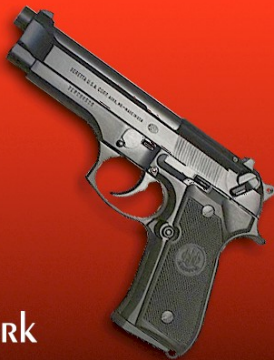


A NOVEL OF UNBEARABLE SUSPENSE BY

# DANA REED



## Unholy Alliance



A BRUTAL KILLER STALKS  
THE STREETS OF NEW YORK

# Unholy Alliance

By  
**Dana Reed**

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## Dedication

To my son, Artie, without whom the details concerning police methodology and weapons would've remained mysteries. And to all of the wonderfully knowledgeable people who either wrote texts on forensics, or shared information in my writing groups.

**Necrophilia** (nek-row-**feel**-e-a) n. 1. The practice of engaging in an unholy alliance or intercourse with the dead. 2. An unnatural affection for corpses.

**Necrophiliac** (nek-row-**feel**-e-**ak**) n. One who possesses a maniacal lust to engage in an unholy alliance with the dead, or an unnatural affection for corpses.

Here is an object more of dread  
Than aught the grave contains—  
A human form with reason fled,  
While wretched life remains.

**Abraham Lincoln**  
**September 6, 1846**

## Chapter One

A year ago she'd left him lying dead on a cold, wooden floor in a remote cabin in the woods in North Carolina...

At the age of twenty-two, when her life was supposed to be on an upwards spiral, killing him had sent it in the opposite direction. By committing the appalling act of murder, she'd cast a pall on her mortal soul. And it was all for nothing. He kept coming back. She sensed him there in her apartment, walking the floors at night. She sometimes saw flashes of him as he mingled with crowds on the streets of New York City. Now he'd begun haunting her dreams. He would never let her know peace.

The dream she'd suffered through last night was the worst ever. W.F. had been in full swing. This time he skipped his normal foreplay of anger on the rise and entered a rage-like state in seconds. She remembered her heart beating erratically throughout his tantrum. First there were rapid palpitations, causing her heart to pound with the cadence of a marching band. Then a hollow thumping filled her with dread because the beats slowed down—dangerously so. Rivulets of sweat moistened the hollow of her back. She wanted to return the venom to its source, to tell him that he was killing her, but that generally sent his anger into overdrive.

During the height of his tirade, she tried conjuring a diversion to escape his display of madness by traveling to the safe haven created in her mind out of the need for a sane place to hide. In that place she heard nothing, and felt even less.

He couldn't reach her there.

But he shattered the illusion when he moved closer and cut off all paths of escape—his venomous words as lethal as stagnant air meant to choke out the last of her stubbornness. He had mistaken frozen fear for a show of strong willed silence. She was unable to breathe properly, to focus. She was deeply anxious about the affects of his constant badgering, because in the beginning, when these sessions first began, she lent no credence to his words. The man was hateful.

After a while, the insults took. She wondered if there was truth in his claims. Was she truly responsible for everything that had ever gone wrong in his life?

At that point, the choking sensations took their toll.

Her brain numbed from the lack of oxygen. She fought for each breath as if it were her last. She swallowed, cleared her throat, and tried drifting once more to her safe haven.

Impossible.

He was louder now, increasingly abusive, his anger fueled by the before and after dinner drinks that were customary enough to declare him an alcoholic. His breath reeked; his face was flushed a terrible shade of red. Veins protruded from his forehead and neck. She feared being hit. That had started years before—the closed fist, the thick, dress belt, anything handy to wield as a weapon in his battle for dominance.

A movement behind him signaled the start of a storm. White lace curtains rose in deference to winds that had suddenly risen. If August had written this scene as part of a movie, the storm would have been a key factor meant to enhance the violence of his mood. Thunder and lightening, storm driven rain—she wondered if these elements had been created from the electrifying tension between them.

After she noticed the storm, the dream generally took a strange twist.

Silence abounded, permeating the air with the same intensity as the fabled calm before an explosion. After using each phrase in his repertoire to describe her ineptness, he was at a loss. In his mind, August was to blame for stealing his ability to think. August had to be punished. He raised his fist while his eyes flashed with rage. She had to be punished enough to remember not to rob him of his thoughts again... August murmured in her

sleep, begged for someone to help her. But no one heard; no one came... *Oh, God, please stop him...*

When the alarm went off, August recalled shooting straight up in bed to scan the room for signs that he had jumped from her dreams to the present. Not that it was impossible. He was an overpowering force, nearly god-like; the feat wasn't beyond his capabilities. She glanced nervously at the closed door to her bedroom closet and noted that the knob was not in motion. He wasn't in there trying to sneak out. And sneak he would. In the past she recalled him hiding in closets and behind doors until she and Diane felt safe enough to unwittingly enter his lair.

