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J. D. ROBB

FRAMED
IN
DEATH



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Nothing is really so poor and melancholy as art
that is interested in itself and not in its subject.

—George Santayana

Some people's money is merited,
And other people's is inherited.

—Ogden Nash

Chapter One

Death was his art.

For too long he'd waited for recognition of his gift, even—yes—the adulation his extraordinary talent deserved. He wanted his due, and had worked and suffered to share his vision, his genius with the world, only to see lesser talents rewarded while he faced rejection.

Rejection, criticism, and worse, tepid, patronizing, infuriating advice.

He took some comfort knowing so many of the great masters had faced the same ignorance, the same blindness during their lifetimes, only to be lauded after death.

At times he fantasized about sacrificing himself on the altar of his art as others had before him.

Van Gogh, Maurer, Goetz, and more.

He wrote long, vituperative suicide notes, placing the blame for his death on the cruelty of art critics, gallery owners, art patrons, and collectors.

He considered hanging, swallowing pills, a leap from the rooftop. He considered, most seriously, slicing his wrists, then using his own blood to paint his final self-portrait.

It would serve them right, all of them.

The drama of it spoke to him. And oh, the copious tears that would fall over the tragedy. He envisioned that last, stunning portrait in a place of honor and wonder in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Millions would gaze at it, and weep for the incalculable loss.

But he didn't want to die. He didn't want fame and recognition after his death.

He wanted it now. He wanted to bask in it, bathe in it, luxuriate in it.

He would wait no longer.

Not his death, no, not that. But death and art would merge in their ultimate beauty and mystery. And he would give to others the gift of that beauty, others who found themselves ignored, overlooked, devalued.

He would, with his genius, immortalize them.

So he planned, and he planned, and he spent months on every detail of what would be his new period. And at last, with all in place, with all perfection, the time had come.

Wandering his studio, admiring paintings he'd created, he took a pill for energy, for clarity. He often wondered how anyone could create without that lovely boost.

Riding on it, he prepped his canvas.

He'd acquired all the costumes for his models, and now painted the background for the first, created the negative space for her head, her shoulders, the trail of the scarf from her headpiece.

By re-creating a masterpiece, improving on it, he would prove himself a master without peer. And the model he chose would become, fortunate girl, immortal. She would live on well beyond a September night in 2061.

Indeed, she would live forever.

Pleased, he cleaned his brushes.

He dressed carefully and without his usual flair. It wouldn't do to stand out. He chose black to blend with the night, and worked his fall of golden brown hair into a braid, then wound the braid into a tight circle at the base of his neck.

He studied himself in the triple mirror on the bedroom level of his home and imagined what she would see.

While the glass reflected an ordinary face, a man of small stature and slim build, he saw a young, beautiful man with a poetically pale, perfectly symmetrical face. He saw deep blue eyes he'd trained, when younger still, to telegraph innocence.

She, he thought, would see the beauty, and the opportunity.

He'd spotted her when he'd scouted the streets for the right one among the poor, the unfortunate, the ones who worked to eat, those who worked to simply survive another day.

He often wondered why they didn't just kill themselves and be done with it.

He'd never known that drudgery. But he had known despair. A despair pushed on him again and again by ignorance. He was an artist who used his innate talents to bring beauty to this dull, often dreary world.

He'd been born into wealth and privilege, and that afforded him the means to focus all on his art, and not have to fracture that focus on some mindless,

miserable job.

He understood the power of money.

Tonight, he'd offer the one he'd chosen the kind of money she couldn't resist.

He took the elevator down to the garage, where he kept two vehicles. He thought the sleek black sports car would serve as another lure for her. He'd bring her to his studio in that.

When he took her out, he'd need the all-terrain.

Though the area she worked was several blocks away, he didn't want to draw too much attention. So he cruised by it. Sometimes the street-level licensed companions gathered in groups, other times they spread out. He spotted her, the short red skirt, the low-cut top with spangles that glittered in the streetlights.

He drove another two blocks to an automated lot where he flicked on the jammer that would prevent the scanner from reading his car.

He meandered his way down to her, made eye contact, then stopped as if unsure.

