

DEATH IS DISPOSABLE

by Evan Marshall

Chapter One

Sanitation Supervisor Anna Winthrop drove slowly along West Fifty-first Street. In the middle of the block between Broadway and Eighth Avenue, she pulled out of traffic and parked in front of a vacant lot flanked by red-brick apartment buildings.

Not far from the sidewalk, Sanitation Police Officer Izzy Martinson stood gazing down at a heap of debris. Anna got out of the car and walked over to him, giving him a smile and a nod. The junk consisted of plaster, drywall, insulation, and broken concrete. Izzy took a drag on his cigarette and shook his bald head.

“Contractor, looks like,” Anna said, running her fingers back through her shoulder-length ash-blonde hair. “You want me to have my people clean it out?”

“Not yet,” Izzy said, flicking his half-smoked cigarette onto the pile. “We’ll stake it out, see if we can nab ’em in the act.”

Since her promotion to Supervisor two years earlier, Anna had worked with the Enforcement Division’s Illegal Dumping Task Force several times in an effort to catch perpetrators in the act. Only a few of the stakeouts had resulted in arrests, but Anna didn’t say anything about that to Izzy.

She watched him drive off and cross Eighth Avenue toward Ninth. Then she got back into her own car, a white Ford Taurus sedan with a red and blue stripe and the Department logo on its side, and SANITATION printed on its side and rear. She took a last look at the pile of debris in the lot, then headed back to her garage.

That’s how she’d thought of it for the past two years: her garage. As a Supervisor for the New York City Sanitation Department’s Manhattan Central District 13, overseeing her section’s garbage and recycling collection, street sweeping, and snow removal, she used the garage as her center of operations.

Not that the garage was much to speak of—a drab, two-story tan-brick building wedged between the ugliest brownstone on West Forty-fourth Street and the fenced-in playground of an elementary school. But it was *her* drab, two-story tan-brick building, and she’d grown surprisingly fond of it.

She drove through the garage’s chain-link gate and into the cavernous building itself, parking to the side near several rows of tires waiting to be disposed of. Getting out, she crossed the vast, dimly lit space in which Manhattan 13’s roughly one hundred fifty vehicles and pieces of equipment were parked or stored. Ahead of her, behind widely spaced cinder-block columns that formed a corridor, were the garage’s offices, their large rectangular Plexiglass windows darkened by closed venetian blinds.

About a hundred feet from her office, three men from her crew stood in a cluster, a small mass of green uniforms and steel-tipped safety boots. As soon as they saw her, they grew quiet, watching her. Terrence King, unreadable as always, looked at her, his expression blank. Winston Avery sniggered. Jay Rapchuck turned to look at something on the garage floor, and Anna followed his gaze.

In the middle of the floor, someone had arranged garbage to spell out the message WE ♥ ANNA. She looked back at the men. Now Jay was laughing wholeheartedly, his flabby frame shaking. He jabbed Winston, who let out a snicker.

“This had better be gone by the time I come out of my office,” she told them, “or I’ll write up every one of you.”

As she approached her office door, she saw Kelly and Brianna coming toward her across the garage floor. They had seen the men’s handiwork. Kelly was shaking her head in disgust, her neck-length honey-blond hair swinging from side to side.

Brianna’s expression was dark and hostile. “They’re like little children,” she said, looking over. The three men were already sweeping up the mess. As if sensing they were being watched, Jay turned and winked at Brianna. He had the hots for her and made no secret of it. Winston looked at Kelly, the object of *his* affections, and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. Both women looked away.

“Just finish your route?” Anna asked them.

“No, we’ve been back about half an hour,” Kelly said.

Nodding, Anna put her hand on the knob of her office door.

“Wait,” Brianna said softly. “You’ve got company.” When Anna raised her brows inquiringly, Brianna said, “Santos.”

Anna smiled. She and Santos Reyes, a beat cop from Manhattan’s Midtown North Precinct, had met twice before—once when he was following up on a complaint about the noise the sanitation trucks made, and once when a purse-snatcher had been seen running into the garage. She was glad he had a reason to come back. She’s always had a thing for Hispanic men, and this one was especially handsome.

When she entered the small room, he was standing in silhouette between her desk and the wall, reading the notices on her cork board. He was tall, slim but muscular, with a nice tight rear end . . . and when he turned to her and smiled, she felt herself melting again.

She wished him a good morning and he gave her a sweet smile and a nod. “Ms. Winthrop—”

“Anna—please.”

“Anna. And I’m Santos.”

“Agreed,” she said, walking behind her desk. “What can I do for you today?”

He looked down, frowning in embarrassment. “This is pretty much a formality, something I’ve got to follow up on.”

She waited, smelling his peppery cologne.

“It’s about a neighbor of yours, a Mrs.”—he checked a small notepad—“Dovner.”

Anna let out a groan. Mrs. Dovner, who lived in the apartment below hers, was the bane of her existence. She had already complained to Anna about playing her music too loud and cooking with too much garlic. Now what?

