

VENDETTA IN DEATH

By J.D. Robb

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever.

William Shakespeare

Justice without force is powerless;
force without justice is tyrannical.

Pascal

Chapter One

He needed killing.

She'd researched, studied, planned the who, when, how and why for more than a year, and had chosen Nigel B. McEnroy to be the first.

At forty-three, he had a wife of eleven years, two children--both girls ages nine and six. He had, over the course of eighteen years built his own executive headhunting business with two partners. As CEO of Perfect Placement, he oversaw recruitment both on and off planet.

Though he maintained his base in London, he traveled extensively. Perfect Placement kept offices in New York, East Washington, Tokyo, Madrid, Sydney, New L.A., Dubai, Hong Kong, Vegas II, and most recently had established a center on the Olympus Resort.

He lived well, entertained lavishly, had earned a reputation for pinpointing the precise needs of a client and making what he thought of as a perfect marriage.

In business, Nigel B. McEnroy was scrupulous, exacting, ethical and diligent.

None of that stopped him from being, in his private life, a liar, a cheat, an adulterer or serial rapist.

The man was, unquestionably a pig, and it was time for the slaughter.

She looked forward to it, and felt she'd chosen her first very well.

He liked cheating with redheads, ones with large breasts, ones--most usually--lower on the food chain of power than himself. When he wasn't fishing in his own company pool, he enjoyed hunting in upscale clubs.

If that wasn't bad enough, considering his wife and two children, he tipped a drug into his chosen prey's drink, to ensure cooperation. Capitulation.

Worse, perhaps, he had, at least once (she suspected more) roofied a potential candidate for a position, one he would pass over--for a male--just to add insult to injury.

Of course, the poor girl hadn't been able to prove a thing, could barely remember the assault, had been too afraid to accuse the son of a bitch.

But she'd heard enough from other victims, more than enough to begin her research, stalking, trailing, watching the pig in action. And twice had documented his rapist routine.

At last she had everything in place, and now took a long last look at herself in the full-length mirror in her workshop.

Her hair, long, wavy, bold red, her eyes dyed a deep, sharp green and carefully made up. Her lips plumped and red as her hair.

She'd worked for sometime to give her nose the appearance of a slight up-tilt, her chin the slightest point.

The temporary fake boobs looked and felt absolutely real--you got what you paid for. To finish it off, she'd padded her ass just a bit--used a very subtle self-tanner for a slight golden hue.

The dress she'd chosen, green like the eyes, slick as water, fit like skin. The heels, sparkling silver, gave her more

height--especially with the narrow lifts.

Pig Nigel hit six-one, and with the shoes, she'd stand at five-eleven. A good fit.

She looked statuesque, bold, sexy.

With the wig, the body and face enhancements, why her own mother wouldn't recognize her.

She gave one more turn in the triple, full length mirror, fluffed the wig. "Engage, Wilford."

The droid designed to replicate a white male in his sixties with a trim silver moustache to match the flow of hair, opened quiet blue eyes.

"Yes, Madam?"

She'd programmed his voice to a plummy British accent, outfitted him in a black suit, crisp white shirt, black tie.

"Bring the car around," she ordered. "The town car. You'll drive me to a club called This Place, then park and wait for further orders."

"As you wish, Madam."

"Take the elevator. I've unblocked it."

While he followed her instructions, she checked the contents of her bag, then walked to the monitors.

Her grandmother--bless her--slept peacefully with the medical droid on watch. Dear, dear Grand would sleep through the night--helped along by the sleep soother she'd added to the glass of brandy sweet Grand drank every night.

"Be back soon." She blew a kiss to the monitor, took the elevator to the main level of the glorious old house she adored nearly as much as Grand.

Always careful, she blocked the elevator again, walked with a satisfying click of heels to the grand foyer, stepped out into the cool of the April night, secured the front doors.

She shivered a little, with cold, with anticipation, but Wilford stood holding the car door open.

She slipped inside, crossed her legs. April eleven, 2061, she thought. The day that marked the rise of Lady Justice.

Nigel was on the prowl, and ready to celebrate a long, successful day of work. With his wife and daughters enjoying tropical breezes during spring break, he had a full week on his own--no need to make excuses about working late when he felt like a bit of strange.

He enjoyed This Place for its discretion (no cams), its VIP booths--screened off from the hoi poloi, its excellent martinis and music. And, oh yes, the variety of attractive women looking for a bit of strange themselves.