He watched her slow smile, and thought again: Perfect.

Hips swaying, she walked to him.

"Looking for a date?"

"Actually, I was just going to ... You have wonderful eyes."

"The rest of me's even better. Standard rates, and I'll prove it."

"I ... would you walk with me?"

"I'm working, handsome."

"I'll pay you." He reached in his pocket, took out a fifty. Bait for the hook.

"Fifty to take a walk?"

"Yeah, for that." He gestured the way he'd come. "And more if you agree to pose for me."

"What kind of poses are you into?" She took the fifty, then fell into step with him.

"I'm an artist."

"Yeah, what kind?"

"I paint. I'm working on a show for next spring. I don't actually know the standard rates for what you do, but if you'd pose for me tonight—and tomorrow night. At least two sessions? I'll pay you double. You've got the face I want for this portrait."

Her eyes narrowed. He wanted her eyes on canvas.

"Double?"

“It’s important to me. It could be the centerpiece of my show. My car’s in the lot right over there. My studio’s not far.”

She wasn’t ready to buy it, he thought, so he offered what he believed would tip her over the edge.

“I can give you a thousand a session. It’s probably going to take three, maybe four. Up to four hours each. After that a model, especially if she’s not a professional, can get stale.”

“Four hours?”

He could see her calculate. Yes, those who needed money often calculated.

“And any sex work’s extra—standard rates.”

“That’s fine.”

“Half now.”

As they were nearly to the lot, he took out his wallet, made the payment.

“This is great. I’m right over here. I was just going to walk around, do some people watching, maybe hit a coffee shop or club, and there you were.”

“This is your car?”

“Yes.” He opened the door for her, and felt the next step click into place when she slid in.

“Some ride,” she said when he got in the driver’s side.

“Thanks.” He used the jammer again, and drove out of the lot. Glancing at her, he tried for mildly embarrassed. “It’s family money. I’m trying to prove myself outside the businesses. Art is, well, it’s everything for me.”

“Uh-huh. I’m going to need the rest of the money when we get to your studio.”

“No problem. I just can’t believe my luck.”

“So is this a naked deal?”

“Oh, no. It’s a portrait. Your face, some shoulder. It’s a classic-style portrait. I have what you’ll wear for it. It’s all about your face, and especially your eyes.”

Which wore far too much makeup. But he’d take care of that.

She gaped when he turned toward the building and the attached garage.

“You’ve got a studio in here?”

“Yeah.” He pulled into the garage and felt that click again. “Actually, it’s my place. The building. It used to be a warehouse.”

“The whole fucking building?”

He hunched his shoulders as if embarrassed again. “Family money.”

She got out, looked at the all-terrain. “I should’ve asked for more of that family money.”

“Well, if this works out, I’d love to use you again. And I could recommend you as a model.”

As she got in the elevator, she studied him. “This is no bullshit?”

“It’s not. We’ll go straight up to my studio. You know, sorry, I never asked your name.”

“Leesa, no *i*, two *e*’s.”

“Leesa. I’m Jonathan.”

The elevator opened at his studio with its wide windows, its domed skylight. And the paintings.

“Wow, guess you’re not starving in a garret—whatever that is. All of these are yours?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know anything about art, but these are really nice. I figured you might be stringing me along, and they’d probably suck, but they’re really nice.”

Considering the source, he deemed that high praise.

“I have to ask you for something.”

She rolled the eyes that had doomed her.

“And here it comes.”

“No, no.” As he spoke, he peeled off the rest of the money. “It’s just, I need you to take off your makeup.”

“Why?”

“The vision I have. A young woman, her pure beauty. There’s a bathroom right there. Makeup remover, whatever you need. And the wardrobe’s in there, too. I’ll arrange the headpiece when you’re done with the rest. The scarves.”

He walked over, picked them up.

“To cover your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?”

“Nothing.” If you liked spiky, streaky brass and pink. “But for this study, again, it’s the face. The scarf will highlight your face.”

“Whatever. It’s your money.”

He just smiled. “I already know it’s well spent. Do you want a drink? Maybe a glass of wine? Since you’re new to modeling, it could help relax you?”