But this was not her only closet. In fact, the entire apartment had several closets and too many hiding places. Breaking away from memories of the dream and from the fear twisting her insides into knots, she sat on the side of the bed and again thought about yielding to defeat. This meant dumping the split-level with the spiral staircase in the East Village in Manhattan that had enthralled her at first sight. Before taking this apartment, the idea of sleeping in a loft had been the fulfillment of a childish fantasy that stayed with her all through college. She'd dreamt of going Bohemian like Kerouac to gain inspiration for *the* novel, the epic that would be published in hard cover first time around and earn at least ten weeks on The New York Times bestsellers list.

That was two years ago and the novel remained unfinished. August had begun the cursed thing, but somehow never progressed beyond chapter three. She discovered a bit late that her characters were dull, had

little to say in the way of interesting prose, and her plot was too thin to carry an entire novel. Over the past two years August had tried rectifying her mistakes. Not an easy task when the rent was due and hunger overtook her to the point where accepting a job as a copy girl for a national magazine seemed an intelligent move.

Getting rid of the loft with the spiral staircase leading down to the main unit of her apartment now seemed another intelligent move. It was impossible to see beyond the first curl of the stairs leading down because the architect who designed the layout of the apartment had lost his senses. He imagined that surrounding those stairs with a wall that wound around the steps was more pleasing to the eye. As the landlady said, he hated the sight of an open spiral staircase plunked in the middle of a room because it gave a clear view of the tenant's bedroom on the upper level. There was no privacy. But August knew better. To hell with décor. To hell with privacy. Because of that wall, anyone could hide beyond the first curl both upstairs and down unseen.

Involuntarily her attention shifted to a door a few feet from her closet and she cringed at the thought of the narrow steps outside that led to the roof. She once pictured sitting on a chaise under the stars on hot summer nights, and one night she had actually climbed those stairs and stepped out onto the roof. Her biggest mistake had been walking to the concrete border surrounding the roof that had been constructed to keep the unwary from falling three stories to their death. Her palms were sweating as she still pictured the metal ladder bolted to the roof. There were no fire escapes attached to the

building, so the ladder was installed as an escape route in the event of a fire. But to her, that ladder was like a double-edged sword. The steps leading down also led up. Anyone could easily gain access to her apartment via that ladder.

If the man in her dreams could transcend death, he'd use that ladder to get to August. Lately she believed he had. For some reason, she could not shake the feeling that she was never alone in the apartment. Footsteps had drifted up the spiral stairs when she was in bed at night and nearly asleep. However, she lacked the courage to go down and see who was walking around. And small items began showing up in the weirdest places.

August was a fanatic for putting things where they belonged, especially on the metal shelves with the latticework that held her collections. Once in a while her designer mugs were out of place. She'd find them sitting next to the religious statues, meaning they had either developed the ability to move on their own or someone had moved them.

Sucking in hard, August tried shoving her fears to the farthest recesses of her mind. No matter what dangers she sensed from a dead man, it was time to get up and get ready for work. She needed this job and doubted that her boss would accept 'hiding in bed' as an excuse for not showing up.

After sliding a wrap resembling a large, cotton sock over the stump of her right leg above the knee, she slipped into her prosthesis, then put on a pair of shorts and a muscle shirt. The spiral stairs leading down to the main floor of her apartment that were enclosed in a wall

loomed before her like the scaly back of a huge beast frozen in stone. However, this was where her exercise equipment was kept—down those stairs. And she had to exercise.

Years before, when her right leg had been removed above the knee, earning her one that was artificial, her doctors stressed the importance of a daily workout. The need to keep her upper thighs muscular was necessary. The one side of her body that was supported by the prosthesis had to remain firm.

As she glared down at the prosthesis, her thoughts involuntarily shifted back five years to a scene in the hospital following the surgery that had cost her a leg. She pictured herself lying on sterile, white sheets with half a leg heavily swathed in bandages while he stood near her bed. Only he wasn't shouting as he normally did. He was laughing, mocking her, branding her soul with a silent threat. She feared that one day he would stand before her demanding another sacrifice for her alleged sins—another leg. The first one was lost due to his negligence, although he termed it a payback.

She snapped to and walked down the stairs by clinging to the outer wall. If someone hid beyond the first curl at the top, August had a better chance of spotting the intruder in time to run. But run where? Back upstairs? Up to the roof? She glanced over her shoulder momentarily to consider a hiding place, then continued down. From her position near the outer wall, she also had a better view of at least three sides of the massive poles holding the ceiling in place on the lower floor once she reached the last step. Anyone could hide behind

those poles.

She grimaced. This was ridiculous. She had to get a grip on her nerves or she'd end up an asylum. Or worse yet, she'd be forced to abandon the one place where, until recently, she'd felt safe for the first time in her life. And that meant analyzing the strange incidents taking place in the apartment in the light of day, when common sense was at its height.

Those dreams, for instance, were just that—dreams. And those nightly footsteps—this building was maybe fifty or sixty years old, so the footsteps were probably just the floors settling. She glanced at her collections lined on shelves on walls to the far right of the staircase. The music boxes, the statues—mostly religious, mostly marble—and the designer mugs were all perfectly lined up and on the proper shelves. Inanimate objects were incapable of moving by themselves. She moved them herself to dust the shelves and forgot to put them back. And that was the end of it: no more nonsense.

