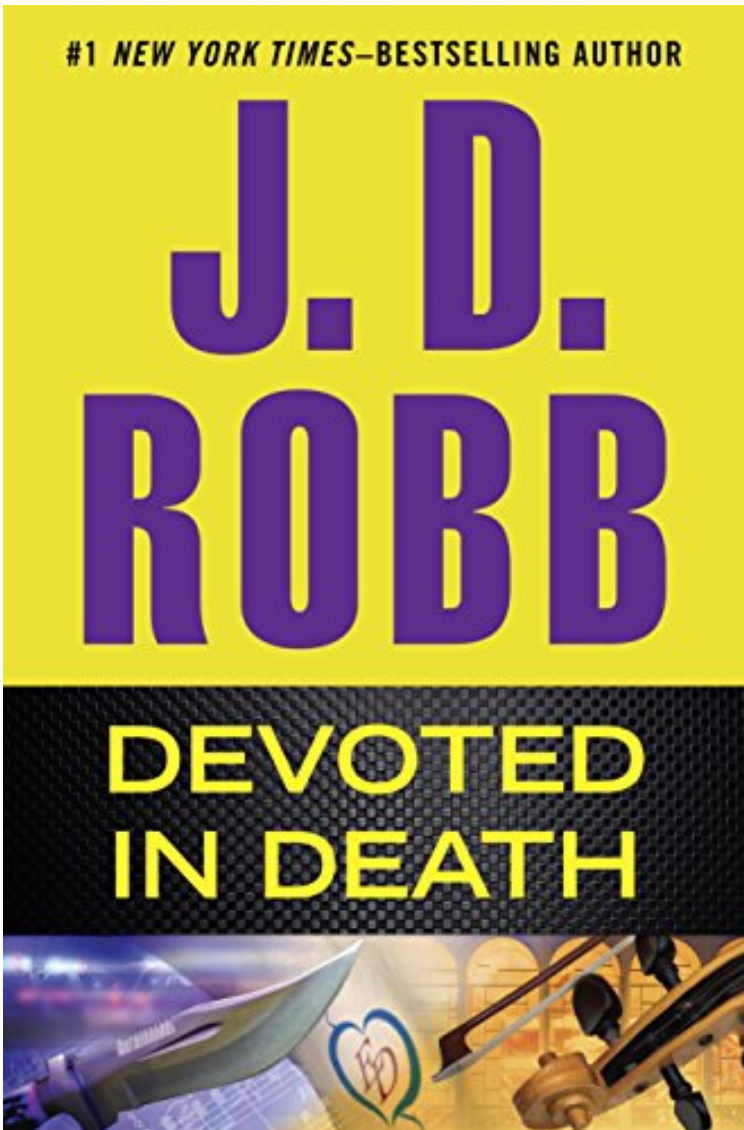


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Devoted in Death



Par J. D. Robb
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurEve Dallas tracks a pair of Bonnie and Clyde copycats whose heated passion for each other is fueled by cold brutality in this crime thriller from #1 New York Times bestselling author of J. D. Robb. When Lieutenant Eve Dallas examines a fresh body in a seedy alleyway in downtown Manhattan, the victims injuries are so extensive that she almost misses the clue. Carved into the skin is the shape of a heartinitials inside reading E and D In Arkansas, Ella-Loo and her recently released ex-con boyfriend, Darryl, dont ever intend to part again. So they hit the road, but then things get a little messy and they wind up killing someonean experience that stokes a fierce, wild desire in Ella-Loo. A desire for Darryl. And a desire to kill again. As they cross state lines on their way to New York to find the life they think they deserve, they leave a trail of evil behind them. But now theyve landed in the jurisdiction of Lt. Dallas and

her team at the New York Police and Security Department. And, with her husband Roarke at her side, Eve has every intention of hunting them down and giving them what they truly deserve. From the Paperback edition.