“Sure, pour away, Johnny.”

He bristled at the “Johnny” as she walked into the bathroom. But he opened a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé as she called out from behind the door.

“You want me to wear all this? It sure won’t show off my talents. Really pretty color though. Classy.”

He sipped some wine. He rarely drank when working, but he had to admit to nerves. This marked the beginning of a new era for him, and one he absolutely believed would bring him the notoriety he deserved.

When she stepped out, those nerves evaporated.

“I knew it. I knew you were perfect. Here, have some wine while I arrange the scarves. I want this deep, rich blue next to your face, a wide band of color with a sharp demarcation to the old gold of the rest, and the lighter blue in the ends a touch against the gold of the jacket.”

“You know what you want. This wine’s really good. I never had anything like it.”

“You can have another glass a little later. Yes, the blue low on the forehead and over the top of the ears, the gold—almost like a turban with the ends trailing.”

“Where’d you get the idea for all this?”

“Who knows where ideas come from? I need you to take off your earrings, and put these on.”

She frowned at what he offered. “Those are like old lady deals.”

“Trust me, they’re just right.”

“You’re the boss.”

He took a long look at her, nodded. “Wonderful. Amazing.”

He led her to a stool. “I’m going to turn your body so your shoulder’s facing me. Then your head turned toward me. Like three-quarter profile. Tip your chin a little—yeah, that’s it. Just hold that, okay?”

He stepped back, picked up a camera.

“Why do you need that?”

“It’ll help me work when you’re not here. Now, without moving your head or your body, turn your eyes toward me. Just your eyes. Fabulous eyes. And part your lips. Not a smile, no, don’t smile. It’s like, like you’re taking a breath. Better, good, a little less.”

He took three photos, then set the camera down. “You can relax while I mix some paints. Then I need you to get into the pose and hold it.”

“This sure isn’t what I figured to be doing tonight.”

He didn’t want to talk to her—she was only an image—but he needed her to stay. Needed her relaxed.

“Do you like sex work?”

“It’s a living. I’m going to work my way up to top level. Do you really think I could maybe make a living doing this?”

He smiled at her, and the hunger he heard in her voice. “I bet you could. Let’s get you back in pose.”

He helped her find it, then walked to the canvas. “Eyes on me, just your eyes.”

Her eyes weren’t as compelling as the original, and her nose not as elegant. But this would be his.

He worked an hour and a half, then let her break the pose, let her walk around the studio before he set her again.

“This is kind of interesting and boring at the same time. You’ve got some of the naked women paintings. I could do that. I look good naked.”

“No doubt about it.”

He worked on the blue now, the light and the shadows, the subtle folds, and found himself pleased with the contrast to her skin.

He worked another hour, a little more, and had to stop himself from snapping at her when she shifted.

So he stepped back. “It’s tiring just to sit, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m getting kind of stiff.”

“I’ve got a really good start. More than. You’ve been terrific. We’ll take a break. You can have another glass of wine.”

“I could use it.”

“Get up, walk around a little. Loosen up.”

He poured the wine, added the powder he’d made to hers.

“You sure got a view here. It must be nice, being rich and all.”

“Here you go. Have some wine, then maybe we can do another half hour. After that, I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

“You’ll take me?”

“Sure.”

“You’re really nice.” Holding the wine in one hand, she skimmed the index finger of her other down his shirt. “I could do this for you again tomorrow. And maybe a little extra.”

She pressed her body to his, ran her hand down, stroked him.

Though he felt nothing, he brushed his lips to hers.

“The extra’s tempting. But art first. It has to be for me. Maybe you want to see what I’ve done.”

“Okay, sure.”

Sipping her wine, she walked around the easel. Then she smiled, let out a quick, surprised laugh.

“I look good. Mysterious. Kind of plain, but pretty, too, and mysterious.”

“That’s the idea. Why don’t you finish your wine, and we’ll try for that half an hour more?”

“Sure. Can I see the rest of this place after? I bet it’s really frosty.”

“We can take the stairs down.” He guided her back to the stool. “Drink up.” The hunger gnawing inside him slid into his eyes as he tipped the glass to her mouth. “Then just a few minutes more.”

