, like I said. Or that’s the word. Probably one of them jammed that knife in his heart, but it wasn’t Sim. She didn’t kill him.”

“I know that.”

“She couldn’t—oh. Well, solid.”

“Do you know who belongs to the shoes and the polka dots?”

“No, but I could maybe find out.”

“Leave that to me. Go home. And next time you do a bunch of shots, go home.”

Emboldened, Trina ticked off points on her festively tipped nails. “She paid the rent. She had a key. Some of her stuff’s still here. She’s got a right to come in.”

“Got that. But the itching powder could be considered assault, the socks destruction of property and the golf club theft. It’s inventive payback, but it’s not worth the legal fees.”

Trina shrugged it off. “Anyway, thanks for handling it.” Trina narrowed her eyes, got the look in them that chilled Eve’s blood. “You could use a little shaping on the do, and a hydrating facial. Winter’s a bitch on

skin.”

“Push it, Trina, and I’ll have you taken into Central, put in the box and make you go through all this again.”

“Just saying what I know. We’ll give you the works before your big bash.” She stepped to the door, paused. “Sim’s a little naive and way trusting. Some people never get over that, even when they end up covered with bruises.”

True enough, Eve thought.

Eve walked back toward the bedroom, picked up her field kit. She’d gotten over any naivete and excessive trust long, long ago, she decided as she pulled out a can of Seal-It to coat her hands, her boots.

A cop did better cynical and suspicious. Considering herself armed with healthy portions of both, she went in to deal with death.

She took a slow scan to allow her lapel recorder to document the scene, including the blood spatter on the wall, the smears of it on the floor. And the gore clinging to the base of what appeared to be another trophy.

An open suitcase holding precisely folded clothes sat on the foot of the bed, opposite side from the body.

“It appears the vic was packing—nearly done with it—for a scheduled trip. Wits state a work-related seminar in Atlantic City. A lot of clothes for a couple days,” she commented. “Which would coincide with wits’ opinion of vic as a peacock. Nice threads, top line,” she said after a quick look. “Also verifying wits’ statements.”

She poked in a little more, came up with a small baggie filled with dried leaves.

“What have we here? It looks like . . . tea leaves.” She opened it, sniffed—and had a flash of the flowery tea Mira, the department shrink, swore by. “Smells like tea. Doesn’t look like any illegal substance I’ve come across. Bagging for analysis. Not a priority as we’re not going to bust the dead guy for possession.”

She crossed back, crouched to examine the large trophy with the figure of a seriously ripped male, clad only in compression shorts, flexing both biceps. “A couple trophies like this in the living room. The blood and gray matter on this one—Personal Trainer of the Year, 2059—indicates it was used to strike the victim on the left side of the head.”

She lifted it, pursed her lips. “Yeah, it’s got some weight to it. A couple good whacks would do the trick.”

Setting it down again, she rose, walked back in the living room, lifted the other trophies.

Twin circles of clean under them. Dust skimmed the rest of the shelf.

“The murder weapon wasn’t here with these two.” She walked back into the bedroom, found a similar circle on the dresser.

“The murder weapon sat right here. The killer and vic are in the vic’s bedroom. No overt signs of break-in, so it’s probable the vic knew his killer. No signs of a struggle—none from a vic who wins personal trainer trophies, so it doesn’t look like a physical fight. No scuffle, but maybe an argument. The killer picks up the trophy, and bashes.

“But doesn’t leave the body where it falls, and that’s interesting. The killer drags the body to the bed—leaves

some blood smears on the way, hefts it on there, props it up. Takes the time—and has the rage or coldness—to get the knife, write the message, and stab what I’m betting was a dead man in the chest just to ice the cookie.”

She took her Identi-pad, her gauges, out of her kit, rose to walk over to the body.

Victim is identified as Trey Arthur Ziegler, mixed race male, age thirty-one. Resided this apartment. Single. No marriages, no legal cohabits, no offspring on record.

She heard the door open, paused until she heard the clomp of her partner’s boots.

“Back here,” Eve called out. “Seal up.”

Detective Peabody came to the bedroom door. Pink cowboy boots, big puffy coat, a couple miles of rainbow-striped scarf and a bright blue hat with earflaps.

She looked, Eve thought, like an Eskimo running away to the circus.

“I saw Trina downstairs,” Peabody began, then looked at the body on the bed. “Wow, ho, ho, humbug.”

“Yeah, he won’t be going home for Christmas.”

“I got from Trina this was her pal’s ex-boyfriend.”