Chapter One

The first kill was an accident. Mostly. All they wanted was a nice car. It didn't even have to be fancy because their piece of shit truck shuddered, wheezed, then let out a death rattle just after they'd crossed over into Arkansas from Oklahoma. It was Ella-Loos' idea how to go about acquiring a new ride. She'd always had ideas, and dreams along with them, and since meeting Darryl she'd come to believe those dreams would come true. She'd been working in a cowboy bar in Dry Creek, a place many who lived there considered the armpit of Oklahoma as it sat on a curve of a desolate spit of land where the Panhandle cornered into Texas. None of her dreams had come true; and, in fact, the man she'd been with that son of a whore Cody Bates had given her a black eye and split her lip open before he'd left her flat on the ground in front of the very bar she now worked. She knew she was made for better things than serving up beer and rotgut whiskey to cowboys and the hard-eyed women who dogged them. She was made for better than pulling in extra giving blow jobs or quick bangs in the bathroom stall or the cab of a pickup to men with beer breath and no ambitions beyond the next ride. The better she walked into Rope N Ride one fateful night in the person of Darryl Roy James. She knew, the minute she laid eyes on him. He was the one. What had been missing. What she needed to complete all she was and could be. Later she would tell him how when he came through the fake saloon doors, light-tred-gold as a sunset had glowed around him. His bright hair had shimmered with it, and his eyes blue and clear as lake water on a postcard had glowed. And she knew all she needed to know. He wasn't like the others, nothing like the barn-smelling, ass-grabbing sort that frequented the Rope N Ride. He had something. After a brief, intense mating dance, after he'd all but nailed her to the stall door in the bathroom, then again against the wall outside the break door, he'd told her the same. One look, he'd said. Like, no sooner looked than loved. That was from a book. From Shakespeare. Darryl had read some Shakespeare. Slick Willy, he called him while getting his high school diploma courtesy of juvenile detention in Denton County, Texas, where he'd run off to find his fortune at sixteen. He'd walked out of juvie at eighteen, into a job at his mother's boyfriend's garage. Darryl had a way with engines as some had a way with horses. Barlow, who nagged Darryl to distraction, said if he spent as much effort on the job as he did dreaming about being somewhere else, he'd be a rich man. But Darryl had never seen the point in working himself to death when there were so many other ways to get what he wanted. And taking it from somebody else was the best way he knew. Still, since he didn't want to go back to jail, he stuck it out for the lifetime of nearly three years. Then he'd gotten what he wanted by stealing the \$6,800 under-the-table cash Barlow kept hidden under the false bottom of a drawer in his office. Which showed what a dumbass Barlow was. Then he'd helped himself to some equipment, some parts, busted open the display case on Barlow's prized Bowie knife figuring he could sell it along the way. He'd packed up while his mother was at work waiting tables as she always had for piss-poor pay and worse tips. He pocketed \$3,200 from the pouch she kept in her flour tin it rounded him up to \$10,000. As he considered himself a good son, he'd left her the remaining \$646 with a note that read: Thanks, Ma. Love, Darryl. He'd loaded up the truck he'd boosted from the garage, and said ad-fucking-ios to Lonesome, Oklahoma. He walked into the Rope N Ride, and Ella-Loos' life on his twenty-first birthday. That was fate, they determined, as they were a gift to each other. Within twenty-four hours she and the duffel bag holding all her worldly possessions were loaded in the truck with him. They drove fast, spent lavishly, stole when the mood struck, and fucked like a pair of rabid minx at every opportunity. By the time Darryl was arrested in Tulsa for trying to pocket an engagement ring for his soul mate, they'd blown through nearly every dollar they had between them. He got four years as he'd had the Bowie knife on him and this time in the Oklahoma State Pen. Ella-Loo waited for him. She took a job at another bar, made extra with it though she wouldn't, even for good money allow any other penetration. She was a one-man woman. As devoted as a priest at Sunday Mass, she visited Darryl every week, and, in fact, conceived a child on a conjugal visit. Darryl read more Shakespeare and honed his mechanical skills. He learned more about engines, learned how to build bombs, learned more complex ins and outs of computers and electronics. He got himself an education he might've put to good use on the outside. She named the baby Darra, after her Darryl, and drove her back to Elk City where Ella-Loo presented the infant to Darra's grandma. Though she could hardly stand to be away from Darryl so long, she gave it ten days. Long enough for her mother to fall in love with the baby, and for her stepfather to relax his guard. Knowing her mother would never allow her stepfather to set the cops on her, she took her great-grandmother's silver. It would've come to her one day anyway. Left the baby, and drove back to McAlester for the next visiting day. Maybe, when they were ready to settle down, she and Darryl would go back for their daughter. But like Darryl said, they were star-crossed.

