

## Fantasy in Death by Nora Roberts

### Excerpt

While swords of lightning slashed and stabbed murderously across the scarred shield of sky, Bart Minnock whistled his way home for the last time. Despite the battering rain, Bart's mood bounced along with his cheerful tune as he shot his doorman a snappy salute.

"Howzit going, Mr. Minnock?"

"It's going up, Jackie. Going way uptown."

"This rain could do the same, if you ask me."

"What rain?" With a laugh, Bart sloshed his way in soaked skids to the elevator.

Thunder exploded across the island of Manhattan, midday commuters sulked under overpriced umbrellas bought from enterprising sidewalk hawkers and maxibuses spewed up walls of wet. But in Bart's world the sun beamed in golden rays.

He had a hot date with the sexy CeeCee, which in itself was nothing to sneeze at for a self-proclaimed nerd who'd been a virgin until the somewhat embarrassing age of twenty-four.

Five years later, and largely because of the success of U-Play, he could have his pick from a bevy of eager women—even if the eager was mostly due to the money and media his company generated.

He didn't mind.

He knew he wasn't especially good-looking and accepted his own awkwardness in romantic situations. (Except for sexy CeeCee.) He didn't know art or literature, didn't know a good vintage from a bottle of home brew. What he knew were computers and games and the seduction of technology.

Still, CeeCee was different, he thought as he turned off the locks and security on his trilevel apartment with its four-star view of downtown. She liked gaming, and didn't care about vintage wine or art galleries.

But even the evening with the sweet and sexy CeeCee wasn't the reason for the whistling or the big, bright grin on his face as he reset the door locks.

He had the latest version of Fantastical in his briefcase, and until he tested it, played it, approved it, it was all his.

His in-house intercom greeted him with a cheery *Welcome home, Bart*, and his server droid—custom-made to replicate Princess Leia, classic *Star Wars*, slave-girl mode (he was a nerd, but he was still a guy)—strolled out to offer him his favorite orange fizzy with crushed ice.

"You're home early today."

"I've got some work to do in the holo-room."

"Don't work too hard. You need to leave in two hours and twelve minutes to arrive at CeeCee's apartment on time. You're scheduled to pick up flowers on the way. Will you be staying the night?"

"That's the plan."

"Enjoy. Your shoes are very wet. Would you like me to get you a fresh pair?"

"No, that's okay. I'll grab some on the way up."

“Don’t forget,” she said with the quick Leia smirk that always tickled him. “Should I give you a reminder about your date closer to departure time?”

He set his briefcase aside, shook back the light brown hair that forever fell into his eyes. “That’s okay. I’ll set up a buzz in holo. You can just shut down for the night.”

“All right. I’m here if you need me.”

Normally, he’d have used his personal Leia for some conversational practice, might have had her keep him company while he unwound from the day and talked about current projects. There was nothing like a droid as far as Bart was concerned. They never judged, unless you programmed them to.

But Fantastical called him. He opened his briefcase, took out the disc, gave it a friendly kiss as he started up the stairs.

He’d decorated his spaces to his own whim and taste, so toys abounded. Props, weapons, costumes, and art from vids and games served as decor and amusement with every room on every level outfitted with various game systems, vid systems, screens, and comps.

It was, for Bart, a dream realized. He lived, as he worked, in a big e-playroom.

His second-floor office was a to-scale reproduction of the bridge of the galactic warship *The Valiant*, from the vid of the same name. His work on the gaming discs for the vid had given his fledgling U-Play its true start.

He forgot about changing his shoes, or changing his wet shirt, and went straight to the third floor.

Security on the holo-room required his thumbprint, voiceprint, and a retinal scan. Overkill, he knew, but it was more fun that way, and fun was always the name of the game. He might have opened up the space regularly for friends and guests, but he liked having the superspy aspects in place.

He reactivated them on entering, then shut down all outside coms. For the hour—okay maybe ninety minutes—he intended to play, he wanted no interruptions.

The whole point of gaming, to Bart’s mind, was the immersion of self in the fantasy, or the competition, or just the fun. And Fantastical would take that immersion of self several steps beyond what was on the market in mid-2060.

*If the latest adjustments and enhancements worked*, the businessman inside the gamer reminded him.

“They’ll work. It’ll be mag to the nth,” he muttered as he inserted the disc and ran through the startup. Once again he used his voiceprint, then his password. The new version was totally top secret. He and his partners hadn’t built U-Play on geek alone. He understood, very well, the cutthroat business in the gaming field, and actually found the corporate espionage kind of a rush.

