

## Prologue

“Okay, see you later,” Melissa said with a full-lipped smile and shut the Honda Accord’s door with a dull thud. Her best friend Tina waved and pulled away from the curb with a revving of the engine. The glare of the streetlights danced across the fresh wax job before Tina was quickly away down the deserted street.

It was 12:35 A.M.

The warm summer breeze blew down Madison Avenue and sent Melissa’s shoulder-length brown hair swaying back and forth. She tilted her head back and briefly shut her eyes; she enjoyed the relaxing feeling the wind had on her. She had always loved the weather here in Albany, NY. There was rarely much humidity, even in the middle of summer. The fall offered beautiful foliage; the winter some snow to have fun in, the spring was sweet with the abundance of life and the exciting Tulip Festival they had right across the street in Washington Park, and now of course was summer; a time to appreciate the outdoors.

The wind rolled gently across her skin; it made her feel as if she were flying over some distant country side when she closed her eyes. It

made her feel free, unfettered by the daily assault of mundane life. Just for a second, she was in bliss, one with all existence, happy, truly happy as though the secrets of life were whispered in her ear and it comforted her, letting her know that everything would be ok.

Life was good.

No worries.

Melissa looked up at her stoop in contemplation. She knew she should just go in and get to bed. It was late after all. However as is often the case, she had a few drinks tonight and it seems that good judgment was always the first thing to go. Instead she mumbled, "Screw it, where's my sense of adventure."

She turned on her heel and darted across the street into the park. She didn't know that this would be one of the worst mistakes of her life; and a blessing.

As soon as she entered the trees and started down the path with a cop-clop-clop of her high heels did it occur to her that this might not be the smartest thing in the world to be doing. Washington Park was relatively small, but essentially was the Albany version of Central park.

Homeless people were often seen sleeping on park benches or drinking from brown paper bags. Sometimes rough-looking individuals

were seen exchanging items in what was probably some kind of dealing of drugs. You'd even get people trying to sell you bootleg software or movies with the endless litany of "DVD-DVD-DVD" as they walk about with a small box and try to sell the items.

Tonight however was quiet, and there was no one in sight.

The warm air still pushed through the trees, rocking their branches with a fluttering of the leaves. The shadows of the trees were like a head bobbing back and forth in mirth across the road and into the dark grass. A bat darted to and fro chasing mosquitoes just outside of the lamp lights direct beam in its erratic flight. Hundreds of crickets chirped loudly; rhythmically.

Melissa continued along the path that went counter clockwise around the perimeter of the park. The facades of two and three story buildings stared down at her. Their faded brick and dim windows were silent watchers as she trod before them.

She made her way through the black tree trunks along the northern edge of the park and past a tall metal statue set before a giant white tomb. It was a bit disquieting this time of night; it was called the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. War she thought, how horrible that throughout history men have always been at war. Killing and maiming and committing unspeakable acts, and in time we have monuments to

honour our fallen heroes, but we don't really understand. In some cases we don't even remember what we were fighting for. What could drive people to commit the most unspeakable act; taking the life of another.

At this point she cut back in toward the center of the park away from Washington Avenue, past the silhouettes of the children's playground; the swings creaked plaintively as they rocked back and forth, gently pushed by the wind's invisible hands.

Melissa hit the path again and then came down toward the outdoor theater. Row after row of audience seating jutted out of the massive hill and faced the raised stage. Wrapped about the stage was a large stone building and behind that the lake. It was here that Shakespearean plays were put on; in fact *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was showing in two days time.

She cut around the edge of the stage, envisioning the actors, like remembered ghosts or a premonition of what was to come; that strange thing called time. How things seem to run together and sometimes lose meaning, just one great overlapping collage that stretched across eternity.

The lake appeared before her and to her left. The path ran forward and then to a bridge not far ahead. It spanned the lake at a

narrow part of the water and would then bring her back around toward Madison Avenue and her home.

That was when she noticed how quiet it had become.

The wind and trees had stopped moving. The crickets were silent. Even the mosquitoes and moths appeared to have gone elsewhere. Her heart beat strongly in her chest and she became exceedingly alert as adrenaline flooded her blood stream. She looked over her shoulder back toward the stage and into the woods to her right, but didn't hear or see anything.

Should she go back or forward?