lovers, and had to live and love every minute to the full. A baby didnt fit in with that. He got out in three and a half years, due to good behavior, and she was waiting for him wearing a tight white dress and red high heels. They barely made it to the by-the-month room before the dress was on the floor and the shoes were in the air. As they both agreed they wanted McAlester in the trucks rearview, they spent only that night eating, drinking the sparkling wine Ella-Loo had copped from the bar where she would no longer work or give bjs and having sex. She wanted to go east, clear to the Atlantic Ocean. She wanted big city lights and noise and everything that wasnt Oklahoma. New York City, she told Darryl, was their destiny, as it was the only town big and bright enough to hold them. So when Darryls truck coughed and wheezed, he used his skill and parts he stripped off another he found in a parking lot got it running pretty smooth again. He headed east with the radio blaring and Ella-Loo curled against his side like an appendage. Even with his skill, the old truck couldnt handle the miles or the speed, and died like a dog. And Ella-Loo had her idea. Darryl managed to baby and jury-rig the truck enough to limp it off the main road while she consulted the in-dash computer. It seemed to her they might have some luck on a little stretch along Highway 12, some ways south of Bentonville. She dug out that white dress and those red heels, reddened her lips and, bending from the waist, finger-combed her long blond hair. She was hoping for a mana lone manas she had no doubt a man would stop for her. The dress sat snug on her curves, rode high on her thighs, and when she flipped her hair up again, it tumbled like a sirens. She laughed, and shooed Darryl back when he tried to grab at her. You just wait, baby, you just wait. And stay out of sight now. A man comes along, hes going to stop to help me out for sure. Hes gonna want to do more than that. Holy Jesus, Ella-Loo, youre sexy as black lace panties. I got a boner so big its killing me just looking at you. Thats the idea. If a woman comes along, she might stop, might not. A couple of men will, a couple of women might. Mix it up, its back to maybe. But sooner or later, baby. She ran her finger over his mouth, gave him a grind, crotch to crotch, that made him moan before she nudged him away. More of that later, honey. Its not full dark yet. People are more inclined to stop to help before it gets dark. Go on back in that brush there. Ive got to look helpless, and I wont when Ive got myself a strong, handsome man beside me. Shed chosen the spot well maybe too well as the sun dipped lower without a single vehicle passing going either way. I maybe could get it running again, Darryl called out. Enough to get to a motel or a town, just boost something there. This is going to work, Darryl. She had her mind set on it. We just have to I see a car coming. When he stops, give me some time to play it up. Then you come out, baby, and take care of it. Youll take care of it, wont you, Darryl? You know I will. She stood beside the car, hands clasped together as if in prayer, big blue eyes wide with what she hoped came off as a little hope, a little fear. She loved playacting. And she felt her excitement rise as the car and a fine one, too slowed. The man lowered the window, angled across the seat. Having some trouble? Oh, yes, sir, I surely am. Older, she noted, maybe right around fifty, so hed be easy for Darryl to knock out, tie up, and drag off into the brush. It just up and died on me. I tried getting hold of my brother its his truck but my link must be broken, or maybe I forgot to pay the service fee. Im always forgetting something. You didnt forget to fuel up, did you? he asked. Oh, no, sir. That is, my brother, Henry, had it topped right off. Thats Henry Beam (the name of her U.S. history teacher back in high school) from Fayetteville? Maybe you know him it seems everybody knows Henry. Im afraid I dont. Im not from around here. Let me pull up in front of you, and Ill take a look. Thank you so much. I just didnt know what I was going to do. Its getting dark, too. He pulled up. His car was a shiny silver, and though shed have liked red just like her shoes she wouldnt complain. She fluttered around when he told her to unlock the hood, so he reached into the truck, released the latch himself. He had a nice wrist unit, she noted, silver and shiny like the car. She wanted Darryl to have it. I dont know much about trucks, he began, so if its not an easy fix, I can take you into Bentonville. You can use my link to get in touch with your brother. Thats so nice of you. I was afraid somebody maybe not so nice would stop, and I didnt know what to do. She glanced toward the brush, kept up a chatter to mask the rustling Darryl made as he came out. My mas going to be worrying soon if Im not back, so if youre going to Bentonville, that would be just fine. Shell thank you herself for bringing me home. I thought you said Fayetteville. What? Oh, Henry, she began. Something must have shown in her eyes or he heard the quiet step of Darryls boot, as he reared back, turned just as Darryl raised the tire iron. It struck the man on the shoulder. And he leaped at Darryl like a demon from hell. It happened so fast the flying fists, the animal grunts and snarls. Thinking only of Darryl, Ella-Loo snatched up the tire iron that had spun out of his hand, tried to get a solid grip. She swung, striking the now raging Good Samaritan hard across the back, realized her mistake when it didnt stop him. The next time, she aimed for the legs. One of them buckled she clearly heard a crack. Even hurt he managed to swing around, backhand her. Before she could steady herself, try for the other leg, Darryl went