The ground floor of her apartment was one large room, with no walls to divide each living space into separate units. So, it was up to the tenants to use their imaginations to lay out the area. August had chosen the far wall opposite the spiral stairs as the marking point for a living room. There she had skillfully arranged the furniture so there was no doubt that this was it—a skill she'd learned from Mother.

Then she purchased three-fold-dividers covered with an Oriental print that were encased in wooden frames to add to the illusion of separate rooms. Now there were three distinct units—a kitchen, a living room and an ex-

ercise room. Sometimes the dividers unnerved her when floor creaking noises or other sounds rose behind them. But she was nearly able to see through the delicate fabric, and after heavy concentration was able to tell when the noises emanated from another apartment in the building, or from hers.

They were never from hers.

Before beginning her workout, she went to the kitchen area where there was a small, table-high refrigerator, a stove with two burners and a cabinet with two shelves. She lived alone, and had for a few years now. The barest of necessities were enough. A board placed atop the mini-refrigerator served as a counter where she kept the electric coffee pot. After adding two scoops of a nondescript store brand to the basket in the pot, she poured water into the top and turned it on. By the time she was finished exercising, the odor of percolated coffee would be welcomed.

She put the coffee back into the fridge where it was stored for freshness, removed an English muffin from a package on the lower shelf of the refrigerator, and popped it into a toaster next to the coffee pot. But she didn't remove the homemade jelly purchased in a specialty shop made from fresh mangos—August liked her jelly good and cold. Just taking out the muffin was enough to save her time when she finally sat down to breakfast.

Starting with the exercise bench, August performed leg curls with weights. Her mind was preoccupied, though, and she soon lost count of the number of repetitions and perhaps did too many. Her shorts and muscle

shirt were clinging to her body as she moved on to the exercise bike. The apartment was damned hot inside. Stagnant air filled her lungs with its bulk and made the walls and furniture feel sticky to the touch. One of these days she'd finish that cursed novel, sell it and buy a few air conditioners, one for her bedroom upstairs, another for down there.

And yet, as she pedaled on the bike she realized the heat only annoyed her lately because the dreams were in the back of her mind, fighting to dominate her thoughts. She gave in and tried to recall what had set him off this time. Finding the reason for this latest attack was most important. The dreams stayed with her nightly. And the dreams were vivid, like watching a movie on TV. His violence was sapping her strength. Perhaps changing the course of dreams was impossible, but she was desperate enough to try. Yet for the life of her, nothing capable of stimulating his anger came to mind.

During his tirade, a storm had raged outside, she remembered that much, but storms never frightened him. Instead they acted as enhancements to his anger. Therefore, his outburst had more to do with August, and a small detail that had unwittingly set him off. And yet, what was it?

They had dinner, some light conversation. He drank and talked; August mostly listened. Mother had not joined them. Perhaps that was the answer; Mother had taken a bullet in the brain during the Gulf War. It was inoperable. She suffered from terrible migraines. He worried that the bullet would one day shift and kill Mother. August tried to recall if any part of the conver-

sation had centered on the bullet and Mother's inability to perform the slightest function. That would set him off because August was somehow to blame for her disability. However, Mother was never mentioned, so August moved on.

The next volatile subject concerned Diane, who had married and moved to Switzerland. August had often taken the blame for driving Diane out. But then, as far as she could remember, Diane was not mentioned either.

When the answer finally came, it was ridiculously obvious. He had wanted an after dinner cocktail, or two, or three. She served coffee to avoid the possibility of a drunken tirade. The tirade came anyway. When the dream returned that night, she'd force herself to do as ordered, serve the liquor, and just maybe... she would lace his drink with some of Mother's sleeping tablets.

Half an hour later, August braced herself and went upstairs and showered and dressed for work. She was still shaken by the dead man who haunted her dreams. And, despite her earlier analysis that the footsteps in her apartment at night were noises caused by the building settling, she was nagged by the sensation that someone was there now, watching her. And yet, except for clothing, her closet had been empty. No one was hiding there.

Taking a shower was unnerving because she had to close her eyes to shampoo her head. But she made it. She showered, dressed and took those cursed spiral stairs down to the main floor, and after doing a fast scan from a vantage point on the bottom step, she was re-

lieved because no one was hiding behind the poles supporting the ceiling. She was safe. The man she dreamt of nightly was stuck inside of her subconscious and maybe there was no way for him to escape to the present—

August had entered the kitchen area and was stunned to see a cup of freshly poured coffee sitting on the table, alongside a plate containing a powdered donut. Her English muffin was still in the toaster. She stared at the donut and felt her stomach wretch with spasms of fear. She never bought donuts; she hated the damned things.

A single red rose made of spun glass was lying on the table beside the plate with the donut. Red glass because it was the reddest rose she had ever seen. The green tint used for the leaves was spectacular as well.

She leaned against the nearest pole and fought for control. She was slightly dizzy, disoriented. The rose wasn't from him. He didn't leave presents. He didn't give anything. He was a taker who had grabbed most of her life, most of one leg and who now hid in the sanctity of her dreams. No. He would never leave a rose. He might, however, leave a donut knowing August hated donuts with a passion.