Forward she thought. That would be the quickest route back to the street. Her pace quickened. Clop, clop, clop went her shoes, painfully loud in the ensuing silence. The bridge loomed before her; the water black like an eternal night. Her skin was truly crawling now. Something was definitely not right.

She clutched her purse tightly under her arm and headed up the bridge. If at all possible her shoes made even more noise as they connected with the wooden planks and echoed across the water. At the high point, half way across she saw movement near a bush to the right of the far side.

She froze.

It was a tall man in dark robes; at least she assumed it was a man. The hood of the get-up was pulled down over his head and she could not see his face. Even the sleeves were long covering the person's hands.

Robbery? Rape? Murder? These were the three questions that quickly ran through her mind. He was still far away and just stood there motionless as if trying to read her thoughts.

Melissa slowly stepped out of her high-heels. If she was going to run for it, she would have to do it barefoot. She could hear the occasional car passing on the street, but it might as well have been in Africa for all the good it would do her. Even a scream might go unnoticed.

Then the figure slowly started advancing on her.

Now or never!

She spun about to head back into the park and ran right into the chest of a second robed figure; like hitting a brick wall is what it felt like. It knocked the breath out of her, and also pushed back the hood of the second attacker.

It was not a man.

Beneath the hood was the head of a snake. Melissa gasped and tried to scream, but nothing would come out. The vertical pupils of the snake man looked at her dispassionately and a forked tongue flicked between the creature's lips.

"Ssssssssssssssleep," the thing hissed. Red light flashed in the snake man's eyes and Melissa knew only darkness.

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It was like buzzing flies at first, distant and annoying. She was sleeping so soundly. The cold hard stone beneath her was as pleasant as any good bed. Ever so slowly the buzzing became words and with a fluttering of her eyelashes, she opened her foggy brown eyes.

Melissa found herself in what appeared to be a damp cool cave of some sort. There was a strange round globe sitting on the ground that emitted a soft light and in its illumination she could make out several other women and a few men talking anxiously amongst themselves.

"We have to try to escape," one man insisted. He had short salt and pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He was somewhere in his mid-40's, lean and rather muscular in a definitive rather than bulky

way. The way he crouched reminded Melissa of a cat ready to pounce at any moment. This man was talking to another.

The second man had long shaggy hair and seemed to shake like a small dog. "I..I..I...don't know," he stammered out in an annoying whine and shook his head from side to side.

"Oh Good, she's awake," a woman's voice broke in and a round Asian – American face with almond shaped eyes suddenly appeared before Melissa as she sat up. "Hi, I'm Judy," she offered and shook her hand enthusiastically.

"Where are we?" Melissa questioned. "I remember being in Washington Park...and then there was...this thing with the head of a snake..."

"Yeah, it's hard to believe, I know," Judy offered. "They took all our stuff, but I see you still got your purse. Is there a phone in there?"

Before Melissa could respond, Judy snatched the purse away from her. She didn't have the strength at the moment to fight for it and merely said, "hey..."

"Sorry," Judy said rather off-handedly and dumped the contents of the purse on the ground, and instantly found what she was looking for. She flipped the phone open and stared at the screen as she waved

it around in front of her face for half a minute before exclaiming that there was no signal. “Damn!”

“Hurry, they’re coming,” the thin salt-and-pepper-haired man whispered urgently. “They’re coming!”

Judy looked through the other items in the purse real quick and ripped open the package to a Trojan Condom. She unrolled it hastily over the phone and then tied the end into a knot. Her hand along with the phone went up her skirt. Her eyebrows arched at an odd angle as her right leg went out slightly to the side and then she pulled her hand out and turned around just in time to see four of the frightening snake men enter the small alcove where the prisons were being held.

“Youssssss will come with ussss now quietly or we will kill you most unpleasantly,” one of them rasped.

Melissa’s head seemed to clear as her adrenaline began pumping again at the sight of the creatures. As the others got to their feet she began gathering up the spilled contents of her purse. One of the snake men kicked the purse and contents across the stone floor. “Leave it,” he commanded.

She had no choice but to comply and quickly walked after Judy, trying hard not to think about this impossible situation or to look at any

of the creatures for too long less she lose her nerve like the one shaggy-haired man ahead of her who was still involuntarily shaking and had a wet urine stain down one leg of his tan trousers.