He'd reserved a VIP booth, of course, but during this first hour roamed the glittering silver floors, scanned the pumping lights of the dance floor, took the glides up and down the triple levels.

He thought of this part of the evening as the hunt, and enjoyed it immensely.

He'd scored very well the night before, thank you, with a twinset. Two strawberry blondes happy to share their attributes for a few hours in his New York pied a terre.

He imagined he could have tagged either--or both--back for a return engagement, but he wanted fresh. In any case, as always, he'd deleted their contacts.

He knew he looked his best, trim in black pants, a studded belt, a pale blue sweater that matched his eyes. He wore a sleek wrist unit that said wealthy to anyone with an eye for such things.

He could have paid for a top-level licensed companion--and had when time squeezed his choices. But he much preferred the hunt, and the score.

At the moment, he had his eye on a redhead with sinuous moves on the dance floor. A bit young for his usual pick, he

admitted, and the hair--spiked and short--not as sophisticated.

But those moves.

Keeping her in sight, he began to circle the floor. He'd find an opening, and then--

Someone bumped him lightly from behind. He started to glance back, heard a throaty, "Excusez-moi."

The voice, the faint French accent, that throaty purr had him turning completely.

He forgot the dancer with the sinuous moves.

"Pas de quoi." He took the vision's hand, brought it to his lips, and was rewarded by a sultry smile.

He kept the hand--she didn't object. "Etes-vous ici seul?"

"Ah, oui," she said, with what he read as clear invitation. "Et vous?"

He turned her hand over, brushed his lips lightly over the inside of her wrist. Spoke in English. "I hope not any more."

"You're English. You speak French very well."

"I hope you'll allow me to buy you a drink, and we can speak in any language you like."

She trailed her free hand down that glorious fall of hair, angled her head. "I would enjoy that."

He thought: Score, as he led her away, through the crowd, around tables, passed one of the many bars and to his booth.

"I hope you don't mind. I prefer a bit of privacy."

Beyond the curtain, the plush semi-circle of black, generous with silver edged pillows, waited. She sat, crossed those excellent legs, reclined back just a little. Just enough.

"I like the booths," she told him. "The curtains where we can see out, but no one can see in. It's . . . titillating, yes?"

"Yes indeed." He settled beside her, gauged his timing. Not too fast, he decided. This green-eyed wonder knew the

ropes, would expect some sophistication. "And what's your pleasure?"

"I have many."

He went hard, but only chuckled. "As have I. But to drink?"

"A vodka martini, very dry, two olives. I prefer Rominov Five."

"As do I."

"Ah, we have found our commonality."

"The first of those many." He ordered from the comp menu, let his gaze travel over her, enjoyed the movement behind the filmy one-way curtain, the pulse of music. The titillation.

"I'm Nigel--"

She touched a fingers to his lips. "First names only, ca va? Some mystery for us. Solange."

"Solange," he repeated. "And what brings you to New York?"

"If I told you, we would lose the mystery. Let me say then, perhaps this moment. I enjoy New York for its many pleasures, and it's . . ." She seemed to hunt for the word. "Ah, yes, anonymity. And what do you enjoy, Nigel?"

"This moment."

She laughed, tossed her hair. "Then we should savor it, and the moments yet to come. Tonight I come here to . . . yes, divest--it is to divest the day and the things that must and needs be done. So to do what pleases instead. A night for me, yes?"

"Yes. This is also the same for me. Another commonality."

"So . . ." She opened her evening purse, took out a tiny compact. "Tonight we are creatures of the moment. Together."

He started to lean toward her, and the drink slot signalled, opened.

"We should toast the moment."

As he turned to retrieve the martini glasses, she tossed her purse to the floor. He set the drinks on the table, bent to pick up her purse.

As he did, she spilled the contents of the vial in the compact into his drink.

"Merci." She took the purse, slipped the compact back inside. She accepted the glass, tapped it lightly to his. "To the moment," she said.

"And the many pleasures."

Her eyes glittered at him over the rim of her glass. "And tell me one of the many pleasures you seek."

"A beautiful woman who wants what I want."

Watching him drink, she laid a hand on his thigh, trailed her fingers teasingly toward the bulge in his crotch. "But how can you seek what you have found?" When he leaned toward her, she brought the hand up to his chest. "Mais non. We drink first, to this moment, the savoring, and the anticipation of pleasures to come. See them beyond the curtain, moving, touching, a ritual of mating, yes? And some may while some may not. And we, we could do what we like here, unseen."

