

Excerpted from

## “A HABBIT FOR DEATH”

By

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### ONE

*IN THE DORMITORY YOUNG Sister Klarissa glides from bed to bed. She tucks in a sheet and gathers in the arm of a child. She touches a forehead with a gentle stroke as she makes her way to the door, orphan by orphan. All the while she sings softly of love and devotion.*

*Across her face her decision is easily read: she knows her choice to leave is the right choice. She will miss the faces of the twelve innocents before her, but the decision is made. Her song soars into a rhapsody of unrestrained joy. As the last note dies in the still night, she reaches out to turn on the night light.*

*From the doorway she takes one last look along the row of sleeping children. She counts twelve little heads resting quietly on twelve little pillows; a nice round, apostolic number. Each child snug under clean sheets and wool blankets, moonlight bathing their unlined brows.*

*There is a noise. A quiet rustle of a breath. She isn't certain, but it is so close to her right ear, sending a shiver along her back. She gathers her black robe to her, hands straying unconsciously to finger the cross at the end of the plain wooden rosary that hangs about her slender waist.*

*She strains to hear the sound again, but nothing reaches her save the gentle breathing of the orphans.*

*Once again she reaches for the night light. Once again there is a sound to her right. She turns to face it. A shadow falls across her vision. The blow that knocks her to the ground is followed by a second and a third, leaving her senseless and dying on the dormitory floor.*

*Silence.*

Except for the giggles coming from the orphan in bed six.

“All right. Stop. Hold it. What is going on up there?” The artistic director of St. Gilbert’s Summer Theater Festival waddled his hefty self up the auditorium aisle to the edge of the stage. “You in bed number six. Why are you laughing?”

Benjamin Singleton – Benny – oversaw the artistic operations of St. Gilbert’s. He was also directing the season’s opening musical. If artistic achievement is ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration, Benny Singleton should have been well on the way to a smash hit. Despite the overworked air conditioning of the auditorium, he was soaked in summer humidity. He wore full baggy commando green rehearsal pants, sandals and a light white cotton shirt. Still his clothing was plastered-on wet. The bald spot in the center of his thinning blonde hair glistened with sweat.

“I don’t know,” answered the voice of an eight year old. Confronted with Benny Singleton’s anger, laughter fast gave way to childhood terror.

“Shouldn’t we do something?” That was my assistant, Patsy Malone, an aggressively competent college freshman with an unrelenting sense of duty.

“Like what? Personally, I’m rooting for the children,” I said.

In fact, I was rooting for peace and quiet. It was Monday evening of the final days of rehearsals. We were almost exactly one week away from our first audience. Even though it would be a small first preview house, an audience is an audience. They stand like a brick wall in front of you. If you smack into them without the right preparation, you get splattered. On the other hand, plan well, rehearse hard and you can usually get through the first encounter without too many bruises. I was planning hard.

Unfortunately, the artistic director was not rehearsing so well. We'd scheduled the first technical run-through for Thursday. After four weeks of desultory rehearsal, the cast would meet the scenery and props for the first time. The light and set designers would argue with each other about whether or not anyone had ever mentioned that special green light. "Did you mean to make her look so ill, darling?" The costumes would produce their own private hell at another time.

"What do you suggest, Patsy?" I asked. "Shall I have him committed or just shoot him now?"

Patsy Malone thought about it for a moment. She hadn't been quite sure what to say to me since I arrived at her small college's summer theater program. All energy and enthusiasm wrapped up in five feet three inches of budding dykedom, she was immediately suspicious of my casual attitude. Patsy was far from casual. She ironed her T-shirts and covered them with vests. I'd won her over by our second week when she realized that no matter what information she wanted to pass on to me, I already had a corresponding note on my pad. I was born with a stage manager's memory for detail. I knew where every prop went, when it moved and who moved it. Impressed by my work, my assistant forgave my detachment.

"Shoot him, Nicky," Patsy said.

“Oh my God, you’ve made a joke at Benny’s expense. I’m a bad influence, aren’t I, Patsy? Go ahead, break it to me gently.”

“I think he’s going to hit that kid,” she said.

Down front, Benny was shaking his fist at orphan number six.

I stood and stretched. “Everyone take ten,” I announced.

I’m not a particularly tall man. The truth is two thirds of all the men I meet are taller than me, but sitting cramped into an auditorium seat at a plywood table will take its toll on anyone. Like any other self-respecting young New York City theater professional, I regularly attended the gym, though I wasn’t exactly obsessed about it. Most of my efforts went into the treadmill or Stair Master. I wasn’t setting any records for muscle mass, but I was fit. In the aisle I bent over, grabbed my toes and stretched out my back, feeling my lumbar snap into place. At the rate my muscles were knotting, I’d be lucky to be walking by the week’s end.