crazy. Put your hands on my woman, Ill kill you! He pummelled, fist flying, eyes wild, teeth bared. She barely had time to scramble clear before the man, unbalanced on his bad leg, face bloody, fell back. His head struck the front bumper of the truck, bounced off, then slapped against the pavement. Before she gave it a thought, she jumped in, smashed the tire iron across his face. Two hard blows. He lay still now, eyes wide in his ruined face. Blood began to seep and pool under his head. Ella-Loos breath puffed like a steam engine, whooshing out as her body quivered. Is he... is he dead? Shit, Ella-Loo, shit. Staring down, Darryl pulled a bandanna out of his back pocket to mop at the sweat and blood on his face. He looks dead to me. We killed him. Didnt do it on purpose. Shit, Ella-Loo. He hit you right in the face. I cant allow that. I cant let anybody hurt my girl. I didnt want him to get up and hit you again, either. So I... You got to get him off the road. Get him back behind all that brush, Darryl, and quick before somebody else comes. And you take his wallet, his wrist unit. Take anything hes got on him. Hurry. She found a rag in the truck, wiped down the tire iron, then tossed it into the backseat of their new car. Take his clothes, too, baby. What? Take everything. You never know, but hurry! She began hauling their things from the bed of the truck to the car. Just put everything in the back, and well sort through it later. Her heart hammered; her hands shook. But she moved fast and sure. We need to get everything of ours out of the truck, baby, and I guess we need to wipe the steering wheel and so on. Anything we think weve touched. Ill do that. She did the best she could, then finished with Darryls help as they didnt have much to transfer from truck to car. In ten minutes Darryl was behind the wheel with Ella-Loo beside him. Dont go over the speed limit now. Were just going to put some distance between us and that man and the truck. She held on, a mile, five, ten. At twenty-five, she broke. Pull off, pull off! See that road there? God Almighty, pull off, Darryl, go back in the trees there. Are you gonna be sick, honey? I can still smell his blood. Its on you. Its on me, too. Its all right, now. Its gonna be all right, now. He pulled off, bumped his way through some trees, stopped. Honey. Did you see his face? His eyes staring at us, but not seeing us? And the blood coming out of his mouth. Of his ears. She turned to him, her face lit like the sun, her eyes huge, full of wonder and want. We killed somebody. Together. They fell on each other. For them, sex was always hot, hard and heady, but now, with the smell of fresh blood, with the knowing, it turned feral until her screams, his shouts echoed in the car. When they were done, when sweat fused their flesh together like glue and the white dress was tattered, stained with blood as red as her heels, she smiled at him. Next time, I dont want to do it so fast. Were going to take some time with the next one. I love you, Ella-Loo. I love you, Darryl. Nobodys ever loved like we do. Were going to have everything we want, do anything we want, from right here all the way to New York City. The first kill, mostly an accident, took place on a hot night in August. By the time they arrived in New York, in mid-January, their tally was up to twenty-nine. With her first look at New York, Ella-Loo had the same reaction shed had with her first look at Darryl. She knew they were made for each other. An ice-pick wind stabbed down the litter-strewn alley, slicing at exposed flesh, hissing and snarling as it hacked its way from Madison Street through the tunnel formed by graffiti-laced buildings of crumbling red brick or pitted concrete. The few lights that worked cast purple shadows along with sickly yellow glows so the pools and splashes of them bloomed bitter, like a bruise. The lowest of low-level street whores licensed or not might take a john into one of the narrow niches hoping for shelter from the worst of the cold and wind while business was conducted. A junkie desperate enough for a fix might follow an illegals dealer into those bruising shadows. Anyone else thinking to shortcut through might as well wear a flashing sign offering themselves up to muggers, rapists and worse. None of those options applied to Dorian Kuper as hed met his unfortunate fate elsewhere before his body had been wrapped in plastic and dumped, much like the wind- and vermin-tattered bags of garbage beside a