He was a player, he thought. Not just in games but in the *business* of games. U-Play’s success provided everything he and his friends, his partner, had talked about, dreamed about, worked for.

With Fantastical, they’d be kicking it all up—and—fingers crossed—become *major* players.

He’d already decided on the scenario, a favorite, and the level. He’d practiced, studied, refined, and reworked this fantasy, the elements of it countless times during development, and now set for the game he code-named K2BK. He’d take the role of the

battered and cynical hero, battling the evil forces of the beleaguered kingdom of Juno on the endangered planet of Gort.

The mirrored walls of the holo-room reflected him as the light began to swirl and dim, as his damp and wrinkled khakis and Captain Zee's T-shirt, his wet skids transformed into the scarred battle gear and boots of the warrior king.

In his hand he felt the hilt, and the weight of the broadsword. And that rush, yes, that new rush of his embodiment of the hero, and the battle to come.

Excellent, he thought. *Excellente primo*. He could smell as well as see the smoke of battle, and the blood already spilled. He reached up, felt the bulge of biceps, the pucker of an old scar.

Twinges and aches throughout his body spoke of wounds barely healed, a lifetime of combat.

Best, he *felt* strong, bold, brave, *fierce*. He became the courageous warrior king about to lead his exhausted, wounded, and unnumbered people into battle.

He let out a war cry—because he could—and heard the power of his voice shake the air.

It rocked completely.

A scruff of beard covered his face, and a tangle of hair tickled his neck and shoulders.

He *was* Tor, the warrior, the protector and rightly King of Juno. He mounted his warhorse—on the second try, which wasn't bad—and charged into battle. He heard the cries of friend and foe as swords clashed and fire lances spewed death. His beloved Juno burned so he hacked his way through the lines while blood splattered and sweat streamed down his skin.

At his partner Benny's suggestion they'd added an optional love interest. In order to reach his woman, a brave and beautiful warrior courageously defending the castle walls, he had to fight his way to the front and engage in the ultimate battle—*mano a mano* with the evil Lord Manx.

He'd reached this level countless times during development, had gone beyond it only a handful as he programmed the challenge to the top of the scale. It took skill, timing, agility to fight through, to dodge the flames from lance and arrow, to deflect the slash of sword—or what was the point?

Any hit would lower his score, potentially send him into humiliating retreat, or a valiant death. This time he wasn't looking just to beat the level, but to hit a new record.

His horse screamed in challenge as they galloped through the stink of smoke, leaped over bodies of the fallen. He braced and clung when the horse reared, and still was nearly unseated.

Every time that happened, he met Manx on foot, and every time he met Manx on foot, he lost Juno, the woman, and the game.

Not this time, he swore, and gave another booming cry as he broke through the smoke.

And there, the walls of home where the brave fought those who tried to destroy it. And there, the dark, fearful visage of Lord Manx, sword red with the blood of innocents. He felt a pang—for loss, for the happier times of his childhood before murder and deceit had sullied it.

"Your trap failed," Bart called out.

“I would have been disappointed otherwise.” Manx grinned, his black eyes shining with death. “It was always my wish to meet you here, to end you and your line on this ground.”

“It will end here, and with your blood.”

The men charged; swords met. A snap of lightning Bart had added for drama spurted and sizzled from the cross of the blades.

Bart felt the impact race up his arm, and the bolt of pain in his shoulder had him making a mental note to lower the levels on the default. Realism was important, but he didn't want gamers bitching because they'd programmed it too hot.

He turned into the next strike, blocking it, and he felt a wrenching *pop* in his shoulder. He nearly called for a pause in the program, but was too busy dodging a swipe.

What the hell, he thought as he struck out and nearly got by Manx's guard, winning wasn't winning until you worked for it.

“Your woman will be mine before nightfall,” Manx snarled.

“She'll dance on your—hey!” His sword slipped, and his enemy's blade sliced his arm. Instead of the quick jolt to mark the hit, the pain seared. “What the hell. Pause—”

But for Bart, it was game over.

Lieutenant Eve Dallas badged the shell-shocked doorman and breezed by. The sun and sultry heat left over from the night's storms boosted her mood. At her side, her partner, Peabody, wilted.

“A couple months ago all you did was bitch about the cold. Now you bitch about the heat. Never satisfied.”

Peabody, her dark hair pulled back in a stubby tail, continued to bitch. “Why can't they regulate the temperature?”

“Who are they?”