Singleton ordered the children out of their beds and into a line along the edge of the stage.

While the Director and his child actors hashed out why it was important not to giggle while the young nun was being murdered, I contemplated taking a break myself. This wasn’t an Equity production. There weren’t any rules on break time. In fact, at St. Gilbert’s Summer Theater Festival there seemed to be few, if any, of the normal procedures that operate in theaters. Certainly nothing was going to happen for at least the next ten minutes. Then again, watching Benny point his fist at orphan number six, I decided that it was probably immoral to leave him alone with a chorus of children. Instead of heading for an exit and leaving my assistant to watch the slaughter of the innocents, I strolled down to the front of the auditorium. Benny was not so patiently explaining some

of the finer points of professionalism to his confused chorus, the average age of which was seven and one-half.

Olivia Singleton, the director's daughter, small in stature, but, at twelve, older than the other children in the chorus, was not interested in any lecture.

"But Daddy, it's funny when she dies 'cause everyone can see she must have heard him coming. She'd have to be pretty stupid to get killed like that." Olivia unintentionally echoed one of the harsher criticisms leveled at *Convent of Fear* during its painfully brief Broadway run in the 1960s. "Pretty stupid" would just about sum up the general response.

Olivia was not a large child, but she had vocal power to spare under all that curly blonde hair and blue eyed innocence. A precocious child, her adoration of Daddy was apparent in her miniaturized version of Benny's rehearsal outfit, complete with her own sandals, baggy green cotton pants and white shirt. She was equally unrestrained in her dislike of his direction.

"She dies that way because that is the way I staged it and that is the way it is going to be done," Benny said. "And I will not argue this with you, young lady. Now, be a good helper and let's get back to work."

"But Daddy, everyone is going to laugh."

Benny turned away from his daughter in an effort to dismiss the entire affair.

"Olivia," I said, sensing that her father turning his back was not going to stop her, "Would you please take the other children through their steps for the 'Bedtime Ballet?'"

"You're just trying to shut me up," she said.

"Of course I am. That's my job. Anyway, you like being dance captain don't you?" I smiled sweetly at the child demon.

She considered my suggestion. I presented the opposite problem from Daddy: I could see she didn't like me, but she did love the way I worked.

"OK. But I don't like it. It's a stupid way to die. I'm sure Daddy will fix it." I often wondered at the home life these two shared.

She led the children center stage and began the cloying circle dance that broke the dormitory scene in half, stopping the action dead. For that, and other theatrical atrocities, I planned to read "Anna Karenina" through most of the performances. If I was going to spend the summer hearing about broken vows, I preferred a grander treatment.

"Well, I'm glad that is settled. Olivia is usually such a sweet child. Perhaps now she'll behave herself," Benny said, snatching the illusion of victory from the reality of defeat. Father and daughter were dancing a duet of mutually misdirected praise. He turned and waddled back to his seat, casually commanding me to "Organize whatever is coming up next."

At first, it had seemed like a good idea: June, July and August outside Manhattan in the clean air of the beautiful tree-filled, sun-drenched western Pennsylvania countryside. There would only be three shows, the first and last musicals. I wanted a chance not to swelter in the August humidity of New York City, an escape from the grinding pace of making a living to pay for my overpriced tiny studio in the West Fifties's. The trip was made more appealing by the idea of subletting my apartment at a small profit and paying off some back rent. And, yes, there was the question of getting away from a failed romance – the kind of affair where you know it's over, but you still walk by his favorite restaurant or "unexpectedly" find yourself in front of his building. We'd met just before Thanksgiving. From November to April we passed quickly through infatuation (mutual) to infidelity (his) and on to

inanity (mine). When I'd started thinking about trailing him at night as he went out for a drink, I knew I needed to get out of town. What can I say? I was still trying to master the dating thing. In the end, western Pennsylvania seemed barely far enough away.

St. Gilbert's College sat in the middle of Appalachian coal country, part of the town of Huber's Landing. Huber, whoever he was, was long gone and so were the coal mines. The countryside was left to tiny farms and small towns that once thrived near industrial activity, but now sat with indifference in the middle of a mountain range covered in pines, small creeks and mid-sized lakes. St. Gilbert's itself was a private school with a student body of two thousand from which no one famous had ever graduated and no one infamous had ever dropped out. Its buildings, all red brick and vines, were a little gone to seed. It had no claim to fame, unless you count the magnificent scenery.

That scenery was the only part of my ideal summer that didn't disappoint me. I learned one of those lessons they can't teach you at a theater conservatory: when someone promises you fulfillment, cash and free time, run away fast.

