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88 Killer

Written by Oliver Stark

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88 KILLER

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Hate isn't only a feeling. Sometimes it's an inheritance.

‘Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter.’

Ernest Hemingway, April 1936

Prologue

Forest Park, Queens, New York
February 26, 5.14 p.m.

Abigail Goldenberg crossed Park Lane South as the delivery truck pulled out of a side street. The truck hit the brakes. Abby heard the loud squeal of tyres and jerked herself to a halt half-way across the street. She looked up at the driver, grimaced an apology and then felt her pulse start to hammer in her chest like an aftershock.

Inside the cab, two guys with long hair and baseball caps cursed and gesticulated. Some crude joke passed between them. Abby watched as their anger turned to lewd laughter. Then the window rolled down. 'If you want to be laid on your back, just climb on board, baby.'

Abby was sixteen and beautiful. She'd learned to deal with unwanted attention both politely and assertively. Smiling sweetly, she raised a middle finger and told them to swivel.

Abby then ran across the rest of the street and headed down towards Forest Park. She glanced behind her. These guys sometimes came back around for a second bite. She saw the truck disappear into the distance and was reassured.

She walked fast, scanning the edge of the woods, and soon spotted the broken wire fence. She had done most of the damage herself ever since she'd found the short cut. She jumped over the wire and pulled herself up the bank, holding on to a young sapling.

Abby could have walked the long way round to the bus stop on Myrtle Avenue. Reason told her that it was the right thing to do. It

was getting late, the light was fading and there were rain clouds overhead. Sure, she should have stuck to the sidewalks, surrounded by passing traffic in the safe orange glow of the street lights, but since when did Abby follow reason? Reason was something to be kept for when you were older and bored with life's experiences.

The clincher, though, was that the long route added twenty minutes on to her journey, and twenty minutes was way too long for an impatient girl trying to go see her favorite band in Manhattan and get home before her daddy found out.

Abby's secret trip to Manhattan had required subterfuge. It helped that her father, an academic who could tell whether you'd stolen a line in your essay from some Internet article on the causes of the Second World War at a hundred paces, still couldn't use a cell phone without help.

Sitting in her bedroom, she had called the house phone from her cell. She ran to answer it herself, down in the living room, right next to where Daddy was sitting.

There was no one on the line, of course, and Abby loved to act the whole conversation from beginning to end. She had held the phone close to her ear and listened for a moment. 'Hi, Suse, babe, how's things?'

Abby spoke, paused and spoke again, all the time watching her daddy's reaction. She played out a whole urgent scenario within his hearing. Suse had a test, was desperate for help, the only person in the world who could help her was Abby and the only person who could let Abby out was Daddy, so the fate of Suse all rested on his shoulders. Abby then stared across the living room wide-eyed, sweet and smiling.

Daddy had said yes. Of course.

Abby headed into the woods until the traffic was just a distant hum, and it was so dark that the uninitiated would have had trouble finding their way out again. She didn't care about that, though. She'd tramped the short cut so often that she could've done it blindfolded and backwards.

Abby was a free spirit like her mother, who had been living in New Jersey for the past twelve years with a succession of rich men.

It wasn't a quality her father admired but it was one he knew he had to live with. Abby ran wild at times, but she wasn't entirely stupid – she always carried what she called her 'Brooklyn dating kit': a charged cell, a rape alarm and a canister of pepper spray.

She pushed on until she reached a small clearing by a hollow tree. She checked her messages, took off her school bag that she'd packed with revision textbooks, and pushed it inside the tree trunk. Her jumper came off next, in one swift movement, to reveal a faded black T-shirt emblazoned with a grainy image of The Cramps. Next, she kicked off her shoes, pulled off her old jeans and rolled down a short red tartan skirt that she'd hidden from her father by twisting it up above her hips.

She placed her school clothes inside a plastic bag, put on a pair of old pink sneakers, let down her ponytail and ruffled her hair. Now she was ready for the gig and anything else life was going to throw in her path. If it wasn't an adventure, what was the point?

The rain started as she was trying to apply dark lines of kohl around each eye, which was never easy in the dark. She had hoped she'd have made it to the tunnel on Myrtle before the deluge. No such luck. A clap of thunder was followed by a sudden cloudburst.

She put her make-up back in her small canvas shoulder bag and started to run for the bus. The dense green canopy held back the worst of the rain, but the drops that got through hit her bare arms and legs.