broken recycler. The vicious wind wouldnt trouble Dorian any longer. Its toothy knives cut keenly enough, so Lieutenant Eve Dallas gave into necessity and yanked on the ski cap with its embarrassing snowflake. But she drew the line at the fuzzy gloves both given to her on a cold December day by the dreamy-eyed Dennis Mira. She thought, fleetingly, that twenty-four hours earlier shed been basking, mostly naked, on the sun-washed sand of her husbands private island with Roarke, also mostly naked, beside her. However shed begun 2061, she was back in New York now, and so was death. She was a murder cop, so while others slept in the blustery dark still an hour shy of dawn, she crouched over a body, hands bare but for sealant, brown eyes flat and narrowed. Killed the hell out of you, didnt he, Dorian? Hes got an Upper West Side address, Dallas. Detective Peabody, wrapped in a pink coat, her feet toasty in fuzzy-topped pink boots, and her face all but buried in the many swirls of a multicolored scarf, relayed the data from her PPC to her partner. Age, thirty-eight, single, no cohab. Hes with the Metropolitan Opera Company. First cellist. Whats a cellist from the Upper West Side doing dead in Mechanics Alley? Wasnt killed here. Plenty of blood on the tarp, on him,

smear from surface to surface. Ligature marks, wrists and ankles, and some of the bruising, the lacerations from struggling look at least a day old. Maybe more. Morris will confirm. A lot of cuts, punctures, burn marks, bruising. Peabody, her eyes a deeper, darker brown than Eves scanned the body. A lot of them superficial. But then... Yeah, a lot of them not. Bound, gagged the corners of his mouth are cut and abraded tortured for hours. Maybe a day or more before it stopped being fun. And then... the slice across the gut, that ended him. But it would have taken time for him to bleed out. Some painful time. Taking out her gauges, she established time of death. The painful time ended at twenty-two-twenty last night. Dallas, there's a missing person on him. Just filed this morning. His mother filed it. Ah... okay. He didn't show for work night before last, didn't answer his link, missed his classes teaching one at Juilliard yesterday afternoon, and was a no-show for last night's performance. So about two days. Contact whoever caught the missing person, get a full report. Well notify next of kin. Hunkered back on her heels, Eve studied the face of the dead. His ID shot had shown an attractive man with deep green, flirtatious eyes and long, rich blond hair. A face sharp at the cheeks, full at the lips. His killer had hacked at the hair, leaving thin tufts and ugly little wounds, burned small circles in his cheeks, like blackened dimples. Spiderwebs of red shattered the whites of his eyes. But the killer had focused most of his energy and creativity on the body. She thought Morris, the chief medical examiner, would find multiple broken bones and damaged organs. Some of these burns are small and precise, she noted. Probably used a tool. But see on the back of the hands here? Bigger, not precise. Somebody put out cigarettes, herbals, joints, whatever, on the vic's hands. Cellist. A cello that violin type thing, right? Well, its... Peabody made a large shape in the air with her hands, then mimed sawing across it with a bow. Yeah, a big, fat violin. You need your hands to play one of those. Burned the hands, broke four of his fingers, right hand, crushed the left hand heavy object. Maybe personal. Hacking off the hair, that reads personal. Dumping him naked could read personal. Eve lifted one of the hands, used her light to do a cursory exam of the nails. I don't see any skin under here, and nothing that looks like defensive wounds. She shifted to the head, lifting carefully, feeling the skull. Big knot back here. He has a fight verbal, I mean, Peabody began. With someone he knew, turns his back, and they give him a good bash. They're pissed off enough to bind him, gag him, torture him. This isn't pissed off. Eve shook her head, finally straightened up. The wind snatched at her long, leather coat, sent it billowing, snapping around her legs. It isn't patient and intricate like Remember The Groom? I'm not likely to forget. Ever. He made a science out of torture. It was his work. This looks more like play. Play? Pissed off usually wales right in. Pissed off would go for the face more, especially if there's a personal connection. But here, she thought, the face was the least of it, as if the killer had wanted to keep it fairly unharmed. So they could see the victim? So he remained recognizable? Pissed off doesn't torture like this for a couple days, she added. Pissed off and crazy, maybe. But again, I'd expect to see more physical contact more from fists or saps. Some damage to the genitals, but again, not as much as I'd expect if it was a pissed off friend or lover. But we'll look at that. Shifting, Eve looked down the alley toward Monroe, turned, looked north toward Henry. The killer had to have transpo, and likely pulled up on Henry. The dump sites close to Henry. The vic's what was it five-ten, and one-fifty-five. We'll