Benny Singleton turned out to be an autocratic six-year-old disguised as a middle-aged man. It was a discouraging sight watching him hack his way through a play day after day.

That the play should be *Convent of Fear*, a musical thriller about a serial nun killer, only added to my disappointment.

The convent in question runs a school for orphan boys. Enemies plague the convent with trouble. A local developer wants the land. The church diocese, tired of losing money, wants to shut them down. It goes on from there, but the real fun starts with the murder of a young nun. There are singing police, frightened children and dancing suspects. More nuns are murdered and more music slaughtered. In the end the murderer turns out to be the groundskeeper, whose only child drowned

while on an outing from the school orphanage forty-five years earlier. How does a child with a father end up in an orphanage? Think amnesia. Think how you'd rather be watching a good movie.

The scene that orphan number six interrupted was the killing of young Sister Klarissa, love interest of the policeman. She had just finished singing about leaving the convent for her "true love." In the previous scene her true love had sung the show stopping tune "Gonna Make a Habit Of You." Does it matter that the Mother Superior is on the take?

As Benny retreated from his skirmish with Olivia, the musical director, a principal actor, and the prop master approached me simultaneously. I've never lost my childhood faith in first-come first-served so I started with the musical director.

While actors at least have to give lip service to sharing the stage with someone else, musical directors often mistake themselves for God. Edward Rossoff was so confused he conducted everything around him. The best way to hold a conversation with Edward was at a distance safely out of reach of his extended hand gestures.

"I need more time in this schedule," he said. He waved one hand and poked with the other. "You have to get me more time. They all sound like shit. Like shit." Edward had a way with language completely at odds with his appearance: a man neatly attired in a dark suit and thick glasses, mostly bald and pushing sixty. He punctuated each "shit" with an ominous downbeat of his left hand. "I need time now. Today."

"Edward, I don't make the schedule," I said. "That's Benny's job. I just execute it."

"Well, you can just execute this music, because this schedule is shit. And that fat twit wouldn't know the difference." Edward was waving both hands in four-four time.



“Maybe you should ask him....”

A sudden cut. “You are not serious are you, young man? Of course you are, you have never been in this pit of hell before. This shitting waste of space. Benny Singleton,” – and here Edward raised his voice and both arms to crescendo – “wouldn’t know how to schedule a six a.m. wake-up call. Well, I am not letting him embarrass me again. Bad enough I have to suffer with this shit of a score. I will not – do you hear me Singleton? – I will not be embarrassed again. I will expect a new schedule by tomorrow. Shit.”

Edward turned on his heel and strode across the front of the house to the piano on the far side. This put him far away from me and far away from Benny Singleton, who was deeply involved in counting the number of pieces of fuzz on the seat in front of him. I guess he wasn’t interested in sharing any rehearsal time today.

There was an audible sigh behind me. It came from Sister Mary Corinne, a nun who spent a lot of her free time watching rehearsals. Sister Mary Corinne was Edward’s age. She had the harsh look that sometimes develops from too many years of self-effacement in the service of too many good causes. Her hair was gray and pulled back, framing a pair of wire rimmed glasses that accentuated her sharp blue eyes. Like all the nuns of her order, she no longer wore a habit, but that didn’t mean she looked relaxed in jeans and a white blouse.

“He really is a nice man.” I assume she said it for my benefit. Despite her severe angular appearance, she was obviously not without some charitable views toward humanity. Edward Rossoff was an excellent musical director, but I was definitely immune to his personal charms.

“I’m sure he is, Sister,” I said.

“Nicholas, it’s bad luck to lie to a nun,” she said without any trace of humor in her voice.

I turned to the next person in line. Joe Sobieski, Jr. played the young cop who falls in love with Klarissa. He was a few years younger than me and looked even younger. He had the dark hair, pale eyes combination that dominated that part of the country. I might have considered him cute – I do like dark hair and pale eyes – but even when he was trying to be pleasant, Joe couldn't keep his entire face from frowning, eye-brows and mouth drooping downward into a scowl. As usual, he was wearing nothing but dark clothing. For Joe the year was always 1984 and the location was always the Lower East Side. A year he no more than vaguely remembered; a location he'd never been.

“Will we get to my scene tonight?” he asked. “If we start over with these kids I'm never going to get onstage.” Joe put an emphasis on “kids” that turned it into a true “four-letter” word. He switched to a tone that hinted at his busy life outside the theater. “I just don't want to hang out here all night for no reason.”