“The weather people. We must have the technology. Why not give us at least a couple weeks of steady mid-seventies? It's not too much to ask. You could get Roarke to work on it.”

“Oh yeah, I'll tell him to get on that, right after he buys up the last ten percent of the universe.” Eve rocked back on her heels as they took the elevator up, and thought of her husband of almost two years.

Actually, he probably could figure something. “If you want regulated temps, get a job where you work inside with climate control.”

“June's supposed to be daisies and wafty breezes.” Peabody waved a hand in the air. “Instead we're getting thunder boomers and humiture to kill.”

“I like the boomers.”

Peabody's dark eyes narrowed as she studied Eve's angular face. “You probably had lots of sex last night. You're almost perky.”

“Shut up. I'm never perky.”

“Almost. You're verging on perk.”

“You're verging on a boot up the ass.”

“That's better anyway.”

Amused despite herself, Eve straightened her long, lean frame, then strode out the elevator when the doors whisked open.

The uniforms in the hallway came to attention. "Lieutenant."

"Officer. What have we got?"

"Victim's Bart Minnock, the U-Play guy."

"You play what?"

"U-Play, sir, it's the comp and holo-game company. The girlfriend found him this morning. He stood her up last night, she says, and she came to read him the riot act. House droid let her in, and when she got here he was locked in his holo-room, got the droid to open it up." The uniform paused. "I think you're going to want to see for yourself."

"Where's the girlfriend?"

"CeeCee Rove. We've got her inside, and an officer's with her. Got the droid on hold."

"We'll take the scene first." She stepped inside, scanned. What she could see of the first level struck her as a clubhouse for a very rich, very indulgent adolescent boy.

Bright, primary colors with more cushion than structure, walls of screens, games, and more games, toys—heavy on the war toys. Not a living area so much as a big playroom. She supposed, given his profession, it fit.

"Third floor, LT. There's an elevator."

"We'll take the stairs."

"It's like a personal fun park," Peabody commented as they started up. "McNab would weep with joy and envy," she added, thinking of her main man. "I've got to say, it's pretty frosty."

"He might live like a kid, but he had very grown-up security on the door." She detoured on the second level long enough to determine the master bedroom was another playground, the guest rooms equipped for plenty of entertainment. He kept a home office that reminded her of a small version of Roarke's home computer lab, but with more fanciful touches.

"Serious about his work," she murmured. "Lived his work." She backtracked to the stairs and up to the officer on the door of the holo-room.

"This door was secured?"

"The girlfriend states it was, sir, and the coms shut down. The droid confirms. It had emergency bypass clearance. The log shows the victim entering, then securing the room at sixteen thirty-three. No other entry or attempted entry until nine-eighteen this morning."

"Okay." Both Eve and Peabody opened their field kits, sealed up.

"Record on," she said and stepped to the doorway.

She wasn't often surprised. She'd been a cop nearly a dozen years, and though she knew she hadn't seen it all—you never did—she'd seen plenty.

But her long brown eyes widened briefly as she took in the scene.

"Now, this is something you don't see every day."

"Man. Oh, man." Peabody sucked in a sharp breath.

"Don't even think about booting."

"Have to think about it." Peabody swallowed hard. "Won't do it."

The body lay sprawled, arms and legs splayed in the bloody pool that spread over the floor. The head sat several feet away, the filmed eyes wide, the mouth in a gaping O.

“It must be said the victim lost his head, which is a pretty good guess for cause of death. Alone in a secured holo-room, no weapons. Interesting. Well, let’s have a look.”

She heard Peabody swallow again.

“Take the play board, see what he programmed,” she ordered. “And I want all security discs and logs, building and for this unit.”

“On that,” Peabody said, grateful for the reprieve as Eve crossed to the body.

For the record, Eve verified the fingerprints. “Victim is identified as Bart Minnock of this address, age twenty-nine.” She pulled out a pair of microgoggles. “From the on-scene exam, it appears the head was severed with a single, powerful blow. No signs of sawing or hacking.” She ignored the discreet gagging sound from Peabody’s direction. “In addition, the victim incurred a six-inch gash on his left forearm. There’s some bruising, but none of those wounds would’ve been fatal. ME to confirm. Morris is going to love this one,” she added, then rose to examine the head.

“Had to be a hell of a blade—big, sharp bastard, to decapitate this clean. A lot of force behind it. The secondary gash could’ve come from the same weapon. Glancing blow sort of thing. Defensive wound. The bruising’s pretty minor.”