“I feel sort of...”

He caught her when she slid off the stool.

“That’s okay, sleep now. Why don’t you sleep now? I’ve got all I need to finish.”

He’d considered poisoning her, or giving her enough of the drug to kill her. But those were passive ways, and for it all to matter, really matter, it had to be active.

Death had to come from him to bring the life.

He put his hands around her throat. Squeezed, squeezed. Her eyelids fluttered; her body convulsed. He hadn’t known that would happen, and found it thrilling.

He felt, oh God, he felt it. Her life slipping from her and into his hands. The power of life, hers into him.

He’d use that life and power and pour it into the painting.

When it was done, he used thin wire, dabs of glue to adjust her head back into the pose. It took time, precision, but masterful art couldn’t be rushed.

Satisfied, he picked her up. He carried her to the elevator and down to the all-terrain.

He knew just where she needed to go.

★ ★ ★

When Lieutenant Eve Dallas woke before the sun, the first thought on her mind was: Fucking paperwork.

She lay a moment, the tubby cat curled against her back. She imagined Roarke, always up before the sun, dressed in one of his king-of-all-he-surveyed suits, sitting at his desk wheeling and dealing.

And that’s how the Dublin street rat became a gazillionaire. Not counting his years as a master in the art of thievery.

As a cop married to that past master, she tried to overlook it.

And she had to admit, lying here thinking about it didn’t address the fucking paperwork.

She’d dumped all she could on Jenkinson. The price he paid for making detective sergeant. She’d pushed a little onto her partner, and that was the price

Peabody paid just because.

But as lieutenant, the bulk of it fell to her. She'd promised herself she'd get up early, go in early, and get it the hell done.

But ... did it really count if you broke a promise to yourself?

She spent about thirty seconds debating that, then gave up and rolled out of bed.

"Lights on full." She cursed when the bedroom lights assaulted her eyes. In bed, Galahad muttered what sounded like a curse and rolled over.

She hit the AutoChef for coffee, black and strong, and gulped it down like medicine. Her brain cleared, and she decided to fill it with the positive.

She was drinking real coffee, wasn't she? And Roarke's blend was as good as you could get. She had a loyal cat currently winding his pudgy body around her legs.

She ordered him breakfast, and when she set it down for him, he pounced as if he hadn't eaten in weeks.

After downing some more coffee, she headed to the shower.

More positive. She had a big-ass shower with a dozen jets pummeling her awake from every direction with water as hot as she wanted.

More hot in the drying tube with air swirling all around her.

A robe waited. Since Roarke seemed to delight in buying her robes, she couldn't be sure if she'd worn this one before. She just wrapped on the silky and rich purple, then went out to explore her closet.

The positive wobbled, nearly dropped with a thud when she faced the dense forest of The Closet.

She could swear the clothes had multiplied overnight, and didn't put that mystery out of Roarke's reach.

Then positive occurred to her. If she actually spent some time choosing, matching or whatever, it put off the paperwork a little longer. Procrastination, sure. But positive procrastination.

Somehow.

And she wouldn't take the easy way with black. Bracing herself, she turned a circle; she faced the line of gray pants that ranged from the palest pearl to the deepest charcoal. Since charcoal came close to her default of black, she grabbed a pair in that shade.

Handily, they had some leather piping in navy, and navy belt loops. So she turned to the line of navy jackets, let out an *Aha!* when she spotted one in leather.

Shirts. Could she go with white? Was that right? How was she supposed to know? How did people just know this shit? And why did white have so many

variations anyway?

Since summer kept its sweaty grip on September, she pulled out a sleeveless white shirt, started to turn toward the dizzying wall of boots.

She didn't yelp, but came damn close when she saw Roarke leaning against the closet door.

"Jesus! Why can't you make some noise?"

"Habit. You did get up early."

"I said I would. If I grab an hour before shift, I can knock out the damn paperwork." Then she let out a long breath. "Paperwork's necessary. It's part of the job. It keeps things organized and efficient. I'm approaching it with a positive attitude."

"Well now, that's interesting."