Now, I may, at times, be cranky and difficult, but when it comes to children, I figure seven year olds at least have an excuse to behave like seven year olds. With adults, I am often not so patient. Nonetheless, I assured him that we weren't wasting his time and we would be in serious need of him any moment. Confidently assuring actors that time was not being wasted is one of the first tasks any good stage manager learns.

My internal clock was ticking urgently now, telling me that I needed to end this break. I took the prop master, Marty Friedman, by the arm and started toward my table.

“Walk and talk, Marty,” I said, gently guiding him along the aisle. “What can I do for you, Marty?”

“I need petty cash.”

That was another peculiarity of St. Gilbert's. Normally, as stage manager, I would be getting my petty cash supply for those handy incidentals – pens, paper, coffee, the occasional new novel for personal entertainment (yes, that could technically be considered stealing, but you take your perks where you can) – from the company manager just like everyone else. Or maybe the business manager. But at St. Gilbert's there was no business manager or company manager. So I dispensed cash and collected receipts and tried to keep an accurate count, though math was never my specialty.

“Receipts?” I asked.

“I don't have them on me, but I have to go shopping first thing tomorrow morning. I'm running out of time.”

Marty Friedman was nervous. The type of guy whose first thought when the alarm goes off in the morning is “Oh, my God, what's wrong now?” Marty was a former St. Gilbert's student who still returned summers to play at theater. In the off season he taught high school English to children who are learning disabled. I have no idea how he ever managed to get through a day of such potentially anxiety producing work. The oddest part of the entire package was his size. Marty Friedman was six feet three inches tall and nearly two hundred pounds. I literally looked up to him, always asking myself, “What could make this man so nervous?”

“Marty, you know I need receipts. Receipts in – cash out.”

“I know, I know, Nicky. But I left all my paperwork at home. I've got to shop. We tech in three days and I'm not finished buying. And then I have to paint stuff. And then it has to dry, and the weather is way too humid, and you know how that is on paint. It will all dry tacky and have to be redone. I don't have time.”

I had a choice. Lay out cash or listen to him for another five minutes.

“How much?” I asked.

“Another hundred.”

That was \$twenty dollars a minute for the whining.

“OK, tell you what. Take a seat and once this break is over we’ll go to my office and do the cash.”

“Oh, great, that’s great. Thanks, Nicky. Really. Thanks.”

The “thank yous” alone could take yet another five minutes. I waved him away toward a back row.

It was time to start again. I chased two orphans from under my work table where they were busy playing cavemen. The rest of the cast was scattered around the auditorium and stage. For a few seconds everything was peaceful. Then I noticed a bundle of black cloth heaped on stage left. I looked at it for several seconds to see if it would move. It didn’t. I asked it to.

“Ah, Sister Sally. Sister? I think you can get up now.”

For a moment there was no response. I was just beginning to think something was wrong when the bundle of cloth slowly unrolled itself into the shape of the young nun so recently bludgeoned to death in the orphan’s dormitory.

“Oh, I knew we were done. I knew we were on break,” she said. “I was just trying to get into character as a dead person. After all, I’m going to have lie there for a long time.” Sister Sally stood up and brushed dirt off her habit. Like all the nuns at the college, she’d abandoned the traditional black habit as everyday wear. The robes she was dressed in were actually produced by the St. Gilbert’s costume shop.

“I am sorry that I got this nice new costume dirty, but the costume people wanted me to start working with it tonight. You know, we don’t wear these things anymore. Anyway,” she said. “I have to confess, I’m not feeling all that well. But I think resting there for a while helped.”

In one of the few theatrically interesting twists of the summer, Benny convinced several nuns from the St. Gilbert’s convent to perform as nuns in *Convent of Fear*. Not all the nuns of St. Gilbert’s approved of the production, but the college administration thought the production would help liberalize the institution’s image and increase its success rate at recruiting new students.

Sister Sally was one of the nuns who approved. She played young Sister Klarissa. Every theater group attached to a Catholic school has one nun like Sister Sally: young, energetic, perky-perky-perky. Sally genuinely loved the theater. She had a laugh like the sound of a helium balloon losing gas.

“I’m sorry you’re not well, Sister,” I said. “Do you need anything?”

“No. No. I’ll be just fine. I believe in a positive attitude. Don’t you?” All the while she was fingering the wooden cross at the end of the rosary that hung from her waist.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Now, remember, all you need to do is lie there. You don’t really have to do any acting to play dead.” Anything to cut down on the melodrama.

“Oh, I knew that too.” Sister Sally laughed. I winced.

“I just wanted to make my time in the theater as interesting as possible,” she said. “I don’t believe in wasting any of life’s moments. Do you?” She laughed again. Very loudly.

I knew just where to start rehearsal.

“OK, everyone. Back onstage. Let’s kill the nun one more time.”