“Who they found when they snuck in to put itching powder in his face gunk.”

“Fun.” Peabody pulled the cap off her dark hair, stuffed it in her pocket. “You don’t think Trina had anything to do with the dead guy.”

“I wish I did, then I could toss her in a cage.”

“Aw.” Peabody began unwinding her scarf.

“But according to my on-site,” Eve continued, removing the gauges, “it looks like he bought it about eighteen-thirty hours. We’ll check Trina and Sima’s alibi, but it’s going to hold up. Besides, Trina’s too cagey to kill somebody this way, and the friend doesn’t have the balls.”

Eve replaced her gauges, pulled out microgoggles. “Check and see if there are any security cams, then go ahead and call in the ME and the sweepers. Let’s get the uniforms started on a canvass of the building. Maybe somebody heard or saw something.”

“Oh boy, a bunch of pissed-off neighbors.”

“Not once they find out there’s been a murder. People love finding out somebody’s dead and they’re not. Get that going, then we’ll go through the place when I’m done with the body.”

Eve fit on the goggles, leaned over to peer at the shattered side of the skull. “So, Trey,” she murmured, “what have you got to tell me?”

Death killed any illusion of privacy. After she’d examined the body, Eve began a systematic search of the bedroom.

As Trina stated, Trey owned an extensive wardrobe. Slick, sexy workout gear, spiffy suits, stylish club wear.

“He coordinated his socks and underwear,” she commented when Peabody came back in. “Colors and patterns. Who does that, and why?”

“I read this article about how what you wear under your clothes is all about what makes you feel empowered and in control. It’s the Under You.”

“If wearing matching boxers and socks makes you feel empowered, you’re a weenie. He’s got standard over-the-counter male birth control, a few unimaginative sex toys, some porn discs in the bedside goodies drawer. Golf clubs, various golf paraphernalia in the closet with his clothes. No female clothes in here.”

“Did you check this?” Peabody held up a link sealed in an evidence bag.

“Yeah, some client checks, a couple guy conversations, some out-goings to women, not yet answered. Nobody threatening to kill him.”

“There’s a knife block in the kitchen with one missing,” Peabody said. “The one sticking out of him looks like part of the set.”

“Bash with the trophy, it’s handy. Then get a little creative with the kitchen knife, again handy.” Eve put her hands on her hips, then walked out to the living area.

She scanned the room—messy, sloppy, but nothing that indicated a fight. “Okay, considering there’s no sign of break-in, no sign of struggle out here, the vic let the killer in. He knows him—or her. He’s wearing drawstring pants and a T-shirt—at-home clothes, so he’s comfortable with the killer, enough that they went back to the bedroom together.”

“Maybe he was forced into the bedroom. Maybe the killer had a sticker.”

“If the killer had a sticker,” Eve argued, “why bash the vic in the head with a trophy? Plus, the vic’s extremely buff, so I’ve got to figure he’d put up a fight. But the vic was taken by surprise. They go back in the bedroom. For sex? The bed’s messed up, so maybe there was sex.”

“Red-shoes lady?”

“Possibly.”

Eve studied the shoes, the bra, all out in plain sight.

“But if you have the cold blood to haul a dead guy onto the bed, go into the kitchen, rip off the top of a take-out pizza box, write up the message, take the knife, go *back* in the bedroom, stab the dead guy, wouldn’t you have the brains to grab your shoes and underwear?”

“You’ve got enough brains and cold blood to take the marker used to write the message—because I haven’t found one on scene—to wipe off the knife handle and the trophy base so you don’t leave prints, but you leave your polka-dot bra and red shoes?”

“Yeah, it’d be a pretty big oops.”

“Still . . . Maybe there’s sex, or the start of it—he’s fully dressed, so either they did and he put his clothes back on, or he never got them off. Either way, before, during, after, whoever came back here with him

grabbed the trophy, swung. Vic goes down, but you bash again because we've got one wound on the side of the head, one on the back of the head. You don't panic, you don't keep bashing so there's some control. But you've got a need to—ha ha—twist the knife, so you dig up some cardboard, write the note. You've got to haul him onto the bed, prop him up, then jam the knife, with note, into his chest."

"That part's just mean. Yeah, murder's the ultimate mean," Peabody said when Eve glanced at her. "But the knife and note's salt in the wound. Seriously."

"It's steel in the chest. He really pissed you off," Eve continued. "But you paid him back. There's satisfaction here. Quick violence—probable impulse—followed by a cold-blooded flourish."