“Mrs. Dovner has complained that you’ve been, um, encouraging a homeless man who frequents your neighborhood. In fact, she says it’s because of you that he’s there so much.”

Anna’s mouth dropped. “You mean Isaiah?”

“Yes,” he said, looking a little scared. “I believe that’s the name Mrs. Dovner gave. According to her, you give him bottles and, well, speak to him.”

“Oh, are those crimes now?”

“No—oh, no,” he said, eyes large. “It’s just that she says by doing these things you’re creating a disturbance.”

She slammed her hand down on her desk. He jumped. “A disturbance! Listen,” she said, leaning forward, hating to be yelling at him because he really was so incredibly

cute, “Isaiah is a sweet, elderly, mentally disturbed homeless man who trades in my cans and soda bottles for the deposits. Other people on my street give him bottles, too. And yes, we sometimes talk to him, the way we would talk to any human being. I think that’s what Mrs. Dovner doesn’t realize—that Isaiah is a human being. Something I’m starting to think Mrs. Dovner is not.”

“Like I said, this is just a formality.” He flipped his pad shut. “Now I can say I spoke to you.”

“And just what is it you want me to do?”

His gaze traveled around the small room. Then he looked at her and burst out laughing. “Darned if I know!”

Laughing along with him, she shook her head. “I appreciate the visit . . . Santos. But since, as you say, I’m not doing anything wrong, I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time.”

“Maybe not,” he said.

She looked at him.

“I was wondering,” he said, lowering his voice, “if maybe I could have your number . . . call you sometime?”

She’d wondered how many times they would have to meet before he asked her that. She grabbed his notepad from him, found a pen on her desk, and scribbled out her number. “Not a problem,” she said, businesslike, as she handed back the pad. When he smiled like a little boy who’s been given candy, she couldn’t help smiling with him.

“Thanks,” he said at the door, holding up the pad.

Then he was gone, the peppery smell of his cologne lingering above Anna’s desk. She inhaled deeply.

* * *

When she emerged from her office at two-thirty, all traces of the garbage message were gone. She felt a small, secret sense of relief. Asserting her authority wasn’t always easy. Heck, this *job* wasn’t easy for a petite woman with a pretty, heart-shaped face, full lips, high cheekbones, and big, long-lashed green eyes. At twenty-nine, she was younger than eight of the ten men she supervised. Most of them showed her a grudging respect, but it was a battle she never stopped fighting. Kelly and Brianna, on the other hand, were never a problem. They liked and admired her.

On her way out, she passed the office of Hal Redmond, Supervisor of section two. Still at his desk, he gave her a broad wave. Next door was the office of Gerry Licari, who supervised section one. His door was closed and beyond the venetian blinds the room was dark. Gerry had two small children and rarely stayed much beyond the end of their shift at two o’clock. The last office belonged to Allen Schiff, the District Superintendent. His door was open but the room was dark.

As she passed through the garage’s entrance area, the door to the stairs to the second floor opened and Bill Hogan came out. Seeing her, he looked uncomfortable and gave a little wave, heading toward the parking lot but staying a good distance behind her. She remembered something she’d meant to tell him and turned around to face him. Caught off guard, he stopped short, but not before she caught a strong whiff of alcohol. Sadly, she made a mental note to speak to him about his drinking.

“What happened with that woman on East Fifty-eighth?” she asked him.

“I told her she needed to tie up her paper or put it in a recycling container,” he said, gaze averted.

“Was she okay with that?”

“Yeah.” He seemed eager to take off.

“Good. Have a good night.”

“You, too,” he said, and hurried off toward his car.

She watched him go, then passed through the gate to the street.

As if in compensation for her earlier irritations, it was a glorious May New York day, the sky a high, hard blue, the slightest hint of a breeze in the air, the temperature a perfect seventy degrees.

Manhattan 13’s garage was on Forty-third Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. Anna lived on Forty-third between Ninth and Tenth avenues, a five-minute walk west. At the corner of Ninth and Forty-third, Mr. Carlucci was neatening displays of apples and pears outside his grocery store.

“Hey, Mr. Carlucci, what’s with the fancy presentation?” She loved busting his chops, and it was mutual.

“Mind your garbage!” he said with a big smile, then gave her a wink.

A few minutes later, Anna entered her building and found herself face to face with Mrs. Dovner, who lived in the front apartment on the first floor. Anna gave her a little smile and started to pass the older woman.

“Not so fast, missy.” Anna hated it when Mrs. Dovner called her that and had told her not to—which, Anna now realized, was exactly why Mrs. Dovner still did it. “I told the police what you’ve been doing, luring that dirty old bum here with all your bottles and smiles. I’m onto you.”

It occurred to Anna that Mrs. Dovner, with her flyaway blue hair and ancient clothes, would herself have made quite a convincing street person. Anna drew a long breath. “I’ve told you before—I have every right to speak to Isaiah and give him bottles, and I will continue to do so. If you bother the police about it again, I’ll have to get in touch with them about you.”