"Titillating," he said, and felt oddly light headed.

"Finish the drink and come with me. I have a place that is more so. A place of many pleasures."

Eager, he downed the rest, took the hand she offered when she rose. "My flat's close," he began.

"I have a place," she repeated.

He thought it like moving through a silver-edged fog, and never saw her tap her wrist unit to signal the droid, barely heard the music as she led him down to the first level, out into the night.

She nudged him into a car, and inside he groped for her breasts as his mouth sought hers.

He thought she said, "Straight home, Wilford," in a different voice, but he was sinking, sinking into her, into pleasures.

Into the dark.

He woke with his head banging, his throat burning dry. When he tried to move, the muscles of his arms screamed. He blinked his aching eyes open, winced against the light.

He saw a large room, counters, monitors, screens, a massive work station. None of it made sense.

It took him nearly a full minute to come around enough to realize he was naked, his hands cuffed over his head and chained from the ceiling. His feet barely made the floor.

Kidnapped? Drugged? He twisted against the restraints, but it hurt.

No, no, the club. He'd gone to the club. The French woman. Solange. He remembered, but it blurred, and when he fought to think through, his head screamed.

No windows, he thought as fear popped cold sweat over his skin. He saw stairs leading up, and if he craned his throbbing head enough a door at the top.

He tried to call for help; his voice came out in a croak.

Pleasures--he remembered that. They'd talked of pleasures, and she . . .

He sensed movement behind him, felt a terrible, shocking pain. His cry started as a croak, broke into a scream.

And she stepped into view.

Not the French woman.

Who was this woman, this creature smiling at him who wore a silver mask, with dark hair edged with silver spilling around her face, with her body curving in black?

She wore silver boots, and a kind of--good God--breast plate in black leather with the letters LJ emblazoned on it in

silver, like the boots.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want my many moments of pleasure."

He felt a thin thread of relief weave through the fear. "Solange? Don't--"

"Do I look like Solange?" Snarling, she tapped the electric prod a bare inch above his penis, had him convulsing with pain as the burn seared across, spiked down. "I'm Lady Justice, you adulterous prick. And Nigel B. McEnroy, this is your time of reckoning."

"Stop, stop, don't. I can pay. Whatever you want, I can pay."

"Oh, believe me, you will. For your wife." She slapped the prod over his belly. "For your daughters." His chest. "For every woman you've raped." His buttocks.

His screams bounced off the walls. "No, no, no. I haven't raped anyone. You've made a terrible mistake."

"Have I? Have I, Nigel?" She gave him a little lick of shock across the balls, and imagined only dogs could have heard the high pitch of his scream on that one.

Each time she said a name--one of his victims--she shocked him again.

He gibbered, went limp, but she was patient. After snapping a vial under his nose to revive him, she started again.

He begged, oh, how he begged, he cursed her, he wept and screamed, and pissed himself.

And oh, oh, oh, those moments of pleasure.

"Why, why are you doing this?"

"For all the woman you've betrayed, humiliated, abused. Confess, confess, Nigel, to your crimes."

"I never hurt anyone!"

She slapped the electric rod hard over his buttocks. When he could speak again, he sobbed out the words. "I love my wife, I love my wife, but I need more. I'm sorry. It was only sex, please, please."

"You drugged women."

"I didn't--yes, yes!" He shrieked it to hold off the pain. "Not always, but I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"You used your position to intimidate to pressure women who wanted work to have sex."

"No--yes--yes! I have needs. Please."

"Your needs?" She picked up a sap, slapped it across his face. Shattered his cheekbone. "Your needs were more important than their free will, then their wishes, their needs? Then your vows to your wife?"

"No, no. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I--I need help. I'll get help. I'll confess. I'll go to prison. I'll do whatever you say."

"Say my name."

"I don't know who you are. Please."

"I told you!" She shocked him again, knew by the way he convulsed she was nearing the end. "I'm Lady Justice. Say my name!"

"Lady Justice," he mumbled, barely conscious.

"And justice will be served."

She had the bucket and the blade ready, brought them over. She set the bucket between his legs.

"What's that for? What are you doing? I confessed. I'm sorry. Oh my God, oh God, please, no!"

"It's all right, Nigel." She smiled into his watering, horrified eyes. "I'm going to take care of your needs. For the last time."

She kept him alive as long as she could, and when it was done, when he hung limp and silent, she let out a long sigh.

"So. Justice is served."