"Well, just for the sake of argument, say it's Red Shoes."

Trying to visualize an alternate scenario, Peabody circled said shoes.

"Things get hot, they're moving along into the bedroom. She changes her mind, he gets pushy—bash. Or they do the deed, then he acts like a jerk. Says something about her weight, her technique, or whatever. Bash. She holds it together long enough to set him up like this—it's all fury and adrenaline. *Then* she panics, and runs."

"Possible." She'd put away people who'd done stupider, Eve considered. "Let's have his comp taken in, go through it. And let's find Red Shoes."

"They're really nice shoes. I wonder what size they are."

"Jesus, Peabody."

"Just wondering," she said and hurried to the door to let in the sweepers—and avoid Eve's wrath.

• • •

By dawn, Ziegler lay on a slab at the morgue, the sweepers swarmed over his apartment, and the initial canvass of the building netted a not-unexpected "nobody saw nothing."

"I vote the classic crime of passion." Peabody, once again wrapped up like a woman facing the Ice Age, walked out of the building with Eve. "Jewelry, cash, credits, plastic, electronics, fancy sports equipment still on premises, no sign of break-in, obvious signs of hanky-panky."

"How does hanky-panky translate to sex? Who comes up with words like that?"

"Probably people who don't have sex, which doesn't include the dead guy. The lab should be able to give us the DNA on whoever he hanky-pankied with when the sweepers get the sheets in.

"I wish it would snow."

"If the state of his apartment, and Trina's statement about him banging anything not already nailed are indicators, they'll probably find multiple DNA— What?" Her brain caught up with Peabody's last statement. "Snow?"

"If it's going to be this cold, it should snow." Peabody jumped into Eve's car, shivered. "It's almost Christmas so we should have snow anyway. Snow's pretty."

“Then we could creep behind the plows that shove it against the curbs where it turns to black sludge, wind our way through all the vehicles that spun out because people don’t know how the hell to drive in the snow, or step over all the pedestrians who slip on the snowy sidewalks.”

“You need a good dose of holiday spirit.” Peabody wriggled down into her seat, grateful and happy with the automatic seat warmers. She thought, at that moment, a warm ass was a happy one. “We should get some hot chocolate.”

Eve didn’t spare Peabody a glance. “We’re going to the gym.”

“If we got hot chocolate first, we could work it off at the gym.” Peabody tried a winsome smile, gave it up with a shrug. “I’ll run the supervisor.”

“What a fine idea.”

Eve navigated the streets, still quiet in the weak winter dawn. Streetlights fizzed off, leaving the air cold and gray with puffs of steam rising intermittently through the subway vents. She passed one half-empty maxibus where the passengers all looked dazed and palely green in its flickering security lights.

Even at the early hour, she had to wrangle a parking spot in a loading zone, half a block from Buff Bodies.

She flipped on her On Duty light.

“Lill Byers,” Peabody began as they got out into the frigid swirl of wind. “Age thirty-eight, divorced, one offspring, male, age seven. Employed with Buff Bodies for twelve years, currently as manager. Little bump here—arrested for destruction of property, disturbing the peace, six years back. She took a tire iron to her ex-husband’s vehicle. I guess it wasn’t an amicable divorce.”

“There’s no such thing as an amicable divorce.”

The lights of the gym shone bright against the wide front windows. The glass rose high, to expose three spacious floors. Through the first level Eve saw several bodies—appropriately buff—running, lunging, lifting, climbing.

While the maxibus passengers had looked stunned and weary, the dawn workout brigade appeared terrifyingly alert.

“I hate them all,” Peabody muttered. “Every one of them. Just look. All perfectly packed in frosty outfits designed to show off every cut, rip, and ripple. Smug looks on their faces, a sheen of sweat on their skin. And zero percent body fat among the whole buff bunch. How am I supposed to enjoy my frothy hot chocolate now?”

“You don’t have a frothy hot chocolate.”

“In my mind I did. Now even its imaginary frothy goodness is spoiled.”

“Buck up,” Eve suggested, swiped her master over the members’ entrance pad, and walked inside.

Straight into a wall of noise.

Screaming, pounding, throbbing music blasted out of the speakers and banged against her eardrums. She saw a woman on a cycle crouched over, face fierce as she sang along, presumably at the top of her lungs.

Her eyes looked just a little insane.

Machines whooshed and whirled, feet slapped on treads, weights clinked and thumped. The open three-story space boasted a juice bar—currently unoccupied—on the second level, and what looked to be classrooms, glassed in, on the third.