*But what if it wasn't him? What if he'd stayed dead?*

Then who left it, she wondered? And when was it left? Was it while she was in the shower, while she was dressing? She had the feeling that someone had been watching her and waiting.

*But waiting for what?*

She stared at an extension phone lying next to her exercise equipment and considered calling the police,

then changed her mind. The person who left the rose might still be there, perhaps hidden in one of the too many closets in the apartment. He'd hear her making the call and grow angry, maybe attack her. Somehow she had to leave and call the police from downstairs. Yes, have them search the place.

## Chapter Two

Detective Bobby Beckett had been born Roberta. By using a non-gender nickname she'd hoped to blend in, to be just another detective, but the plan failed at times. Lately, the other detectives had jokingly referred to her as Delilah ever since Joe Sampson became her partner. Joe, however, had been on sick leave for the past two weeks recuperating from hernia surgery. This caused another round of the usual jokes. Now there were references to the Old Testament story in which Delilah cut Sampson's hair and robbed him of his notorious strength. In self-defense, Bobby refused to work with an interim replacement who was certain to make jokes behind her back; so she was currently going it alone.

Not that she minded. Bobby was gratified to have been rewarded with a spot on the elite homicide division

in Midtown South. She had no desire to compound the daily stress of hunting down killers by working with someone who made her feel uncomfortable by cracking jokes about her and Joe. Joe Sampson was the ultimate; a serious minded man who was smart enough to out-think most killers and large enough in stature to bring them down.

Too bad he'd gotten a hernia on his time off pulling out tree stumps left over from clearing a piece of land in Upstate New York. Joe intended to retire in that area, and wanted to start building the house before he got too old to do the work himself. Now he was out, and she alone—by choice.

Sitting at her desk, Bobby shuffled through a pile of folders of current cases and sorted them according to priority. Top of the pile belonged to the perpetrator who consorted with the dead and thus far fit no profile. Most of these loonies generally broke into graves searching for valuables to keep as reminders of the deceased whether they knew that person or not. This one, however, was a real Twinkie. Besides stealing items from bodies, he took body parts, and often an entire body.

Sampson had dubbed him 'Dr. Frankennut', while Bobby preferred 'Necrophiliac'—a bastardization of the term Necrophilia that rhymed with maniac. This nut had obviously formed a morbid fascination for being in the presence of the dead, and had established an unholy alliance with their bodies.

To date there were no leads. She lacked even a general description of the perp because, other than his victims—who were unfortunately dead—there were no

eyewitnesses. And while the killer was apparently demented, he was smart enough to not leave the tools of his trade behind, such as an odd make of a shovel at a gravesite to possibly trace back to a manufacturer. Nor did he unwittingly discard any of the many surgical instruments used to remove body parts. As a pathologist from the Medical Examiner's office had determined months ago, and the good folks at forensics verified, the parts he took were removed with surgical instruments like scalpels and what she termed 'bone cutters'. He was precise and he was efficient, meaning he sure as hell wasn't sloppy.

When the case first came across their desks, she and Sampson were inclined to put it on hold. Chasing killers who were doing live victims was more important than chasing a grave robbing nut job. Then something happened. She didn't know whether it was the turn of the moon or if the Necrophiliac stopped taking his meds, but months ago he changed his modus operandi, and that changed his status; now he was at the top of the pile.

She sat forward in her chair and rubbed the small of her back and considered the many arguments she'd had with Sampson over this one case due to the change in status. In Bobby's opinion, the Necrophiliac had stopped robbing graves, and had now developed the ungodly habit of stealing body parts from living, breathing individuals—mostly while they were still alive. Sampson, though, failed to see a link between the ghoul who desecrated corpses in graves and the murder/mutilation lunatic. As he argued, grave-robbing nuts generally stuck

to one method of operation, while Bobby argued that he had probably reached the age where digging up corpses was beyond him.

Her argument was based on the connection between the *mementos* left at gravesites and those found at the site of mutilation murders—a single, long stemmed, red rose with vivid green leaves made from spun glass. A single red rose meant love. It was as if the perp was telling his victims that despite his brutality, he loved them.

Bobby shook her head in silent dismay. How could you love someone and be cruel enough to mutilate their body, and then kill them—adding a final insult to their fatal injury?

Another of Sampson's arguments against the involvement of the grave robbing ghoul had to do with the way the kills were being committed. Since the methods weren't consistent, Sampson was inclined to believe that several killers were responsible for the bodies with missing parts that were turning up with increasing frequency, and not just a single perp.

Some of the victims had been fed powdered donuts laced with rat poison—an anti-coagulant that caused internal hemorrhaging and made the victims' bleed out before they died. While the toxicology tests performed on others showed they had imbibed a ten percent solution of formalin before they were killed. Formalin is a derivative of formaldehyde generally used to preserve biological specimens for forensic tests and pathological examinations. The nut was using this as a fixative agent to stabilize the victims' bodily tissue before death to prevent the body parts from rapidly deteriorating after he

stole them. He wanted to preserve them until he got home and stuck them in a jar with alcohol, or whatever he used. But, according to forensics, the formalin oxidized to formic acid and decalcified the victims' bones, so the parts he took, like hands and heads, were useless after a while.