As dawn broke over the city, Lieutenant Eve Dallas stood over the naked, mutilated body. The early breeze frisked through her choppy cap of hair, flapped at her long leather coat as she read the bold, computer-generated print on the sign tacked securely where the victim's genitals had been.

He broke his vows of marriage,

and woman he disparaged.

His life he built on wealth and power,

to lure the helpless to his tower.

He raped for fun,

and now he's done.

LADY JUSTICE

Eve shifted her field kit, turned to the uniformed officer, the first on scene. "What do you know?"

The beetle-browed, mixed race female snapped to. "The nine-one-one came in at oh-four-thirty-eight. A limo dropped off a female, one Tisha Feinstein, on the corner of West Eighty-Eight and Columbus. Feinstein states that after attending her bachelor party with fourteen friends, she wanted to walk, catch some air. Catching said air, she walked the three blocks uptown to Ninety-First, saw the body laid out across the sidewalk here. She ran into the building--this is her residence, Lieutenant, woke her fiance, one Clipper Vance. He came out, saw the body, called it in.

"My partner and I responded, arrived on scene at oh-four-forty, secured the scene, called for a pair of beat droids to help with that. Officer Rigby is inside with the wits."

"All right, Officer, stand by."

After sealing up, she crouched by the body, opened her field kit. Then pressing the victim's thumb to her Identapad, she read out for the record.

"Victim is identified as Nigel B. McEnroy, Caucasian, age forty-three, British citizen. His several listed residences include an apartment in 145 West Ninety-First, New York City. That would be the same building as Tisha Feinstein who discovered the body."

Eve scanned the face. "Hardly a surprise she didn't recognize him if she'd known him. Severe bruising and burn marks, most likely electrical, on the face, the body, ligature marks, deep, both wrists indicate the victim was bound during torture, and struggled during same."

She took out micro-goggles, took a closer look at the cuts and bruises on the wrists. "From the angle, I'd say his arms were bound over his head, carried the weight of his body. ME to confirm. The genitals have been severed."

She bent close, lifted the bottom edge of the sign for a clearer angle. "No visible hesitation marks, looks almost surgical. Possible medical knowledge or experience?"

She took out her gauges. "TOD oh-three-twelve. COD, possible blood loss from castration, possible cardiac incident from electric shocks. Maybe a combo."

She sat back on her heels. "So he was bound, tortured, killed elsewhere--need some privacy for that--placed here. Not dumped so much as arranged, basically on his own doorstep. And with this handy, poetic note.

"Lady Justice. Somebody was really pissed at you, Nigel."

She took small pliers, a couple evidence bags from her kit. As she pulled out the first tack, she heard the familiar clomp of her partner's pink cowboy boots trotting up the sidewalk.

Peabody badged the beat droids, moved through the barricades. She took a look at the body, said, "Harsh."

"It's all that."

Eve remembered a time, not so long before, when Peabody would have taken that look and gone green. A couple years as a murder cop brought out the sterner stuff.

"When I get this love note detached--there. Peabody, call the morgue team, the sweepers. Let's get him bagged and tagged before people in this nice, quiet neighborhood start walking their dogs or taking a morning jog. Officer, help me turn him to finish the on-site."

She found scores of burns, many that had seeped open during the torture, on the back, the buttocks, the hamstrings, the calves.

"Had to take some time," she murmured. "Couldn't do all this without taking time. And what do you suppose Lady Justice did with the cock and balls?"

Rising, Eve turned to her partner. Peabody wore her pink coat with a thin blue scarf with--jeez! pink flowers scattered over it. She had her dark hair in a bouncy little tail.

"Wits inside. Hold the scene, Officer. What's Feinstein's apartment?"

"603, sir."

With Peabody she started toward the entrance of a nicely rehabbed brownstone of about fifteen floors of dignity. No nightman on the door, Eve noted, but good, solid security.

She badged her way through the beat droid on the door.

The lobby continued the dignity with navy and cream tiles for the floor, navy walls with cream trim, a discreet security desk--currently unmanned--a couple of curved padded benches and fresh, springy-looking flowers in tall slim vases.

Eve called for the first of three elevators while she filled in Peabody.

"Wit's coming home from a girl party, sees McEnroy on the sidewalk, runs in, gets Vance, her fiance. He goes out, verifies, calls it in. Nine-one-one logged at four-thirty-eight, first on scene arrived in two minutes. Vic's also a resident of this building--or has a residence here. He's a Brit, owns, with partners, some sort of international, interplanetary headhunter firm. Married, two offspring."