She could see more buff bodies performing graceful yoga sun salutations behind the glass of one of the rooms.

“Must have amazing soundproofing,” Eve decided.

The check-in desk—a semicircle of glossy white—was currently unmanned, but Eve spotted a woman in snug shorts and an equally snug tee sporting the gym’s double B logo whipping a client through a series of punishing squats and lunges on a teeterboard while he curled twenty-pound free weights.

“Come on, Zeke! Quads of steel! Get low. Push off. *Squeeze!*”

“Excuse me,” Eve began.

“One sec. Dig for it, Zeke. Five more!”

“I hate you, Flora.”

She absolutely beamed at him. “That’s the spirit, that’s what I want to hear. Four more.”

“Lill Byers?” Eve said.

“Should be here, should be in her office. Don’t you quit on me, Zeke. Don’t you quit. Three. Squeeze it, pump it, form, form, form. Two more. Just past check-in,” she added for Eve. “You got it, you got it, last one. Finish strong.”

Eve heard the guy collapse, gasping, when Flora whistled her approval on the last set.

“Thirty-second water break,” Flora announced as Eve headed toward the office. “Then it’s time for crunches.”

“You’re a monster, Flora.”

“That’s what you love about me.”

“Maybe I should get a personal trainer,” Peabody speculated. “If I had someone like that hammering at me, I’d have a perfect heart-shaped, drum-tight ass in no time.”

“You’d blast her with your stunner before the end of the first session.”

“Other than that.”

Through the narrow glass of the office door Eve saw a woman with a skullcap of orange hair and a body honed scalpel sharp sitting at a comp with two screens running.

One showed the CGI image of a woman carrying maybe twenty-five to thirty extra pounds struggling through a session of core work—crunches, leg lifts, crisscross—while the other ran a spreadsheet of names

and figures in various columns.

Eve knocked briskly.

The woman tweaked one screen so the figure pushed through some single leg stretches.

Rather than bang on the glass again, Eve pushed in, said, “Hey!”

“Let’s add five full roll-ups,” the woman said, and the figure on the screen moaned and began them.

Eve tapped the woman on the shoulder. She squealed and jumped as if she’d been scalded, spun around to goggle, then to laugh. And finally removed earplugs.

“Sorry, so sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. The first shift wants the music up to scream, so I use these. What can I do for you?”

“Lill Byers?”

“That’s right. I’m the manager.”

Eve pulled out her badge. “Lieutenant Dallas, Detective Peabody. Is there somewhere we can talk?”

The healthy color in Lill’s face dropped to gray. “My kid. Is my kid okay? Is Evan okay?”

“It’s nothing to do with your son. It’s one of your employees.”

“Oh Jesus.” She ran a hand over her bright cap of hair. “Sorry. My kid’s with his father for a few days—a pre-Christmas deal as the asshole’s going to Belize with his current slut over the actual holiday, so too bad for his son. Anyway.” She let out a long breath. “Something’s up with one of my gang?”

“Is there somewhere quieter we can talk?” Eve asked.

“Sure. Relaxation room, this way.” She led the way out of the office, across the workout area, passed a mini self-serve juice bar, up the curl of steps to the second level and into a room with soft gray walls, two long benches and a half dozen padded sleep chairs.

The door closed, brought silence.

“We offer clients a meditative space to balance things. Yin and yang. Somebody’s in trouble?”

“Trey Ziegler.”

“Crap.” Lill dropped onto a bench, gestured for Eve and Peabody to have a seat. “He swore he’d behave in AC. Do I have to post bond?”

“He never got to AC. I regret to inform you Trey Ziegler’s dead.”

“Dead?” She didn’t go gray again, but stiffened, toe to crown. “What do you mean dead? Like *dead*?”

“Exactly like dead.”

“Oh my God.” She shoved up, holding her hands on either side of her head as she walked up and down the room. “Oh my God. Was there an accident?”

“No. We’re Homicide.”

“You’re . . .” Lill stopped, dropped down again. “Homicide. Murder? Somebody killed him? How? When?”

“He was killed yesterday evening. When did you last see or speak with him?”

“Yesterday. About two—no, closer to one. I let him go early so he could finish getting his shit together and get to AC in time for the mixer, get familiar with the facilities. I sent Gwen, too. Is Gwen okay?”

“Gwen?”

“Gwen Rollins, one of our instructors.”

“Were they traveling together?”