After a few yards of running, she ran out of steam and slowed her pace. The woods were dark in every direction and she was alone, creeping through the undergrowth. She looked up towards the path ahead. Something flickered in the dark and she paused momentarily. There was something in the woods – a light, a flashlight or something. She felt very alert all of a sudden, with every nerve and muscle taut. Her eyes watched the light. It moved left and right and then started to move towards her, like a Cyclops's eye.

Abby darted behind a tree. When she looked ahead again, the light had gone, but her skin was covered in goose bumps.

She listened out. There was nothing but the sound of water

dripping from the high leaves. Her breathing was shallow and her body was tingling with adrenalin. She looked at her cell phone. Should she call someone? Who would she call? What would she say? She couldn't call her father. She couldn't call anyone. Maybe she should just turn back.

She stood still as the cold air and rain started to make her shake. No, she was too far into the woods and she was only five minutes from Myrtle. Maybe the light was just a car turning on the road. Yes, that must be it. She let her mind be reassured.

Abby walked with a slight shiver, her head jerking about in every direction. She felt underdressed. She took ten quick steps, and then heard a noise off to her right. She stopped, panting but trying to make no sound. What was it? An animal? Her mind started to grow fears. Suddenly everything seemed alien and frightening and able to swallow her up. She shouldn't have left the sidewalk. She wanted to whimper like a lost child, but told herself to be strong.

'It's nothing, Abby,' she said aloud to herself. 'You're a hundred yards from the street.' She started to walk again. Could someone have followed her into the woods from Park Lane South? Could someone be stalking the woods? To her right, about ten meters ahead, a twig snapped. It was a definite noise, not some figment of her imagination. Abby crouched down and listened.

She remembered her father's protective hand on her shoulder as she left the house. 'Promise me you'll be back by eleven.'

'Shouldn't even be that long,' Abby had said.

'You always say that and you're never home by twelve. Eleven, all right, honey? I mean it. I love you, Abby.'

She turned around again, trying to see into the darkness, opening her eyes wide as though that might help. She felt as if someone was watching her. Maybe it was the two guys from the truck? The thought made her panic. Maybe they had turned and parked up, tracked her and now were waiting ahead of her. She was so far from help. If she screamed, no one would hear. She edged towards a tree. Her hand reached into her canvas bag. She pulled out her pepper spray and flipped back the lid. With the other hand, she held her rape alarm.

She couldn't hear much outside the beating of her pulse loud in her ear. A sound again, somewhere behind her now. Circling? Was it a man, two men, more?

A high wind brushed through the leaves and Abby thought she heard a voice. It seemed to say her name. Was it just the wind? She stood again, pepper spray ready.

She was finding it hard to concentrate properly. Then a voice cried out, 'Abby!' high in the trees. Was she losing her mind? Was it her father? Had he started to look for her for some unknown reason? It was possible, wasn't it?

'Daddy!' she shouted. 'Daddy!'

She heard bushes move to her left, then to her right came another sound. No one replied. *Please. Please let it be Daddy.*

She remained still for what seemed like several minutes, but nothing happened and she started to think she had made the whole thing up. The voices had stopped. She tried to pull herself together. Reasoned it out. 'Nothing's happened, Abby. Nothing. You've just frightened yourself half to death.' She smiled as best she could. 'Come on. It's animals and the wind, nothing more.'

She stepped out on to the path, telling herself, 'Just keep walking.' Shadows from the canopy above flickered dark under the moon, making the path ahead appear to shift. 'It's just the wind and the moon. Guilt – that's what it is. This is your punishment for deceiving Daddy.'

She walked a little faster, and then up ahead saw the street lights of Myrtle Avenue appear through the trees.

'Thank you!' she said, lifting her head to the heavens. 'Thank you.'

She almost ran towards the gate ahead, pushing the cap closed on her pepper spray and ramming her rape alarm back into her bag. As she approached the last row of trees, beyond them she could see the wooden posts that marked the exit. She'd never been so delighted to hear the rumble of traffic.

Two trees ahead, a flashlight appeared from nowhere and danced in her eyes. She froze and called out, 'Who's there?'

Suddenly, the world seemed to tighten around her. A large

shadow loomed behind the beam of the flashlight. The light darted across her face then down over her body and on to her legs. 'Daddy.' It was a prayer, not a question.

'Abby,' said a low, deep voice, closer now. A hand reached out and unfamiliar skin touched her shoulder.

