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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WITNESS IN DEATH*

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JUDGMENT IN DEATH

J. D. Robb

Judgment in Death

CHAPTER ONE

She stood in Purgatory and studied death. The blood and the gore of it, the ferocity of its glee. It had come to this place with the willful temper of a child, full of heat and passion and careless brutality.

Murder was rarely a tidy business. Whether it was craftily calculated or wildly impulsive, it tended to leave a mess for others to clean up.

It was her job to wade through the debris of murder, to pick up the pieces, see where they fit, and put together a picture of the life that had been stolen. And through that picture to find the image of a killer.

Now, in the early hours of morning, in the hesitant spring of 2059, her boots crunched over a jagged sea of broken glass. Her eyes, brown and cool, scanned the scene: shattered mirrors, broken bottles, splintered wood. Wall screens were smashed, privacy booths scarred and dented. Pricey leather and cloth that had covered stools or the plusher seating areas had been ripped to colorful shreds.

What had once been an upscale strip club was now a jumbled pile of expensive garbage.

What had once been a man lay behind the wide curve of the bar. Now a victim, sprawled in his own blood.

Lieutenant Eve Dallas crouched beside him. She was a cop, and that made him hers.

"Male. Black. Late thirties. Massive trauma, head and body. Multiple broken bones." She took a gauge from her field kit to take the body and ambient temperatures. "Looks like the fractured skull would have done the job, but it didn't stop there."

"He was beaten to pieces."

Eve acknowledged her aide's comment with a grunt. She was looking at what was left of a well-built man in his prime, a good six-two and two hundred and thirty pounds of what had been toned muscle.

"What do you see, Peabody?"

Automatically, Peabody shifted her stance, focused her vision. "The victim... well, it appears the victim was struck from behind. The first blow probably took him down, or at least dazed him. The killer followed through, with repeated strikes. From the pattern of the blood splatter, and brain matter, he was taken out with head shots, then beaten while down, likely unconscious. Some of the injuries were certainly delivered postmortem. The metal bat is the probable murder weapon and was used by someone of considerable strength, possibly chemically induced, as the scene indicates excessive violence often demonstrated by users of Zeus."

"Time of death, oh four hundred," Eve stated, then turned her head to look up at Peabody.

Her aide was starched and pressed and as official as they came, with her uniform cap set precisely on her dark chin-length hair. She had good eyes, Eve thought, clear and dark. And though the sheer vileness of the scene had leached some of the color from her cheeks, she was holding.

"Motive?" Eve asked.

"It appears to be robbery, Lieutenant."

"Why?"

"The cash drawer's open and empty. The credit machine's broken."

"Mmm-hmm. Snazzy place like this would be heavier in credits, but they'd do some cash business."

"Zeus addicts kill for spare change."

"True enough. But what would our victim have been doing alone, in a closed club, with an addict? Why would he let anyone hopped on Zeus behind the bar? And ..." With her sealed fingers she picked up a small silver credit chip from the river of blood. "Why would our addict leave these behind? A number of them are scattered here around the body."

"He could have dropped them." But Peabody began to think she wasn't seeing something Eve did.

"Could have."

She counted the coins as she picked them up, thirty in all, sealed them in an evidence bag, and handed it to Peabody. Then she picked up the bat. It was fouled with blood and brain. About two feet in length, she judged, and weighted to mean business.

Mean business.

"It's good, solid metal, not something an addict would pick up in some abandoned building. We're going to find this belonged here, behind the bar. We're going to find, Peabody, that our victim knew his killer. Maybe they were having an after-hours drink."

Her eyes narrowed as she pictured it. "Maybe they had words, and the words escalated. More likely, our killer already had an edge on. He knew where the bat was. Came behind the bar. Something he'd done before, so our friend here doesn't think anything of it. He's not concerned, doesn't worry about turning his back."

She did so herself, measuring the position of the body, of the splatter. "The first blow rams him face first into the glass on the back wall. Look at the cuts on his face. Those aren't nicks from flying glass. They're too long, too deep. He manages to turn, and that's where the killer takes the next swing here, across the jaw. That spins him around again. He grabs the shelves there, brings them down. Bottles crashing. That's when he took the killing blow. This one that cracked his skull like an egg."