“No, no.” She paused, nearly did an eye roll before she caught herself. “No.”

“Didn’t get along?”

“Didn’t *not* get along. Jesus, what happened to Trey?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out. Did anyone have a problem with him?”

“Not a murder problem. Give me a sec, okay?”

She sat there, pressed her fingers to her eyes, took long slow breaths. “He’s somebody I worked with, saw every workday, and sometimes off days if he came in. You get to be part of each other’s lives, you know, in a way. We weren’t tight outside the work, but he was part of my life. Now he’s dead.”

She lowered her hands, met Eve’s gaze directly. “He’s—was—a good trainer. He tapped into the client really well, knew how to motivate. Better at the one-on-one than group—he couldn’t spread his attention out to a group very well, so I didn’t use him as a Group-X instructor unless I was squeezed. Damn good massage therapist. I used him a few times myself for that.”

She pushed her hands through her hair again, huffed out a breath. “And he was kind of an asshole.”

“Which kind?”

“With women. He was a user. Didn’t see any problem juggling them. Liked the attention, and he bragged about his sex life. I had to tell him to chill there more than once.”

“Did he hit on clients?”

“Sure, and vice versa. But he was careful there, I mean careful not to screw it up. Lose a client, lose money, and he liked money as much as sex. So he’d keep it light with the clients if it went in that direction. He’d been living with somebody for a few weeks, but that broke off. Sima Murtagh—but she wouldn’t hurt anybody. Best thing that happened for her when he cut her loose. He’d been playing around on her the whole time.”

“Did she know?”

“I don’t think so.” Lill sighed. “She’s a sweet kid. She works at the salon just down the block. Ultra You. I

know he was tapping a couple clients when they were together. He leaned toward older women there with disposable scratch. The kind who'd book a hotel suite for a few hours or a night, buy him dinner or gifts and not get emotional about the whole thing. And, shit, he was rolling with Alla again, I'm pretty sure."

"Alla Coburn?"

"Yeah, yeah. She owns Natural Way—it's local, too. They were a thing for a while, then he ditched her, or she ditched him depending on who's telling it, and he went for Sima. Alla's a member, and I walked in on her and Trey in a clutch just the other day. He got a big laugh out of it."

She looked down at her hands, miserably. "You've got to understand. The guy had the looks, the body, the charm when he wanted to use it, and from the reports, knew what to do in bed."

"Did you ever test that one out for yourself?"

Lill's head came up again, and again her eyes were direct. "No, and two reasons: I'm his supervisor, and I like my job. I've got a kid to think about—which actually makes it three reasons and Evan's number one. And the last? I was married to a Trey Ziegler-type for four years. I don't repeat myself."

"But I bet you could put together a list of names who tried him out."

"Yeah." Lill huffed out a breath, pressed her fingers to her eyes again. "Yeah, I could. You think it was a jealous thing or sex thing that did him? I get that. I wanted to drop-kick my ex out a twelve-story window plenty before we were done. Still do now and then."

"But you took a tire iron to his car instead."

Lill winced. "Yeah, I did. Look, I come home sick one afternoon—crappy cold. Things weren't great, but we had a kid and I wanted to try to stick it out. He's supposed to be writing some freelance travel article, watching Evan, and I come home. Evan's in his crib, crying, soaking wet, and the asshole's in bed, banging our next-door neighbor. I took Evan straight to my mother's, got him changed, fed, settled, then I went back, gathered up all of Evan's stuff, my stuff, I could carry while the asshole's saying, Hey, don't get so wound up. She'd come on to him. I haven't been putting out much anyway. He needed to relax, and he wasn't a fucking nursemaid."

"He's lucky you didn't hit him with the tire iron," Peabody commented.

"Oh yeah, he is. Me, too, I guess, but I had a kid to think of first. I was going to take the car—hell, it was half mine—and he's yelling out the window how if I'm going I'm going on foot with what's on my back. If I take the car, he's calling the cops saying it was stolen. So I lost it. I got out the tire iron, beat the living crap out of the car. Ended up getting arrested. It was worth it."

"It's got to be irritating, having someone like your ex on staff."

"God." She rubbed her hands over her short crop of hair again. "Okay. It makes me jittery, but I get where you're coming from so I'll tell you straight. The first couple of times I saw him playing one of the instructors, I gave them the word. You know, you want to be careful. And got told to mind my own. So I minded my own, even when I lost a few instructors. I laid it out to Trey. I lose another, I'm going to find a way to lose you. He didn't like it, but I'm the freaking manager, and I'd have gotten rid of him—professionally," she added. "He stopped hitting on coworkers because he knew I could and would cut him loose. What he did outside BB? It's not for me to say."