She screamed and turned, and in a moment, she was running back into the woods, twisting through thick undergrowth. She ran until she fell and lay, cut, bruised and sobbing on the wet earth. Beside her was a thicket. She crawled into the center of it, her arms and face scratched and bleeding. She picked out her cell with shaking hands. It fumbled out of her fingers into the dirt. She felt around in the dark and found it. She was panting and sniffing and shaking. The phone lit up. It was so bright in the darkness. She looked up, afraid, and tried to hide her phone while attempting to make a call. But she couldn't find the right keys. She tried again.

A beam from a flashlight swept across the bushes and crossed her legs. She shrank away as if from physical pain. The light came back across and hit her again, right through the thicket and into her eyes. It remained trained on her face.

She couldn't see what it was, but she could hear something pushing through the bushes. She retreated further into the thicket.

She felt a hand on her leg. It grabbed and tightened around her ankle. She screamed, held on to a branch as her body was dragged out. She kicked at his hand, but he jerked hard and her hands slipped off the branch, her body sliding over wet leaves and sharp twigs. She was crying out but her voice no longer made any noise.

He dragged her to her feet. She felt his palms circle her neck, his two thumbs hard on her throat. He was strong and not even breathing heavily. Her eyes remained open. She didn't fight him; instead she was fumbling in her canvas bag. Her hand found the pepper spray and flipped back the lip. She tried to see his face. She wanted to have something to tell the cops.

Her right hand rose out of the darkness and she sprayed the pepper directly at his face. The hiss of the spray was followed by an angry cry of pain. He yelled and let her go momentarily, but he lashed out hard with his arm, catching her full on the cheek.

She crumpled to the ground and the pepper spray flew from her hand. She tried to get to her feet to run, but he grabbed her and held her. He coughed and spluttered to his knees, but he didn't let go of her. He let himself recover with her body beneath his.

He finally stopped coughing and his hands returned to her neck and tightened. The blood beat hard in her temples. The pressure just kept building. Then her mind went white, her eyes misted over and she faded out of consciousness. The last thing she remembered was his cologne. There was something about it. It smelled familiar.

PART ONE

Chapter One

Jules Gym, Lower Manhattan
March 6, 8.12 p.m.

A tattooed arm swung in fast from the right and connected with a thud of leather. The guy in the red shorts took the full force of the blow on the point of his chin; his head jerked up and he staggered three steps backwards on to the ropes, then tucked his head between his gloves. The attacker strode across and started to pummel his body repeatedly.

In the faded ring, the boxers had been going two rounds, fighting toe-to-toe, trading uppercuts, right and left hooks, and body blows. Under their head guards, each guy's face was bubbling up with bright red bruises.

The audience whooped at every big punch that landed. It was not difficult to imagine that the head guards didn't so much protect as prolong the time in which each man was getting his brain pounded. But it was a precinct grudge match, honor was at stake and neither boxer was going to stand down. The big crowd roared their approval, jumping, shouting, spitting and drinking like a bunch of out-of-control rioters.

The NYPD's fight night was in full swing and it was brutal.

Through the double doors into the locker rooms, the narrow, airless corridor was tiled in blue and black. Inside the third locker room the next fighter prepared, listening to the excited bloodlust of the crowd. The air was coarse with the smell of sweat, and the striplight above, twenty years' deep with dead insects and dust, shed a clouded yellowing light on the fighter below.

Detective Tom Harper of the NYPD's Homicide Division tried to focus. He caught the image of the majestic peregrine falcon in his mind's eye. He'd spotted the raptor earlier in the day, perched imperiously on one of the pylons of the Brooklyn Bridge. The peregrine was a skilled hunter. It flew way up high and watched the world below, unnoticed and unseen until it sighted its prey.

The fight was ten minutes away. On the white clock-face ahead, the seconds ticked past, but Harper could only see the raptor.

There was a great roar from the gym; it rattled the doors, which hung loose on their hinges. Someone had gone down. The crowd loved a knockout – they loved to see someone hit so hard that the brain would momentarily lose motor control and the body twist and sink like a bag of cement.

The roar faded and Harper was left with the silence, the bare red brick of the locker room and the ingrained smell of male sweat. He shifted on the bench. He needed to feel ready for the fight, was waiting for the trigger – anger or a sense of injustice – but all he felt was the cold air, the hard bench and the fear trickling slowly through his veins.