Ireland whispered through his voice like a warm breeze.

Eve studied him a moment, that glorious face, the impossibly blue eyes, the perfectly carved mouth, the black silk of his hair.

A definite positive.

And he smiled at her in a way that still brought a quick flutter to her heart.

He'd also chosen gray, more slate than charcoal, in his perfect and elegant suit, and paired it with a shirt in that pearly gray, a tie in what she thought was, maybe, maroon with subtle gray diagonal stripes.

"How did you pick that outfit?" She gestured at him. "I mean, do you wake up in the morning—or basically in the middle of the night for you—and think: Ah well, today's the day for the slate-gray suit, I'm thinking, and won't it look grand with the pearl-gray shirt and the maroon tie then."

"Your Irish accent needs some work, darling, but thanks for trying."

He moved into the closet, kissed her.

Another positive.

"The clothes are image, and image is part of the job. You've gone classic, with a bit of an edge with the leather. Finish it out with the navy leather boots there and the same with the belt."

"Which navy leather boots?" Frustration smothered the positive. When she reached for a pair, he just shook his head.

"Not those, no. They're too heavy for the outfit." He chose a pair himself. "These. More streamlined, as you are, darling Eve."

"Ha. Fine. And that's enough positive procrastination."

"Then I'll see to our early breakfast."

She took another breath, said, "Thanks."

“Just how long do you think your positive attitude will last?”

“I’m figuring until I get to Central and start on the paperwork. I already fed the cat. Don’t let him tell you otherwise.”

She dressed, a tall—and yes, streamlined—woman with a choppy cap of brown hair that held shades as varied as the line of brown pants in her closet.

She had long, whiskey-colored eyes in a face of sharp angles. Those eyes scanned the selection of belts before she grabbed one.

She stepped out, set the jacket aside as she walked over to pick up her weapon harness. As she hooked it on, Roarke poured her another cup of coffee.

He sat, PPC in hand, while the wall screen scrolled the early stock reports, and the cat sprawled on his belly on the floor. Hoping, Eve knew, the humans would be distracted enough, at some point, to let him at whatever was under the domes on the table.

“I thought to meet you at Central.”

“Why? When?”

“Eve.” He shook his head as he removed the dome on—yay!—pancakes. “It’s the official move-in. The Great House Project is finished. We’re to have dinner there tonight.”

“I didn’t forget. It’s just...” She waved a hand at the back of her head. “Compartmentalized. Anyway, they all moved in over the weekend.”

“A project of its own, no doubt. Now they’re fairly settled, and dinner with us tonight makes it official for them.”

“Everything got there, right? You said the stuff we picked out for them got there, so we don’t have to take anything else.”

“We’re taking champagne.”

“Okay, good. That’s good. We said we’d give them a hand with it over the weekend, but they nixed that.”

“They wanted, in their way, to present the house to us. Obviously we’ve seen it in progress.”

“But this is different. I get it.”

She started to walk over to pancakes, and her communicator signaled.

She picked it up. “Dallas.”

Dispatch, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve. Report to 17 King Street. Possible homicide, female victim. Officers on scene.

“Copy that. Contact Peabody, Detective Delia. I’m on my way.”

She shoved the communicator in her pocket.

“Now you’re stuck, aren’t you then? Between regret at a death, the pancakes you won’t eat, and the relief at the further, and necessary, procrastination of your paperwork.”

Though she couldn’t drown it in butter and syrup, she plucked up a pancake, folded it, ate it. “One less regret.” She grabbed her jacket, swung it on, then loaded pockets with her ’link, her badge, and everything else.

“And positive? I’m already up and dressed. I’ll see you at Central later, unless.”

“Understood.” He gave the cat a hard, warning look, then stood, crossed to Eve. “Take care of my well-dressed cop.”

“That’s the plan.” She stroked her knuckles over Roarke’s cheek.

“He’s making his move,” she said.

At their unified stares, Galahad stopped his belly crawl toward the table and rolled over as if to study the ceiling.

She gave Roarke another quick kiss, and as she headed out, heard him speak to the cat.

“And don’t think because she’s called to duty you’ll get her share.”