She crouched again, sat back on her heels. "After that, the killer just beat the hell out of him, then wrecked the place. Maybe in temper, maybe as cover. But he had enough control to come back here, to look at his handiwork before he left. He dropped the bat here when he was done."

"He wanted it to look like a robbery? Like an illegals overkill?"

"Yeah. Or our victim was a moron and I'm giving him too much credit. You got the body and immediate scene recorded? All angles?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's turn him over."

The shattered bones shifted like a sack of broken crockery as Eve turned the body. "Goddamn it. Oh, goddamn it."

She reached down to lift the smeared ID from the cool, congealing pool of blood. With her sealed thumb, she wiped at the photo and the shield. "He was on the job."

"He was a cop?" Peabody stepped forward. She heard the sudden silence. The crime scene team and the sweepers working on the other side of the bar stopped talking. Stopped moving.

A half dozen faces turned. Waited.

"Kohli, Detective Taj." Eve's face was grim as she got to her feet. "He was one of us."

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Peabody crossed the littered floor to where Eve stood watching the remains of Detective Taj Kohli being bagged for transferal to the morgue. "I got his basics, Dallas. He's out of the One twenty-eight, assigned to Illegals. Been on the job for eight years. Came out of the military. He was thirty-seven. Married. Two kids."

"Anything pop on his record?"

"No, sir. It's clean."

"Let's find out if he was working undercover here or just moonlighting. Elliott? I want those security discs."

"There aren't any." One of the crime scene team hurried over. His face was folded into angry lines. "Cleaned out. Every one of them. The place had full scope, and this son of a bitch snagged every one. We got nothing."

"Covered his tracks." With her hands on her hips, Eve turned a circle. The club was triple-leveled, with a stage on the main, dance floors on one and two. Privacy rooms ringed the top. For full scope, she estimated it would need a dozen cameras, probably more. To snag all the record discs would have taken time and care.

"He knew the place," she decided. "Or he's a fucking security whiz. Window dressing," she muttered. "All this destruction's just window dressing. He knew what he was doing. He had control. Peabody, find out who owns the place, who runs it. I want to know everybody who works here. I want to know the setup."

"Lieutenant?" A harassed-looking sweeper trudged through the chaos. "There's a civilian outside."

"There are a lot of civilians outside. Let's keep them there."

"Yes, sir, but this one insists on speaking to you. He says this is his place. And, ah ..."

" 'And, ah' what?"

"And that you're his wife."

"Roarke Entertainment," Peabody announced as she read off the data from her palm PC. She sent Eve a cautious smile. "Guess who owns Purgatory?"

"I should've figured it." Resigned, Eve strode to the entrance door.

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He looked very much as he'd looked two hours before when they'd parted ways to go about their individual business. Sleek and gorgeous. The light topcoat he wore over his dark suit fluttered a bit in the breeze. The same breeze that tugged at the mane of black hair that framed his poetically sinful face. The dark glasses he wore against the glare of the sun only added to the look of slick elegance.

And when he slipped them off as she stepped out, the brilliant blue of his eyes met hers. He tucked the glasses in his pocket, lifted an eyebrow.

"Good morning, Lieutenant."

"I had a bad feeling when I walked in here. It's just your kind of place, isn't it? Why do you have to own every damn thing?"

"It was a boyhood dream." His voice cruised over Ireland, picked up the music of it. He glanced past her to the police seal. "It appears we've both been inconvenienced."

"Did you have to tell the sweeper I was your wife?"

"You are my wife," he said easily and shifted his gaze back to her face. "A fact which pleases me daily." He took her hand, rubbing his thumb over her wedding ring before she could tug it free again.

"No touching," she hissed at him, which made him smile.

"That's not what you said a few hours ago. In fact—"

"Shut up, Roarke." She glanced around, though none of the cops working the scene was outside or close enough to hear. "This is a police investigation."