“Rumor is he was thinking about starting his own place.”

Lill laughed. “He wouldn’t be the first to have the dream. Trey got pretty grand recently from what I heard. But it was just talk. Look, he targeted women like Sima and Alla because they were hard workers, because they’d pay the rent or the bulk of it. He could live off them and blow his pay on clothes and sports equipment. He’d never have put enough scratch together to finance a place like this.”

“I’m told he was doing some after-hours work around here.”

“I work days—I’ve got Evan—but yeah, he’d been coming in off-hours. Staff’s allowed to use the facilities off their shift, or adjust their schedule to suit a client. We run six A.M. to ten P.M., and I noticed him swiping in pretty regularly after ten on the log. He said he was using the comps to program some new training sessions, getting a late workout in when the place was quiet. He brought in the clients, earned his pay and commission. I didn’t make a thing of it.”

“Okay. He has a locker here.”

“All the staff have lockers.”

“We’d like to get into it. I can get a warrant.”

“No need for it. If he doesn’t want the cops to have all the information they can get on finding out who killed him, he’s too stupid to live anyway.”

Intrigued, Eve nodded. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

Lill took them down to the staff lockers—a tight little room with wall units, two narrow benches, a toilet stall and a skinny shower.

“We have another staff locker room on the third floor. Mostly the guys use this one, the women use that, but they’re coed. He put a second lock on his a couple weeks ago. People do, sometimes—clients and staff. Which is why I have a universal master because half the time people forget their codes.”

Lill ran it under the first lock once, then twice. Frowned, ran it under the main lock.

“It’s not reading.”

“Let me try mine.” Eve stepped in, repeated the process with the same results. “He’s gone to some trouble here. That’s interesting.” She glanced at Peabody. “McNab.”

“On it.”

“I’m calling in someone from our Electronics Detective Division. He’ll access and confiscate anything in the locker. You can be present if you want.”

With her hands on her hips, Lill frowned at the locker. “I kind of do just because I want to know what the hell he’s got in there.”

“Meanwhile, why don’t you give me a list of names. People, you know, who might have wanted to take a tire iron to his car.”

Lill laughed weakly, said, “Crap.”

While they waited for McNab, Eve had Peabody do a run on Alla Coburn and the names Lill listed while Eve talked to the instructors and trainers on duty.

She broke off when she spotted McNab.

He stood out among the hard bodies, the six-packs, the oiled guns.

Then again, he stood out anywhere.

In his long red coat and bright green watch cap he looked like a skinny twig in a forest of sequoias. The long tail of his hair bounced sunnily at his back as he pranced in on gel boots the same color as the cap. A line of silver rings glittered on the curve of his ear.

She watched his pretty face light up, followed the direction of his gaze to Peabody.

Love, Eve thought, came in all colors, shapes, and sizes.

She cut across his path before the EDD ace and her partner did something embarrassing like lock lips on duty.

“Double locks,” she said without preamble. “One factory installed, one add-on, both reprogrammed to block master access.”

“Got your bypass right here.” He patted one of the half dozen pockets of his coat. “Some sweatbox,” he added with a glance around. “Your DB work here?”

“He did.”

“Guess he died fit. Makes you think, doesn’t it? Eat rabbit food, sweat daily, die anyhow. Hey, She-Body. You forgot your toe warmers this morning.” He pulled a pair of thin gels out of one of his pockets.

“Thanks. Aw, you activated them.”

“Can’t have my girl’s tootsies cold.”

“Don’t say *aw* again,” Eve ordered, anticipating. “And never say tootsies. You’re wearing badges, for God’s sake. This way.”

She knew damn well they did their little finger tap behind her back.

“Nothing stood out on the run, Lieutenant.” Peabody made up for the finger tap with a brisk report. “A couple minor bumps, one with some outstanding traffic violations, but nothing that rang. Coburn’s run her business out of its current location for nearly six years.”

“Okay. Nobody liked him. Most of the coworkers don’t come right out and say so, but it’s clear he won’t be especially missed around here. Words like *arrogant*, *sneaky*, *ambitious*, and *asshole* are the most popular.”

She nodded to Lill.

“Lill Byers, the manager, will witness our access to the deceased’s employee locker. I’d also like Detective McNab to take a look at any computer Ziegler would have used.”