Formalin is also corrosive to the skin and eyes. Therefore, getting a victim to imbibe formalin, then removing their eyes before death was another joke because the formalin destroyed them. Another problem she had with the formalin was how he got his victims' to ingest the stuff before he killed them. While it might have been colorless, it sure as hell wasn't odorless.

After a while, the perp gave up on formalin and moved on to strangulation and decapitation.

Due to these differences in the methods of killing, Sampson continued to argue that they were dealing with several killers. But then Bobby reminded him again of the glass roses, and he reluctantly agreed that she might have a point.

The top file she was scanning through contained a forensics report that brought on migraines each time she read it. But she glanced at the report again in hopes that she'd missed some detail the last dozen times she'd perused it. From all outward appearances, the perp was mindful of every detail, like fingerprints for instance. From the evidence gathered thus far, it was evident that the perp always wore gloves when he handled the bodies. And although plenty of trace evidence, such as fibers, was found on bodies of the victims killed in their homes, those fibers originated *from* their homes. And

that was useless information because everyone carries fibers on their clothing from home. Whether it be minute threads from bedspreads, carpeting, or pet hairs, they're there.

What she needed in this case was fibers from victims killed *outside* of their homes that would have led to the killer's identity, or to a primary crime scene.

Bobby's 'boy', as she sometimes termed the killer, used a primary site for his killing spree at different times because some of his victims were either abducted or lured to his lair by whatever means. In other words, they weren't killed at home. Then their mutilated bodies were dumped in various locations around the city and surrounding areas. It was this primary scene that yielded no clues.

He was a loony all right, but he was mindful of those forensic clues that would have nailed his ass in no time.

Sitting behind the large oak desk that adjoined Sampson's, with her auburn hair drawn back into a ponytail, she stiffened and concentrated on a moving object spotted through peripheral vision to the left. It seemed that someone was trying to make a grab for the 9mm Glock 17 worn in a leather holster on her hip—on the left since she was a southpaw.

Many 9mm's were heavier and larger in size than past regulation weapons. Using a shoulder holster was out. Most officers and detectives had now drifted back to those worn around the waist or hip. The main disadvantage was that it was easier to grab a weapon where it was now positioned as apposed to when it was situated on the upper chest where the weapon was more visual to

the officer wearing it. And someone was making a play for Bobby's weapon.

"How lucky do you feel?" she said without looking straight at the sneak thief.

From what her vision allowed, the culprit was a street prostitute known as Jena. And that was odd because the worst crime Jena had committed to date was rolling in bed with her Johns for a buck, and occasionally rolling those same Johns for their cash and valuables. She'd never been known to take an interest in weapons. The only reason she was there had to do with one of those Johns turning up dead in her bed. He'd been smoked with a .38 and Jena was wanted for questioning, although Bobby personally doubted her guilt.

"Looking to enhance your wrap sheet by grabbing my weapon?" Bobby asked, turning towards the now silent hooker.

Both of Jena's eyes were twitching, Bobby noticed, and her hands were in motion, weaving small circles against the sides of her too short, too tight dress. She was jonesing for a fix.

"How did you imagine you could lift my weapon and get out of here alive?" Bobby asked, knowing that the pitiful trembling junkie known as Jena could have been her if she hadn't been turned around.

For one moment Bobby saw herself in that same position years before, a street junkie dressed in rancid clothing that reeked of sweat and her own waste. Beneath the rags, her filth-encrusted body had been crawling with lice. Her nose dripped constantly as damage from snorting heroin began taking its toll. Yet,

despite the tremors when she was dry and needy, the heavy palpitations that threatened cardiac arrest when she was using, and the ever-increasing seizures that were side effects of the drugs, she would've continued taking drugs until she died in some desolate alleyway if she hadn't been stopped.

"Dike bitch!" Jena spat at Bobby and flinched when two detectives grabbed her shoulders. "You's a lesbian, dike bitch!"

"Redundancy should be a crime," Bobby said and clenched her fists when the detectives shoved Jena roughly into a holding cell. Explaining to these bozos that the woman was a junkie—*true*—was a whore—*true*—but was still human underneath was impossible.

"You really a dike?" a seasoned detective by the name of Lopez asked. He'd spent nineteen and a half years on the force and constantly mulled over the question of whether to take his pension in another half year, or to shoot for twenty-five. Smirking, he sat on the edge of her desk, his dark Latino eyes focused on her face.

Bobby's gaze was intense, analytical, as though she was looking at someone from the inside out. She had a firm jaw, high cheekbones and brown eyes framed by heavy dark lashes. Her mouth was full and sensual. She wore little makeup.

"Say again?" she asked.

"Are you a dike?"

"Why? Because you never got lucky?" she answered dryly.

"You resisted these charms," he said, pointing to his chest, "You gotta be a dike."

“Bite me, Lopez,” she said, and nudged him playfully off her desk amidst guffaws from the other detectives present.