"Wife," Peabody said.

"Yeah." She stepped into the elevator. "We'll see if she's in residence after we talk to the wits."

"Didn't keep his marriage vows," Peabody said. "If she did it, she left a really big clue with that note."

"Yeah, well, people do the weird when they're pissed, and Lady Justice was seriously pissed. But . . . unless the wife's a moron, she's going to have a damn good alibi."

Eve stepped off, started down the quiet corridor on long legs. She noted security cams. "Let's get the security feed for the vic's floor, for the elevators, the lobby, the exterior."

She rang the bell at 603, flashed her badge for the uniform--young, male, fresh of face--who answered the door. "I've got this Officer Rigby. Contact the building security or supervisor. We want the feed for the cams on the victim's floor, the elevators, the lobby, and exterior."

"For what period of time, sir?"

"Forty-eight hours if they have it. Then start the knock-on-doors."

"Yes, sir!"

She let him go, gave the couple huddled together on a long, shimmery green gel sofa a quick study.

The female--late twenties--had long, curly, coppery hair. Eyes, nearly the same color showed signs of weeping and

shock in a face pale and scrubbed clean of the enhancements she'd surely have worn for the night out.

She wore simple gray cotton pants, a long sleeved shirt, house skids as she clung to the buff mixed race male of about the same age.

He cast soulful brown eyes at Eve. "I hope this won't take long. Tish needs to sleep."

"I'm afraid to close my eyes. I know I'll see . . ." She pressed her face into Vance's broad shoulder.

"I know this is difficult, Ms. Feinstein, and we'll keep this as brief as possible. I'm Lieutenant Dallas, this is Detective Peabody. We're Homicide."

"I guess I know. My friend Lydia's brother's a cop in Queens. I almost called him. We sort of dated when we were in high school, but . . ."

"Why don't you just tell us what happened? Start with where you were tonight."

"We were all over," Feinstein began.

"I'm sorry," Vance interrupted. "Please sit down. Do you want coffee or anything?"

"That'd be great." And would give him something to do, Eve thought. "Black for me, Coffee regular for my partner."

"How about some more tea, cutes?"

Feinstein smiled. "Thanks, Clip. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Never have to find out. Just take me a minute."

He rose, moved quietly from the room. Feinstein curled up defensively.

"So, your evening?"

"We were all over. It was my stag party. We're getting married next Friday. The limo picked me up about nine. There were fourteen of us, and we club hopped, you know? Clip's deal is tomorrow night. So anyway, we finished up with the all-male

revue at Spinner's downtown. I know it sounds like--"

"A fun time with girlfriends," Peabody finished with a smile.

"It was." Feinstein's eyes filled. "It really was. Some of us have been friends since forever, and I'm the first of our group to get married. So we did it big, and we drank a lot and laughed a lot, and the limo started dropping us off. I was the last one, and I had him drop me on the corner. I just wanted some air, to walk a little. I felt so happy, so silly, so good. I didn't want it to end.

Then . . ."

She broke off when Vance came back with mugs on a tray.

"Clip."

"It's okay, come on now, cutes. It's okay."

He set the tray down, put an arm around her. Eve took the mug of black coffee from the tray. From the smell, she knew she'd had worse. She'd had better, God knows, but she'd had worse.

"If I'd just had Shelly--that was the driver--drop me out front, she'd have seen it first. It's terrible, but I wish she had. He was just lying there. For a second I thought it was just some awful joke, but then I saw . . . I think I screamed. I don't know for sure, but I ran, and I could hardly use my swipe and code to get in I was shaking so bad, and I came right up to Clip."

"I thought there'd been an accident. She could hardly tell me. Then I thought, well, she's pretty lit, she imagined it, but she was so upset." He kept that protective arm around her as he spoke, his fingers stroking up and down her arm. "I threw on some clothes, went out. And I saw she didn't imagine it. I called nine-one-one, and the police came."

"Did you recognize the victim?"

"No." Vance looked at Feinstein who shook her head.

"I didn't really look," Feinstein added. "I know he was right under the street light, but I didn't really look at his face. He

was all, I don't know, burned. I saw the sign, the note, and that right below it, he'd--"

"So did I," Vance added when she broke off. "Someone castrated him."

"Could I ask how long you've lived in this building?"

"Two and a half months." Feinstein managed a ghost of a smile as she took Vance's hand. "We wanted to have our own place before the wedding. Our first place together."