“Oh, man.” Lill did the hand over hair scoop. “Staff lounge on the third floor. We’ve got two minis up there. Mostly everybody brings their own pocket or tab, but we provide the two minis, full software. I don’t know his passcode.”

“I can get it,” McNab assured her.

Inside the locker room he pulled a scanner out of his pocket, ran it over the first lock.

“Changed the factory default, upgraded. Wait.” Using his thumbs he keyed in some sort of code, ran the scanner again. “Serious upgrade. Bank-vault quality on a gym locker. Huh.”

“How long is this going to take?” Eve demanded.

“He redid the works, and he’s got a thirteen-digit code on there, layered. It’s going to take a few minutes.”

Eve jammed her hands in her pockets, thought of Roarke. Her husband, the former thief, would likely slip through the damn locks like smoke. But she could hardly ask him to put a pause on his day as emperor of the business world to open a damn gym locker.

“Why would he go to all this trouble?” Lill wondered. “What the hell has he got in there?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

“Why the hell not get a lockbox at home, or a bank box?”

Eve watched McNab painstakingly work through the code. “Employee locker’s free, right?”

“Yeah.” Lill sighed, shook her head. “Cheap bastard. Shit, shit! That’s horrible. He’s dead. I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Eve advised.

“Maybe I could get you all something. Some juice, a smoothie. We have some really nice teas. Why don’t—”

“Got it!”

The last number clicked, disengaging the primary lock.

“Okay, he put two layers of twelve on this one,” McNab muttered, more to himself than the room. “Total overkill, total waste ’cause all I have to do is . . . Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Numbers popped up on his scanner, glowing red as he tapped his thumbs, jiggled his hips, tapped his foot in the dance so many e-men choreographed while working.

Seconds ticked to minutes until Eve had to pace away and back again a few times to keep from nagging him to get the damn thing open.

“Nearly there, Dallas. Not such a tricky one. Just tedious. He spent a lot of time on the layers, but no pizzazz. Just takes some time.” He glanced over at her, grinned. “Watch it be empty after all this! Wouldn’t that be a bitch?”

“Don’t make me kick your ass, McNab.”

“Last sequence coming up, locking in, and . . . bam! Overridden. It’s all yours, Lieutenant.”

“Okay, let’s see what was so fricking important.”

It wasn’t empty.

Wrapped packs of bills formed neat stacks and rows. Low denomination, Eve noted, banded in thousand-dollar packs.

“Holy shit!” Lill clamped a hand on Eve’s shoulder as she leaned in, goggled. “Holy shit, where did Trey get all that money? Cash money. Who has that kind of real money anywhere?”

“Good question. Peabody, let’s get an accurate count with Ms. Byers as witness, then seal and log. He put the second lock on when?”

“Ah. God. Maybe a month ago,” Lill managed. “Maybe more like six weeks. Yeah, more like six weeks ago.”

Just what kind of side business had Ziegler launched in the past few weeks? Eve wondered. Whatever it had been, it had proven lucrative and deadly.

“A hundred and sixty-five thousand, Dallas. A hundred and sixty-five thousand-dollar stacks, and one broken stack with five thousand. Crisp new twenty-dollar bills,” Peabody added. “Rubber-banded. Not bank-banded.”

“Seal it up. McNab, go through the staff comps here, then take his home unit, his ’link. Do the works. We appreciate your time and cooperation,” she told Lill.

“Will you kind of keep me up on things? I can’t believe Trey had all that money in there. I can’t believe he’s dead. None of this is really getting through, you know?”

“Will let you know what we can when we can.”

“Okay. Oh, listen, let me get you a bag. A complimentary Buff Bodies gym bag. You can’t carry all that money out of here in those clear bags.”

“Good thought.”

Once it was loaded up in the bold red bag with the glittery double B logo, Eve glanced at her wrist unit.

“We’re going to take a good, hard look at his financials. We need to get this into evidence, then double back here, talk to Coburn, check in with Morris, and start working down Ziegler’s client list.”

“I know but, Dallas? I’m carrying a hundred and sixty-five *thousand* dollars in a gym bag.” Peabody slung it over her shoulder like Santa Claus as they walked back out into the cold. “I mean, jeez! Ho, ho, freaking ho!”

“I’ve never held this much money at one time in my life. I thought it would be heavier,” Peabody said as they walked into Cop Central.

“What kind of asshole keeps that much cash in a staff locker at a gym? Cheap bastard’s right. Wanted the

cash,” Eve speculated. “No record of it that way, you can wash cash easy enough.”