He tried to imagine his glove landing on his opponent's jaw, tried to imagine hitting someone into submission, but the image faded as fast as it appeared. If you couldn't imagine beating someone, then how the hell could you go out and do it?

There was a loud smacking sound as Dylan, the all-in-one corner man, manager and trainer, chewed his gum. Harper looked down at the man taping up his fists. 'Can't you cut that out?' he said.

Dylan looked up, his unshaven face pockmarked. 'The champ feeling a little tetchy tonight?'

'Just trying to focus here,' said Harper. He exhaled slowly. Ahead of him, a boxer in red satins stared out from a torn poster, his shining gloves held high, his body tense and ready. Harper tapped his booted feet on the floor. 'Let's just get this done.'

Three years ago, Harper had made NYPD Cruiserweight Champion. He'd beaten an opponent who was bigger and heavier.

Harper had had reserves that night, and he'd wanted it bad. Now he didn't know what he was doing here. Rusty and tired even before he stepped into the ring. Maybe that was the problem – three years of rust was making his muscles feel dull and heavy.

From somewhere beyond the small room, both men heard another roar echoing down the corridor. Harper's muscles twitched. He imagined the referee lifting the winner's arm, the loser standing beaten. Avoiding failure used to be Harper's main motivation. It'd been three months since the end of his last big case. A tough case. And three months since he'd seen Denise Levene. And that hurt too.

Guilt still kept him from sleeping. He'd brought Levene on to the case – she'd impressed him, she was smart and eager. She knew things about criminal behavior that no one else seemed to understand. They'd worked well together. Then it all went wrong. The killer targeted Denise Levene and kept her for two terrible days. For three months since, Harper had been unable to put the monster to rest inside his own head and Denise Levene wouldn't speak to him or see him. And without forgiveness you can't go forward, you can only keep punishing yourself.

Out at ringside, the first bout was cleared. The ring was mopped of sweat and blood as more cops poured in from the street for the main event. They were there to see the ex-champ Harper take on the new boy Castiglione. Harper had retired as champ, had never been beaten and word was, he wanted his title back. People of all ages, from the old vets to the fresh-faced rookies, began opening beers and jostling for space on the battered wooden benches.

In the locker room, Harper thought about the weeks of preparation and training. He'd pushed himself hard, working long shifts at North Manhattan Homicide and then carrying on with lengthy sessions at the gym.

Cops weren't supposed to be affected by what happened to them, they were supposed to move on to the next case, the next body. The reality was different. The cops Harper knew hid their weaknesses. The hardening of the heart was the price you paid for being in the game, but every cop knew that underneath, every

damn thing stuck in deep and clawed away at you. Awake, you could control your fears, but asleep, there was nothing at all between you and the abyss.

Harper stood up, his gloves on and laced. He was in good physical shape – six two with broad shoulders and toned muscles. His age showed only in the gray flecks in his hair.

Pushing his mouth guard in, he gritted his teeth and let himself be led out of the room into the darkness beyond. They walked slowly up the narrow corridor as the noise of the crowd grew louder and louder, the heavy beat of stamping feet rising to meet them.

The door to the gym opened up, the noise doubled in a moment and hit them like a wave. There was no fancy music, no fancy name. Just Tom Harper who had demons to face and had decided he'd try to face them in the place he knew he could fight best. The ring.

He looked across at Marco Castiglione pacing his territory. He was a short, bullish patrol cop with a mean and hungry look in his eye, who was out to prove himself. Once upon a time, Harper had been that guy.

As Harper walked towards the ring, the cops started shouting his name, rising from their seats and patting his back as he passed. He pushed the top rope high and stepped through on to the canvas, standing opposite the young Italian, who was shadow boxing in his corner.

The referee walked up and stood between the two men. The fighters came together. Harper held up his gloves, but stared right through Marco Castiglione's direct gaze. Denise Levene was still in his head, back in the dungeon, the face of the killer behind her. Fragments of his nightmares kept breaking in.

From ringside, Harper's partner Eddie Kasper slurped on a beer and leaned back, his arm curling around the shoulder of the cop next to him. 'My man is going to slay this guy,' Eddie boasted. 'It's going to be brutal. I've got a hundred dollars here that says so.'

In the ring, Tom Harper felt a wall of fear rise up like never

before. It was like a sudden freeze, turning his muscles to waste and leaving his mind in flashes of white-frosted panic.

But time had run out. The bell rang three times and, from across the ring, Castiglione approached like a beast from the shadows.