



Strangers in Death

By J. D. Robb

Excerpt

Murder harbored no bigotry, no bias. It subscribed to no class system. In its gleeful, deadly, and terminally judicious way, murder turned a blind eye on race, creed, gender, and social stratum. As Lieutenant Eve Dallas stood in the sumptuous bedroom of the recently departed Thomas A. Anders, she considered that.

Only the night before she'd caught—and closed—a case dealing with the homicide of a twenty-year-old woman who'd been throttled, beaten, then chucked out the window of her nine-story flop.

The rent-by-the-week flop, Eve mused, where the victim's boyfriend claimed to have slept through her *demise*, smelled of stale sex, stale zoner, and really bad Chinese food. Anders? His Park Avenue bedroom smelled of candy-colored tulips, cool, clean wealth, and dead body. Death had come to him on the luxurious sheets of his massive, silk-canopied bed. And to Tisha Brown it had come on the stained mattress tossed on the floor of a junkie's flop. The header to the sidewalk had just been the flourish.

The point was, Eve supposed, no matter who you were—sex, race, tax bracket—death leveled it all out. As a murder cop going on a dozen years for the NYPSPD, she'd seen it all before.

It was barely seven in the morning, and she was alone with the dead. She had the first officers on scene downstairs with the housekeeper who'd called in the - nine-one-one. With her hands and boots sealed, she walked around the edges of the room while her recorder documented.

"Victim is identified as Anders, Thomas Aurelius, of this address. Male, Caucasian, age sixty-one. Vic is married. Spouse is reported to be out of town, and has been notified by Horowitz, Greta, domestic who discovered the body at approximately oh six hundred and placed the nine-one-one at oh six twelve."

Eve cocked her head. Her hair was a short, somewhat shaggy brown around a face of angles and planes. Her eyes, a few shades lighter than her hair, were all cop—sharp, cynical, and cool as they studied the dead man in the big, fancy bed.

"Anders was reputed to be alone in the house. There are two domestic droids, both of which were shut down. On cursory exam, there are no signs of forced entry, no signs of burglary, no signs of struggle."

On long legs, she crossed to the bed. Over her lean body she wore rough trousers, a plain cotton shirt, and a long coat of black leather. Behind her, over a gas fireplace where flames simmered gold and red, the view screen popped on.

Good morning, Mr. Anders!

Narrow-eyed, Eve turned to stare at the screen. The computerized female voice struck her as annoyingly perky, and the sunrise colors bleeding onto the screen wouldn't have been her choice of wake-up call.

It's now seven-fifteen on Tuesday, March eighteenth, twenty-sixty. You have a ten o'clock tee time at the club, with Edmond Luce.

As the computer chirpily reminded Anders what he'd ordered for breakfast, Eve thought: *No egg-white omelette for you this morning, Tom.*

Across the room in an ornate sitting area, a miniAutoChef with bright brass fittings beeped twice.

Your coffee's ready! Enjoy your day!

"Not so much," Eve murmured.

The screen flipped to the morning's headline news, anchored by a woman only slightly less perky than the computer. Eve tuned her out.

The headboard gleamed brass, too—all of its sleek, shiny rungs. Black velvet ropes tied Anders's wrists to two of them, while two more ropes bound his ankles by a length to the footboard. The four matching ropes were joined by the fifth that wrapped around Anders's throat, pulling his head off the pillows. His eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open as if he was very surprised to find himself in his current position.

Several sex toys sat on the table beside the bed. Anal probe, vibrator, colorful cock rings, gliding and warming lotions, and lubricants. The usual suspects, Eve thought. Leaning down, she studied, sniffed Anders's thin, bare chest. Kiwi, she thought, and angled her head to read labels on the lotions.

Definitely the kiwi. It took all kinds.

As she'd noticed something else, she lifted the duvet from where it pooled at Anders's waist. Under it, three neon (possibly glow-in-the-dark) cock rings rode on an impressive erection.

"Not bad for a dead man."

Eve eased open the drawer in the nightstand. Inside, as she'd suspected, was an economy pack of the top-selling erection enhancer, Stay-Up. "Hell of a product endorsement."

She started to open her field kit, then stopped when she heard approaching footsteps. She recognized the clomp of boots as her partner's shit-kickers. Whatever the calendar said about the approach of spring, in New York that was a big, fat lie. As if to prove the point, Detective Delia Peabody stepped through the door in an enormous—and puffy—purple coat, with a long, striped scarf that appeared to be wrapped around her neck three times. Between that and the cap pulled over her ears, only her eyes and the bridge of her nose were visible.

“It’s freaking five degrees,” somebody who might have been Peabody said against the muffle of scarf.

“I know.”

“With the windchill, they said it’s, like, freaking minus ten.”

“I heard that.”

“It’s freaking March, three days before spring. It’s not right.”

“Take it up with them.”

“Who?”

“The *they* who have to go mouthing off about it being freaking minus ten. - You’re colder and pissier because they have to blabber about it. Take some of that shit off. You look ridiculous.”