"So I'm told."

"And who told you?"

"The head of the maintenance team who found the body. He did call the police first," he pointed out. "But it's natural he'd report the incident to me."

What happened?"

There was no point in griping because his business had tangled around hers. Again. She tried to console herself that he could and would help her cut through some of the muck of paperwork.

"Do you have a bartender by the name of Kohli? Taj Kohli?"

"I have no idea. But I can find out." He took a slim memo book out of his breast pocket, keyed in a request for data. "Is he dead?"

"As dead gets."

"Yes, he was mine," Roarke confirmed, and the Irish in his voice had taken on a cold note. "For the past three months. Part time. Four nights a week. He had a family."

"Yes, I know." Such things mattered to him, and it always touched her heart. "He was a cop," Eve said. This time his brows lifted. "Didn't have that data in your little scan, did you?"

"No. It seems my personnel director was careless. That will be fixed. Am I allowed inside?"

"Yeah, in a minute. How long have you owned the place?"

"Four years, more or less."

"How many employees, full- and part-time?"

"I'll get you all the data, Lieutenant, and answer all pertinent questions." Annoyance gleamed in his eyes as he reached for the door himself. "But now, I'd like to see my place."

He pushed inside, scanned the destruction, then focused in on the thick black bag being loaded on what the death attendants called a stroller.

"How was he killed?"

"Thoroughly," Eve said, then sighed when Roarke simply turned and stared at her. "It was ugly, okay? Metal bat." She watched Roarke look toward the bar and the spray of blood sparkling on glass like an incomprehensible painting. "After the first few hits, he wouldn't have felt anything."

"Ever had a bat laid into you? I have," he said before she could answer. "It's not pleasant. It seems far-fetched to think it's robbery, even one that got well out of hand."

"Why?"

"There'd have been enough prime liquor, easily fenced, to keep anyone cozily fixed for some time. Why break the bottles when you could sell them? If you hit a place like this, it's not for the bit of cash that might be copped, but for the inventory and perhaps some of the equipment."

"Is that the voice of experience?"

She teased a grin out of him. "Naturally. My experience, that is, as a property owner and a law-abiding citizen."

"Right."

"Security discs?"

"Gone. He got all of them."

"Then it follows he'd cased the place carefully beforehand."

"How many cameras?"

Once again, Roarke took out his pad, checked data. "Eighteen. Nine on this floor, six on two, and the other two on the top level for full scope. Before you ask, closing is at three, which would have staff out by half past. The last show, and we've live ones here, ends at two. The musicians and the entertainers—"

"Strippers."

"As you like," he said mildly. "They clock off at that time. I'll have names and schedules for you within the hour."

"Appreciate it. Why Purgatory?"

"The name?" The ghost of a smile flirted with his mouth. "I liked it. The priests will tell you Purgatory's a place for atonement, rehabilitation perhaps. A bit like prison. I've always seen it as a last chance to be human," he decided. "Before you strap on your wings and halo or face the fire."

"Which would you rather?" she wondered. "The wings or the fire?"

"That's the point, you see. I prefer being human." As the stroller wheeled by, he ran a hand over her short brown hair. "I'm sorry for this."

"So am I. Any reason a New York City detective would have been working undercover in Purgatory?"

"I couldn't say. It's certainly likely that some of the clientele might dabble in areas not strictly approved by the NYPSD, but I've not been informed of anything overt. Some illegals might change hands in privacy rooms or under tables, but there's been no large transactions here. I would have known. The strippers don't turn tricks unless they're licensed, which some are. No one under age is allowed through the doors—as client or staff. I have my own standards, Lieutenant, such as they are."

"I'm not coming down on you. I need a picture."

"You're pissed that I'm here at all."

She waited a minute, her short, choppy hair disordered from its dance outside in the early breeze. As the morgue techs opened the door to transfer Kohli, the sounds of the day punched into the club.

Traffic was already thickening. Cars crammed irritably on the street, air commuters swarmed the skies. She heard the call of an early-bird glide-cart operator call to the techs and ask: "What da fuck?"