Getting slowly to her feet, she realized those ten and twelve-hour days she had put in lately were leaving their mark on her joints. Her legs felt like lead weights had been attached at the ankles. Walking across the room under the usual watchful eyes of most of the male detectives present, she grabbed the sides of a dark vest and pulled it across the breasts she attempted to de-emphasize with the full silk blouse loosely tucked into her dress pants. Judging from the leering grins making the rounds, the blouse wasn't doing its job.

As Bobby approached the holding pen, Jena eyed her hatefully, but they had to talk.

Jena had taken a dangerous chance trying for Bobby's weapon, and that was not in line with her downtrodden profile. Her pimp beat her so often and so brutally she had nothing left in the way of spunk. How she'd gathered the courage to attempt to swipe a detective's gun in a police station was beyond explanation. The language she spewed was out of character, too. Jena might not have been much on a social level, but she was generally polite. These were some of the facts Bobby intended using in making a case for Jena's innocence in the shooting of a john in court.

“Drop off,” Jena said, trying to meld with the wall behind her bunk.

“What's up, Jena? You ready to die? Was that a suicide attempt?”

Jena bit a full lower lip and fought back tears, but

they were soon flowing freely. “Didn’t mean ta dis you,” she whimpered.

“I know,” Bobby said. “You’ve always behaved yourself in the station house. No gutter talk, no name calling.”

Studying the men in the room with a jaundiced eye, Jena said, “They calls me a ho. To you I’m a home slice. Sprung for coffee and sandwiches fer me in the ho’s lockup downstairs.” Biting her lip again, the tears flowed heavier.

Bobby scrutinized her and finally decided the tears were real. “Why’d you need a gun? Your pimp getting out of hand with the beatings? Because if he is, I’ll give that boy a lesson in manners.”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“They’s this gangsta hanging in the hood what ain’t no homie what’s going ‘round whacking off fingers. I needs protectin’.”

Bobby listened and experienced a cold sensation in her stomach. Jena had told her that someone dangerous, a stranger in her area was collecting fingers, and fingers were body parts. Jena also claimed he wasn’t a ‘homie’. “A white man?”

“Yes, um. A honky.”

That information lent a bit of hope. According to FBI profiles, the highest percentages of serial killers were white males between the ages of twenty-five and forty. Although a female serial killer due to be executed in Florida wedged a hole in the ‘mostly male’ aspect of the profile. Still, Bobby was positive that the Necrophiliac

was white and probably approaching forty since he no longer dug up and robbed graves.

“What’s his name?” she asked next.

“Lobo they calls him. He’s a banger what’s always fiendin’ for a free lay from the group ho’s. A poser what says he’s a lover, but he’s a stoner. We calls him Lobo, short for lover-hobo.”

“She speaking English or what?” Lopez asked, walking up to the holding pen.

“Yes,” Bobby said, wishing he’d get lost. “She said there’s a dirt bag in her area who’s always begging the working women for a free piece. He claims to be a lover, but they have him pegged as an addict.”

After she spoke, Lopez rubbed the back of his head and walked away, muttering, “Deciphering that shit is like being back in the Navy and working on coding. Or worse.”

“Where’s he hang?” Bobby asked once Lopez was out of range.

“Right now he’s in Rikers. Only I don’t think they’re gonna keep him ‘cause he fenced the rings and dumped the fingers so they ain’t got nothing on him.”

“You seen him in action?” Bobby hung onto the bars of the cell and whispered. If this was a lead to the Necrophiliac, it was hers.

“I seen him jack up an old man with his fists and knock him down. The old bird was sucking up dirt in the gutter, moaning, half in and half out of it. His eyes was fluttering like he was try’na wake up. Lobo grins and lifts his wallet, his watch. When he got to the rings—two of them—and they wouldn’t come off, Lobo uses a

switchblade to whack off the fingers. Just sawin' back and forth nice as can be. Neat he was and the fingers come off and he got the rings."

"Anybody know Lobo's real name?" Bobby asked, sorting through Jena's statement. A brutal thief hardly qualified as a grave robber. And while this one used a switchblade while her killer used scalpels and bone cutters, it was worth looking into.

"No. He never gave a name. But he's a diesel with a six pack."

"He's huge and he's built. That's ninety-percent of the men in Rikers. Can't you do better than that?"

Jena thought about it and shook her head negatively. "But them cops in Rikers know 'im. He's a hood rat there."

"Meaning he's a regular with a record?"

"Yeah, but why you wanna know? You work homicide. Ain't no reason to look after a honky stoner with a blade."

Without answering, Bobby thanked her and walked back to her desk. Grabbing the top folder from the pile to her left, she opened it and began reading the contents. Jena's question was intelligent, but unanswerable. Only a few people in her department, meaning those who were high in rank and had a right to the facts of the case, knew about Bobby's latest theory—that the Necrophiliac had tired of breaking into graves and had now graduated to the living for bodies and body parts.

Bobby had to make a trip to Rikers and talk to this Lobo.

## Chapter Three

August waited a half hour for the police before giving up. They weren't coming. Otherwise they would have shown by now. As she told a 911 dispatcher, someone had fixed her breakfast and had left a long stemmed, red rose next to her plate. "How romantic," was the response. "Wish someone would make my meals and leave a rose." That alone clued her in to the fact that the call was not taken seriously. Considering the rate of vicious crimes committed there in Manhattan, August had probably been placed at the tail end of a long list. A squad car might eventually respond by midnight tonight.