“Even my teeth are frozen.”

But Peabody began to peel off the multiple layers covering her sturdy body. Scarf, coat, gloves, insulated zippy. Eve wondered how the hell she managed to walk with all of it weighing her down. With the hat discarded, Peabody’s dark hair with its sassy little flip at the nape appeared to frame her square face. She still sported a pink-from-cold-tipped nose.

“Cop on the door said it looked like sex games gone bad.”

“Could be. Wife’s out of town.”

“Bad boy.” Down to her street clothes, sealed up, Peabody carted her field kit to the bed. Scanned the nightstand. “Very bad boy.”

“Let’s verify ID, get TOD.” Eve examined one of the limp hands. “Looks like he had a nice manicure recently. Nails are short, clean, and buffed.” She angled her head. “No scratches, no bruises, no apparent trauma other than the throat. And . . .” She lifted the duvet again.

Peabody’s dark brown eyes popped. “Wowzer!”

“Yeah, fully loaded. Place like this has to have good security, so we’ll check that. Two domestic droids—we’ll check their replay. Take a look at his house ’links, pocket ’links, memo, date, address books. Tom had company. He didn’t hoist himself up like this.”

“*Cherchez la femme*. It’s French for—”

“I know it’s French. We could also be *cherchezing* the . . . whatever ‘guy’ is in French.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Finish with the body,” Eve ordered. “I’ll take the room.”

It was a hell of a room, if you went for a lot of gold accent, shiny bits, curlicues. Besides the big bed in which Anders had apparently died, a sofa, a couple of oversized scoop chairs, and a full-service sleep chair offered other places to stretch out. In addition to the AutoChef, the bedroom boasted a brass friggie, a wet bar, and an entertainment unit. The his and hers bathrooms both held jet tubs, showers, drying tubes, entertainment and communication centers within their impressive acreage. The space continued with two tri-level closets with attached dressing areas.

Eve wondered why they needed the rest of the house.

She should talk, she admitted. Living with Roarke meant living in enough space to house a small city with all the bells and whistles big, fat fists of money could buy. He had better taste—thank God—than the Anderses. She wasn’t entirely sure she could’ve fallen for him, much less married him, if he’d surrounded himself with gold and glitter and tassels, and Christ knew.

But as much *stuff* as there was jammed into the space, it all looked . . . in place, she decided. No sign or sense anything had been riffled through. She found a safe in each closet, concealed so a child of ten with dirt in both eyes could have found them. She’d check with the wife on those, but she wasn’t smelling theft or burglary.

Walking out into the main bedroom again, she took another, hard look around.

“Prints verify ID as Anders, Thomas A., of this address,” Peabody began. “Gauge gives me three thirty-two as time of death. That’s really late or really early to be playing tie-me-up, tie-me-down games.”

“If killer and vic came up here together, where are his clothes?”

Peabody turned toward her lieutenant, pursed her lips. “Considering you’re married to the hottest guy on or off the planet, I shouldn’t have to tell you that the point in the tie-me-whenever game is to be naked while you’re doing it.”

“One of the other points is to get each other naked. If they came in here together,” Eve considered, “if they came up here for games, is he going to strip down, *then* hang up his clothes or dump his shorts in the hamper? You got that on the menu”—she gestured to the sex toys— “you’re not thinking about tidy. Clothes get pulled, tugged, torn, yanked off—fall on the floor. Even if this is an old game with a usual playmate, wouldn’t you just toss your shirt over the chair?”

“I hang up my clothes. Sometimes.” Peabody shrugged now. She angled her head to study the scene again, absently tossed back the hair that fell over her cheek. “But, yeah, that’s going to be when I’m not thinking about jumping McNab, or he’s not already jumping me. Everything looks pretty tidy in here, and in the rest of the house I got a look at on the way up. Vic could’ve been a neat freak.”

“Could. The killer could’ve come in when he was already in bed. Three in the morning, surprise, surprise. Then things got out of hand—accidentally or on purpose. Killer comes in—the probability’s high the vic or another household member knew the killer. No sign of break-in, and there’s a high-end security system. Maybe this is another part of the game. Comes in after he’s asleep. Surprises him. Wakes him up. Trusses him up, works him up. Toys and games.”

“And went too far.”

Eve shook her head. “It went as far as he or she meant it to go. The erotic asphyxiation oops doesn’t play.”

“But . . .” Peabody studied the body again, the scene, and wished she could see whatever Eve could. “Why?”

“If it was all in fun, and went wrong, why did the killer leave the noose around Anders’s neck? An accident, but you don’t loosen it, try to revive when he starts choking, convulsing?”

“Maybe in the throes . . . Okay, that’s a stretch, but if it happened fast, and she or he panicked . . .”

“Either way, we’ve got a corpse, we’ve got a case. We’ll see what the ME thinks about accidental. We’ll go interview the housekeeper, let the sweepers in here.”