She sat back on her heels, the head at her feet. “There’s nothing in here that could’ve caused these wounds. No way he could’ve cut his own head off, deliberately or by accident with what he had to work with.”

“I can’t get it to run,” Peabody told her. “The program. The disc won’t even eject without the proper security sequence. All I’ve got is the log-in time and program end time. It ran for just over thirty minutes, and ended at seventeen-eleven.”

“So he came home, came up here almost directly, programmed the game. It looks like it, and he, ran for the thirty minutes. We need an e-team and the sweepers in here. I want the ME to red-flag the tox screen. Maybe somebody slipped him something, influenced him to bypass his own security, somehow keep it off the logs. Set it up, then take the droid. I’ll take the girlfriend.”

Eve found CeeCee in the media room on the first level. A pretty blond with an explosion of curls, she sat in one of the roomy chairs. It dwarfed her, even with her legs tucked up, and her hands clasped in her lap. Her eyes—big, bright, and blue—were red-rimmed, puffy, and still carried the glassiness of shock.

Eve dismissed the officer with a nod, then crossed over to sit.

“Ms. Rove?”

“Yes. I’m supposed to stay here. Somebody took my ’link. I should tag somebody, shouldn’t I? Somebody.”

“We’ll get that back to you. I’m Lieutenant Dallas. Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

“I told somebody.” CeeCee looked around vaguely. “The other police. I’ve been thinking. Is Bart playing a joke? He does that sometimes. Plays jokes. He likes to pretend. Is this all pretend?”

“No, it’s not.” Eve took the chair facing so her gaze would be level with CeeCee’s. “You were supposed to meet him last night?”

“At my place. At eight. I made dinner. We were going to have dinner at my place because I like to cook. Well, sometimes. But he didn’t come.”

“What did you do?”

“He can be late. It’s okay. He gets caught up. Sometimes I’m late, so it’s okay. But he didn’t come, and he didn’t answer the ’link. I tried his office, too, but Benny said he left a little after four to work at home for a bit.”

“Benny?”

“Benny Leman. He works with Bart, and he was still there. They work late, a lot. They like to.”

“Did you come over here to find out what he was doing?”

“No. I almost did. I got pretty steamed because I went to a lot of trouble, you know? I mean I *cooked*, and I got wine and candles, everything.” She drew in a breath that hitched and stuttered. “And he didn’t come or let me know he’d be late. He forgets, and that’s okay, but he always answers his ’link, or remembers before it’s really late. He sets reminders. But I was pretty steamed, and it was storming. I thought, ‘I’m not going out in this.’ So I drank some wine and I ate dinner, and I went to bed. Screw it.”

She covered her face, keening a little, rocking herself while Eve stayed silent. “I just said screw it, screw you, Bart, because I’d made a really nice dinner. But this morning, I was really, *really* steamed because he never came or tried to reach me, and I didn’t have to be to work till ten, so I came by. I thought, okay, that’s okay, we’re going to have our first big fight because that’s no way to treat somebody. Is it?”

“No. How long have you been seeing each other?”

“Almost six months.”

“And this would’ve been your first big fight? Seriously?”

CeeCee smiled a little even as tears continued to drip. “I got a little bit steamed once in a while, but you can’t stay mad at Bart. He’s such a sweetie. But this time, I was laying it down. Leia let me in.”

“Who’s Leia?”

“Oh, his house droid. He had her designed to look like the *Star Wars* character. From *Return of the Jedi*.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, she said he was in the holo-room, fully secured, and had the coms down. DO NOT DISTURB. That according to her morning log, he’d been in there since about four-thirty or something the day before. So I got worried. Like maybe he’d gotten sick in there, or passed out, and I convinced her to bypass.”

“You convinced a droid?”

“Bart programmed her to listen to me after we’d been tight for a few months. Plus he’d been in over his twelve-hour limit. Then she opened the room, and . . .”

Her lips trembled; her eyes welled anew. “How can it be real? First I thought it was, and I screamed. Then I thought it was a joke, or a droid, and I almost got steamed again. Then I saw it was Bart. It was Bart. And it was horrible.”

“What did you do?”

“I think I kind of fainted. But, like, on my feet. I don’t know, for a second or a minute everything went black and swirly, and when it wasn’t, I ran.” Tears streamed down her cheeks even as she flushed. “I ran downstairs. I almost fell, but I got downstairs and I called nine-one-one. Leia made me sit down, and she made me tea. She said there’d been an accident and we had to wait for the police. That would be in her programming, I guess. But it can’t be an accident. How can it be an accident? But it has to be.”