have the sweepers determine if the plastic with the body was dragged down the alley, but it doesn't look like it. Hard to be certain in this light, but dragged or carried, the killer had some muscle. Or help. We'll see if the canvass turns up anything. She looked up, scanned dark windows. Middle of the night, middle of the winter. Cold as a bitch's tit. Its witch. Why? Doesn't matter, Eve said quickly. Neither way makes sense. If somebody's a witch, why do they put up with cold tits? I'm a bitch, and twenty-four hours ago, my tits were plenty warm. Was it wonderful? Your vacation? It didn't suck. Blue skies, blue water, white sand and Roarke. No, it hadn't sucked. And now it was done. Let's call in the sweepers, the morgue, and get a couple of uniforms back here on the body. She checked her wrist unit. We'll go by the vic's residence first. There's no point waking his mother up at this hour to tell her he's dead. Eve tugged the silly cap farther over her frozen ears, bobbed her light. As she leaned over to retrieve it, her gaze flicked toward the body where the end of the beam arched. Wait. Is that... Peabody, microgoggles. You see something? I'll see if I see something better with the microgoggles. She was kneeling beside the body now, drawing the left arm farther out. Fuck me, I almost missed this. Missed what? After she pulled the microgoggles from Eves field kit, Peabody pushed them at her, tried to angle to see what Eves light beamed on. It's a heart. So much blood and bruising, I might've missed it. Morris would have caught it once the vic was on his table, but in this light, I didn't see it. I don't see it now. Just under the armpit. Leaning closer, goggles in place, Eve bookended it with her fingers, top to bottom, then side to side. About an inch high and wide. Precise as a high-dollar tattoo. Initials inside. E over D. D for Dorian. Could be. And it's sure as hell shifted some angles. Maybe a pissed-off lover or wannabe or

used-to-be lover after all. Ante- or postmortem? she wondered. A signature or a statement? This parts precise. The killer took some time and care carving this in. McQueen carved numbers in his vics, Peabody remembered, so the cops would know how many hed done. Maybe this is Es signature, and E picks the vic and develops some sick, delusional relationship. And since sick, delusional relationships never end well, the killer bashes, ties up, gags, tortures, kills, then carves in the heartkiller over vic inside it. Eve noddeda good theory. Solid and logical. It could play. Maybe this isnt Es first sick, delusional relationship. That could play, too. Eve rose, pulled off the goggles. Well run the elements through IRCCA, look for like crimes. Right now, lets go check out the vics place. Maybe well find out who he knew whose name starts with E. His mother lives in the same building, Peabody said as Eve signaled to one of the uniforms at the mouth of the alley. Well, that saves us time. Well go through his place, then do the notification. Shes with the orchestra, too. She plays a baby cello. They have babies? It was, like, a joke. Shes first violin. So, ha ha, baby cello. Assume I laughed. Lives in the same building, works the same jobbasically. She probably knows anybody with the initial E he knew. And how he got along at work, with lovers. Eve turned away, had a short conversation with the uniform. With the scene secured, and no witnessso farto interview as the body had been discovered by beat droids, she climbed into her car. And with unspeakable relief, ordered the heat on full. With even more unspeakable relief, she pulled off the snowflake hat. Aw. It looks cute on you. If I wanted to look cute, I wouldnt be a cop. She forked her fingers through her short, shaggy brown hair. Address, Peabody. West 71st between Amsterdam and Columbus. A long way from where he ended up. Needles pricked along her fingers as they thawed out. One of the things shed figured out how to operate in the fully loaded, purposely nondescript vehicle her husband had designed for her, was coffee from the onboard AutoChef. And right that minute, she thought she might kill for real coffee. Computer, engage AutoChef, Eve began. Yippee! Shut up, Peabody, or you wont get any. AutoChef engaged. What would you like, Dallas, Lieutenant Eve? One coffee black, one coffee regular, both in go-cups. One moment, please. Is front-seat delivery desired? Yeah, yeah, yeah, thats desired. I didnt know it did that, Peabody piped up. I thought it was just backseatwhoa! Order complete, the computer announced as two go-cups slid out from under the dash. That is totally iced. It better not be iced. Eve snagged the go-cup with the black top, leaving the cream-colored top for Peabody. It was hot and strong and perfect. I love this ride, Peabody stated, cuddling her coffee. Dont get used to the coffee service. Maybe the next time its shy of five a.m., minus three with a windchill of you dont fucking want to know, well do it again. Otherwise, forget it. Peabody only smiled, took the first glorious sip. I love this ride, she repeated.

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