But it was a crime in her estimation. Her apartment

had been broken into and her privacy violated. Next time the nut might have a weapon and use it. What if it happened during a full moon? She believed that the turn of the moon heightened lunacy, and she lived alone. Perhaps buying a gun for self-protection was her only answer. And it had to be today because tonight, after work, August would be entering her apartment alone, as usual.

She trudged wearily to the subway station while wondering if her skirt had gotten soiled from leaning against a car out by the curb while waiting for the police. She'd chosen a knee length, white skirt that did not accentuate her legs. Not that she feared showing them off. The real one was shapely from working out, and the prosthesis looked genuine enough to be real, too. But she was dressed for work and wanted to appear business like. With this in mind, she'd picked a mauve colored, short sleeved blouse in a loosely, subdued style to wear over the skirt, as subdued as the muted, white pumps on her feet that were low heeled, but dressy.

The mauve blouse had been a hard choice. Some of the women she worked with told her that mauve was her color because it highlighted the streaks of mahogany sluicing her dark hair. Still, she didn't want to appear as though she'd picked that color because of the compliments. She was not bubble headed enough to allow flattery to rule—

When her cell phone began making annoying trilling sounds like birds searching for a mate, she shuffled through her purse and retrieved it from the bottom where it had been shoved after calling the police. She

answered on the third ring.

“Hello,” she said and wondered what now? The phone was a company issue. Very few people had the number, meaning this was her boss or one of her flunkies. Undoubtedly, Shelly Robins wanted a favor—immediately if not sooner.

“This is August,” she said. With her back to a nearby wall, she watched strangers rushing to work, their minds in absentia as they approached the subway entrance without the normal expressions that signaled inner peace or apprehension. They existed, nothing more. August wondered if she resembled the nondescript throng lost in resignation.

She also wondered when was the last time any of them had received a rose.

A single red rose meant love.

Her stomach churned. She wasn't serious about anyone. She didn't even have a boyfriend.

“Three rings it takes for you to pick up? You sound as though I interrupted something,” Shelly said jokingly. “You aren't in bed with someone interesting, now are you?”

Shelly Robins was a frumpy blonde with puffy cheeks and a sagging jaw line. Turkey waddles cursed her neck. Her body bulged at awkward angles from being jammed into tailored suits meant for someone thinner, younger. Heavy makeup accentuated blue eyes surrounded by multiple layers of mascara-laden lashes. The voice, though, was Shelly's outstanding feature. Sugary as pure honey, it often struck listeners with a permanent case of diabetes, a devastating disease that

led to amputation, even death. The voice suited Shelly the most.

August clenched her teeth. Shelly's words had the effect of sandpaper being rubbed across eardrums. August hadn't been in bed with anyone for such a long time rumors were circulating that she was frigid. "No. I'm walking to the subway—"

"What for? You have a company car."

For running errands, August thought, like trips to the worst sections of Manhattan and Queens to pick up computer parts when the equipment broke down. "True. But I found a good spot across the street that wouldn't be there when I got home."

"August!"

"Shelly. The garage where you leased a spot for the car is closed for repairs. God knows what they're fixing. Although the ceiling is close to collapse and the concrete floor is badly pocked. Probably a patch-job all around. Anyway, in the meantime I have to consider alternate side of the street parking. You said I wouldn't need the car for a few days. Right?"

"Whatever! I changed my mind. And since my signature appears on your paycheck each-and-every week, that's my prerogative. Go back and get the car. I have an assignment for you."

"Say what?"

"An assignment—Jean's working on a political piece. Harry's onto some corporate scandal. Everyone's busy, meaning August Summers will finally get her byline, although we'll have to do something about that last name. What *were* your parents thinking?" She paused

then, but not long enough for August to respond. “If this is a job well done, I might be throwing more assignments your way. Plus you’ll earn enough of a raise to remove you from that broken down apartment with that outdated loft.”

The mention of the loft made her shift uneasily on her feet. She was afraid of living there now. The dreams had spooked her, but they were just that—dreams. Out there on the street in the light of day, she didn’t really believe that W.F. had returned from the grave. However, this morning she had received a taste of reality from a love struck goon who somehow got in. Despite the unyielding humidity that accompanied July in New York, chills rode her back like morning dewdrops on a flowerbed.

“I want you here at the office in fifteen minutes,” Shelly demanded, driving a wedge through her troubled thoughts. “You’ll be interviewing a reclusive kid in a wheelchair who’s turned computer programming into a multi-million dollar business. He expects you at 8:30 sharp. It’s a little after eight now.” Shelly ended the sentence with a silent threat. She expected punctuality and perfectly written copy without much editing—nothing too unrealistic.

“Fifteen minutes?” August questioned, gazing at the lines of traffic on the road moving slow enough that she could outrun them on foot, even with her prosthesis. A few drivers were impatiently blowing horns as if the traffic ahead would disappear in the face of their ire. “Traffic’s bumper-to-bumper.”

“Do your best. But I want this story—today!”