“Do you know anyone who’d want to hurt Bart?”

“How could anyone want to hurt Bart? He’s just a big kid. A really smart big kid.”

“How about family?”

“His parents live in North Carolina. He bought them a house on the beach because they always wanted one, once U-Play took off. Oh God, oh God, his parents! Somebody has to tell them.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

“Okay, okay.” She shut her eyes tight. “Good. Because I don’t think I could. I don’t know how. I don’t know how to do any of this.”

“What about you? Old boyfriends?”

Her eyes popped open. “Oh God, no. I mean, yes, I had boyfriends before Bart, but nobody who’d . . . I never had the kind of breakup that would . . . I wasn’t seeing anybody special or regular before I hooked up with Bart.”

“How about at his business? Did he have to let anyone go recently, or reprimand anyone?”

“I don’t think so.” She swiped at her cheeks now as her brow furrowed in thought. “He never said anything to me, and he would’ve. I think. He hated confrontations, except in a game. He’d have told me if he’d had trouble with anyone at work, I really think. He’s a happy guy, you know? He makes other people happy, too. How could it happen? I don’t know how this could happen. Do you?”

“Not yet.”

She had CeeCee escorted home, then began her own room-by-room. Plenty of them, she thought, and each designed so the occupants could play in comfort. Roomy chairs, oversized sofas shouted out in their bright colors. Nothing dull for Bart. The menus of the AutoChefs and Friggies ran to those adolescent tastes again—pizza, burgers, dogs, chips, candy. Fizzies and soft drinks outnumbered wine and beer and liquor.

She found no illegals, and only the mildest of over-the-counter chemical aids.

She’d nearly completed her initial search of the master bedroom when Peabody came in.

“No illegals that I’ve come across,” Eve began. “No sex toys either, though he’s got some porn on vid and on game discs. Most of the comps throughout are passcoded, and those that aren’t are game-only. No data, no com.”

“The droid confirms the girlfriend’s statement to the first-on-scene,” Peabody told her. “The vic told her to shut down for the night after he got home, and her log confirms she did. She has an auto-wake for nine, which activated as the vic didn’t start her up prior. She’s a little spooky.”

“How?”

“Efficient. Plus she doesn’t look like a droid. She doesn’t have any of the tells, like the occasional stuttering, the blank stare while it processes data. Definitely cutting-edge there. I know she didn’t actually *feel* shock and grief, but it seemed like she did. It did. She asked me if someone would contact his parents. That’s active thinking. It’s not droidlike.”

“Or it’s careful and thorough programming. Let’s find out more about U-Play. You don’t get a trilevel in this neighborhood for chump change. Let’s find out who gets the money, and who’s lined up to take over the company. We need to know what he was working on. And who was as good as he was.”

She paused, looked around the room again. “Somebody got in here, got past the droid, got into that holo-room without leaving a discernable trace.”

She only knew one person who’d be able to pull that off—and she was married to him. Maybe Roarke would know another.

“Priority is to get that disc out of the holo-room unit, run it.”

“E-team’s on the way, and so are the sweepers. One of the uniforms got all security discs for the last twenty-four.”

“You keep on the room-by-room. I’m going to notify next of kin via’ link. We’ll see what EDD can do for us, then we’ll pay a visit to U-Play.”

She took a few moments after the notification to let it all settle. She’d just crushed the lives of two people she hadn’t known existed less than an hour before, Eve thought as she sat on the side of Bart Minnock’s bed. They would never really be the same, nothing would ever be as it had been for them.

Murder did that. Took lives, crushed others, changed still others forever.

So why had someone needed or wanted to end Bart Minnock’s existence? And why had they chosen the method used?

Money. Jealousy. Revenge. Secrets. Passion.

From all appearances, he had money, she thought, and ran a quick, standard financial. Okay, he had money, and U-Play was a strong, young company. Her first instinct was to take CeeCee at her word. No jealous exes. But money often generated jealousy. Revenge might come through a competitor, or an employee who felt shafted or underappreciated.

Secrets, everyone had a few. Passion? Gaming had certainly been the victim’s.

Method . . . Murder during game play. Kind of poetic in a sick way. Decapitation. Sever the head—the brain—and the body falls. Minnock was the brains of U-Play it seemed from her quick run. Would the body fall without him? Or was someone ready and waiting to slip in and take over?

Whatever the answers, the method had been bold, purposeful, and complex. God knew there were easier ways to kill. It was very likely the killer was just as serious and devoted to gaming as his victim.