“I’ll start on the financials, but no way that was saved up or legit. It was all new money. New money smells really good.”

“No sniffing the evidence.” Eve hopped off the glide.

She wanted to swing into Homicide, check a few things, start her murder book and board while Peabody dug into the vic’s financials. Then they’d circle back around for interviews.

Plus her office at Central offered the one thing she hadn’t had access to since she’d been rudely called out of a warm bed in the middle of the night.

Real coffee.

She turned into the bullpen and the noise of comps, voices, ’links. Someone had dug out a tatty and tawdry length of silver garland, strung it over the side windows. An even tattier sign announcing “HAPPY HOLIDAYS” hung crookedly from it.

Perhaps the same determined elf had dragged in the pitiful, spindly fake tree, propped it in a corner. ID shots of detectives and uniforms decorated the branches with Eve’s stuck on the stubby top.

“Seriously?”

The slick-suited Detective Baxter stepped over to study it with her. “Santiago pulled it out of the recycler.”

“Waste not, want not,” Santiago said from his desk. “Carmichael did the decorations.”

“We’re the spirit of Homicide Christmas,” Carmichael claimed. “If murder cops can’t be festive this time of year, who can?”

“What? ‘Happy holidays, fucker, you’re under arrest’?”

Carmichael grinned. “Works for me.”

“It’s not bad. Peabody, financials.” She turned, started toward her office, and got the next surprise when Roarke walked out.

He looked perfect—as if the gods had gotten together over drinks one night and decided to join together to create something extraordinary. So they’d carved the face of a wicked angel, added eyes of wild blue, then sculpted a mouth designed to make a woman yearn to have it pressed to hers.

Those eyes warmed now, the mouth curved.

Love, she thought again, came in all colors, shapes, and sizes.

She’d hit the jackpot with hers.

“There you are, Lieutenant.” The Ireland of his birth wound smoothly through his words. “I just left you a memo cube.”

“Did I forget my toe warmers?”

His eyebrows, the same inky-black as the hair that spilled nearly to his shoulders, raised. “Your what now?”

“Nothing. Come on back if you’ve got a minute.”

“I do now.”

He brushed a hand down her arm as they started back. His version, she supposed, of the Peabody/McNab fingertip tap.

“Your men weren’t sure when to expect you back. I had a quick meeting down this way, so I stopped in.”

They stepped into her tiny office.

Roarke cupped her face in his hands, kissed her before she could object. “Good morning.” Then he flicked a finger down the shallow dent in her chin. “You’ve put in a long day already.”

“Dead guy,” she said simply.

“And what does the dead guy have to do with Trina?”

“Ex of a friend. I need coffee.” She turned to the AutoChef, programmed two, hot and black. “I was ready to strangle her with her own hair for getting me up and out at that hour, but— Oh, thank fat Santa and all the pointed-nosed elves,” she said at the first sip of coffee.

She took another hit, then shrugged out of her coat, tossed it aside. “She and her pal got juiced up, went to the ex’s place to do some mischief—itching powder level. Jesus, are they twelve? Instead they find the ex dead. Bashed in the head, then stabbed. Killer left a festive note.”

He followed it, and her, easily enough as he sipped his coffee. “You’ve eliminated Trina and the friend?”

“Yeah, yeah. Guy was an asshole. Worked over at Buff Bodies. We’ve just come from there. I had to send for McNab to access his employee locker. The vic doubled the lock, programmed it to block masters.”

“A pity you didn’t tag me as I was close.”

“Didn’t know or I might have.”

“And what was he hiding?”

“A hundred sixty-five thousand in cash. All twenties, all new bills.”

“Interesting. Now, that’s very interesting indeed.”

“Not a huge haul in the grand scheme—a Roarke grand scheme anyway—but a nice pile for a guy who lived in a cramped little apartment in a dicey neighborhood and liked really nice clothes.”

“It’s considerable,” Roarke corrected, “in any scheme, when tucked away in a gym locker.”

“Yeah, it is. The way it looks, he got the windfall in the last few weeks and dumped Trina’s friend shortly thereafter. He was already banging somebody else. And he was up to something at work. Don’t know what, but something. McNab’s on his electronics. Peabody’s on the financials. I’m going to write up the report, open the book, then go talk to the ex before his last ex.”

“Busy, busy. What did he do at Buff Bodies?”

“Personal training and massage work.”

“Hmm. The sort of intimacy that leads people to talk about personal business. Blackmail?”

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