“Me!” Elegantly Mrs. Dovner placed a deeply lined hand on her bosom, like some grande dame.

“Mm-hm. You’re harassing me. It had better stop or I’ll see you in court.” Anna went up the stairs, Mrs. Dovner muttering below. Anna could only imagine the old bat’s reaction if she knew Isaiah sometimes slept in their building’s courtyard.

Suddenly the older woman let out a cry. “There he is now! See what I mean? There he is!” She had her face pressed to the glass of the front door.

Anna hurried down the stairs. “You leave him alone!” She ran in front of Mrs. Dovner and out the door to the front stoop. She heard Mrs. Dovner scramble out after her. Sure enough, Isaiah was across the street, making his way toward her. She gave him her kindest smile. Smiling back, he started toward her.

“Shoo! Scat!” Mrs. Dovner squawked, standing at the edge of the sidewalk as if afraid to let her feet touch the street. “We don’t want you here.”

That did it. Slowly Anna turned toward her and got out her cell phone. She punched out some numbers, then pretended to hit the send button. “Yes, is this the police station?” she said into the dead phone. “Good. I want to report a case of harassment.”

Mrs. Dovner’s eyes widened in horror, then narrowed to slits. “Okay for now,

missy,” she said, as if vowing to return for another battle, and turned and stormed back into the building.

Anna turned back to Isaiah. “I didn’t expect to see you this week,” she said with a smile. “You said you would be away.”

“Ah, yes. Trip postponed due to illness.” His voice was low, a little gravelly, pleasant to listen to.

She wondered where he had planned to go, with whom, and if he had really planned to go anywhere at all, but she knew not to ask. “How are you today?”

“Fine, Anna, just fine.” He wore black jeans and an oversize light blue Mexican wedding shirt, which Anna now realized looked new. His usually scraggly neck-length brown hair was clean and combed. And, she realized now, he was without his rusty shopping cart.

She looked at him more closely. He was different, she saw that now. Then she realized he’d been different the last few times she’d seen him—better dressed like this, his manner more . . . sane. His watery hazel eyes looked deeply into hers.

“The fact is, I’m doing really well now. I— I see a way out, a way out of . . .” He struggled to express himself, looking around him as if the right words were floating in the air. “A way out of this life.” His eyes brimmed with sudden tears.

She understood what he meant and nodded. “That’s wonderful, Isaiah. Has something happened?”

He frowned in thought, then lowered his gaze and said, “No cans or bottles anymore.” He locked his gaze onto hers as if trying to will his meaning into her. “I just came to say thank you.”

He turned and ambled away. Anna watched him until he reached Tenth Avenue and disappeared around the corner.

* * *

Early the next morning, Anna stepped out of her building into a gray, drizzly rain. A rivulet of water in the gutter carried a Mars Bar wrapper and an empty Marlboro pack, reminding her she needed to finalize her street sweeping schedule.

Walking east, she crossed Ninth Avenue and continued along Forty-third Street. Ahead and to the right, on the south side of the street, three police cars sat at the curb and a small crowd had gathered.

She approached a man standing at the back of the crowd, craning his neck in an attempt to see into a brownstone. “What’s going on?” she asked him.

“Woman was killed. Murdered.”

Anna’s eyes grew wide. “Murdered? Who was it?”

The man shrugged. Two people away, an older woman wearing a flowered kerchief on her head turned toward them and said, “Maria Trujillo.” She made the sign of the cross.

Anna had never heard the name. “Anybody know anything about her?” she asked no one in particular. “How it happened?”

No one replied. Two female cops, one tall with red hair, the other heavy and blonde, approached the crowd. “People,” the blonde one said, “please move on. Nothing to see here. Let us do our work.” No one moved. “I’m not gonna say it again.”

Everyone moved. Anna continued east, casting a glance back at the brownstone.

Two more cops, male, emerged and descended the steps to talk with the two women.

At the garage, Anna ran into Bill Hogan again. He reeked of liquor and his skin was a wan yellowish color in the harsh fluorescent light. "You see the commotion on Forty-third?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Any idea what happened?"

"Overheard two cops talkin' to each other. Woman strangled, one of them said. Don't know more than that. Figure we'll read it in the papers. Probably a robbery," he said, and headed across the garage floor toward a collection truck beside which his partner, Pierre Bontecou, was already waiting.

"Bill—" she called after him. He turned. "Come and see me when you're done with your route, please."

Looking stricken, he nodded and continued toward his truck.

"I knew her," Kelly said from behind Anna, who turned. "Not well, though. Her name was Trujillo. Maria Trujillo. Husband died years ago. Nice lady. Did charity work. You remember that children's benefit I helped out with last winter? She was the volunteer coordinator."

"Really upsetting," Anna said, entering her office.

Kelly stood in the doorway. "Hey. It's New York." She shrugged and gave a weak smile, as if that explained it all.