“Right,” August said, not certain she was up to this, either arriving at the office early enough to satisfy Shelly, or writing a saleable article. Other than the piece she wrote while studying journalism in college—the one that had nearly cost August her life—she had never written anything journalistic enough to be published in a national edition of *The Interloper*. And Shelly would have her head on a plate if it were not up to standards, meaning excellent.

“And August, he’s been written up in multiple articles. You’ll need a new approach.”

“Say what?” She hadn’t read the previous write-ups. She was lost and hoped for a definitive angle from Shelly.

“Dig into his past. Ask questions about his childhood, his college days. Anything that might uncover a fresh lead-in for your article. For instance: early in my career I was assigned an article on an older woman who was losing her sight—an artist—who’d dedicated seventy-five years to teaching her craft. She’d been written up many times, same as the whiz kid. I needed fresh copy. During my initial conversation with her, I discovered that during World War II she was no stranger to a bomb shelter in England. One night a bomb hit the ground directly outside of the shelter, but it didn’t explode. Everyone, including her, went outside to heave moist dirt onto the bomb to cool it down and, hopefully, to keep it from detonating. She had a small child, a toddler, and was pregnant at the time. She miscarried and still mourns the loss. In fact, on each anniversary of that miscarriage she goes to church and lights candles in

memory of that baby. Understand? It was a wonderful article.”

“So... uh... I go with something along those lines—the unusual.”

“Yes. And I want you to know that this assignment is not just by coincidence, although I am shorthanded.”

“Really.”

“You’re missing a good portion of a leg, he’s in a wheelchair. You have much in common. Play on that angle if you’d like. But get a decent story.”

August cringed slightly when Shelly mentioned the leg. One of her goals was acceptance for what she was, not for what she was missing. She kept her voice even when she questioned Shelly’s judgment. “Why do I need the car if the interview is at the office?”

“Remember that I told you he lives in Queens?”

August knew where this was heading and gritted her teeth silently.

“His servants have the day off. He’s coming in by hired limo. You’re driving him home. Understand?”

Walking back to retrieve her company car, August still had misgivings about the assignment. The magazine she worked on, *The Interloper*, had a reputation for covering politics with sidelines on big business. Shelly was notorious for using the cream of the journalism crop to deliver a heavy selling issue each month. In assigning this story to August, a virtual unknown, the resulting article was no apparent big deal.

Neither was driving the whiz kid home to Queens once she stopped to think about it. August had to visit a patient at the Sisters of Mercy Convent near the Queens-

Nassau border anyway. These trips were emotionally draining, but a promise was a promise. While she sat in the car and waited for the engine to warm up, August recalled her last visit to the convent and prayed for a miracle. This time had to be different. But nothing ever changed, she thought, as the scene played through her mind like a Shakespearean tragedy.

When August first arrived at the convent last week, a petite, soft-spoken nun wearing a tight headdress—that made her face appear to be swollen and out of proportion—escorted her to the exterior gardens where the patient sat under a weeping willow. Apropos, August thought. Most of the woman’s days outside of these grounds were spent riding an emotional roller coaster of extreme highs and lows. Depression had always been a close friend, as was weeping.

The patient sat in a white lounge chair with a strap clamped around her midsection to keep her from tumbling to the ground. The woman had no sense of anything let alone balance. Her mind had long ago traveled to God knows where, but the trip must have been pleasant since she’d never returned.

“Where are you?” August had asked wistfully. However, the question was rhetorical and required no response.

A wisp of dull, gray hair had torn loose from the neat bun at the back of the patient’s head. She made no attempt to brush it back. August studied the lifeless blue eyes and tried to recall the woman that was, the one who didn’t need a kindly nun to tend to her hair each day.

At a younger age, the woman had been rather comely and vibrantly attractive. August recalled the mousy brown hair that was never colored, lightened, or highlighted. This was hardly necessary when a drawer full of fancy combs and the right style erased the drab cast. She also recalled the nondescript blue eyes that sparkled mischievously when the right shade of eye shadow was applied. She remembered the laughter that once flowed from her lips that could be as melodic as a lullaby, or loud and boisterous, but never offensive.

August continued to study the spent shell in the lounge chair and felt her body slump as a familiar sense of unease returned. She feared winding up like this: in a convent, strapped down, a mindless individual reposing under a weeping willow.

“Why didn’t you fight him?” she murmured. However, the question, though simple, would forever remain a question because the answer was just too complex.

“Good-bye,” August said, brushing her lips across the woman’s cheek. “I’ll see you next week... I love you.”

“Hey lady, you movin’ or what?”

A man dressed in Saturday gear—torn T-shirt and jeans turned white from too many trips to the washing machine—shook August from her reverie. He was bent over, holding onto his knees, in order to yell at her eye-to-eye. She glared at him, then noticed a large, double-parked, truck sitting on the road slightly behind her. While the truck was not a tractor-trailer, it was still too long for her spot. But he wanted it.

August snapped on the radio, put on her seat belt

and tore out of the space, mumbling under her breath. She just knew this day was starting out bad, and considering what Shelly wanted—no, *demanded*—it promised to grow worse as time went by.