

HELEN PHIFER

A crime she wants
to forget

A killer who won't
let her...

DETECTIVE MARIA MILLER, BOOK 1

THE
HAUNTING
ON WEST
10TH
STREET

An utterly gripping crime thriller with a jaw-dropping twist

THE HAUNTING ON WEST 10TH STREET

HELEN PHIFER

Storm
PUBLISHING

*This book is dedicated to the late Gail O'Neill and her husband, Paul O'Neill,
the kindest, most supportive friends a writer could ever hope for.*

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PROLOGUE

Homicide Detective Maria Miller stared at the television screen as the camera panned around the crowds of spectators; thousands of them all crammed into the Rockefeller Plaza underneath the huge Christmas tree. Sam passed two cardboard coffee cups over to her.

“Have a good one Maria.”

“You too Sam, thanks,” Maria called back as she juggled the scalding cups of coffee along with the heavy door of Sam’s Deli on Waverly Place.

Frankie Conroy, her partner, was watching her with a grin on his face. Maria reached the car and he reached across to open the door for her. As she got in, the aroma of the fresh coffee and a hint of perfume filled the front of the Toyota Prius.

“Do you miss working the streets on days like this?”

He turned to stare at her. “Let me see, it’s cold and there are probably around thirty thousand people currently in midtown. Every single one of them trying to get a glimpse of the tree-lighting ceremony. We would be stood there for a full shift, smiling and talking to tourists—and you miss standing around for hours.”

“You know what I mean. It’s always such a good atmosphere. Sting and Mary J Blige are singing tonight. I like them both.”

“You’d be lucky if you got to hear them; you never get close to the plaza unless you’ve been ass-kissing all year. No thank you, give me my warm car, hot coffee and a homicide any day of the week.”

“You’re so full of crap. I bet you’d be there if Frank Sinatra was playing.”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t be there even if old Frank had come back for one night only to croon to the crowds and flick the switch on that tree.”

Maria rolled her eyes, took a sip from the cardboard coffee cup and sighed. “You can keep your Starbucks, this is the real deal.”

Both of their cell phones rang in unison.

“Hell no, tis the season to be jolly. What’s wrong with people? Where’s their Christmas spirit?”

Maria smiled. “It’s probably in the same place as yours.”

She answered the call. “Yep, we are. What address?”

Tucking her cell under her chin, she pulled a pen from her top pocket and wrote the address on the back of her hand. “Right, on our way.”

“Homicide West 10th Street. Officers on scene, suspect at large.”

“Be nice for once if we weren’t the ones catching all the calls.”

“Quit complaining, we get paid, don’t we? Did you not just wish for a homicide? You need to watch your mouth Frankie, the universe is always listening.”

Frankie parked as close to the police circus as he could. The usually quiet tree-lined street was lit up with flashing red and blue lights. Maria looked around. The street was deserted apart from the police cars and an ambulance. She took a large gulp of the coffee knowing that it would be cold by the time she got back into the car.

Frankie did the same. “Just as well we haven’t eaten yet.”

She nodded, put the cup in the holder and got out of the car. She looked around the street. All of them were nice properties. But this one had a marked difference to the others: its steps went down to the front entrance, not up, and that struck Maria as unusual.

Tugging her ID out of her pocket she flashed it at the officer standing in front of the door to the large brownstone. The officer stepped aside to let her in and as she crossed the threshold she felt as if she was walking into the

depths of hell. As quickly as the thought entered her mind, it was gone. Maria Miller was tough; she lived on her own and didn't believe in ghosts or demons. What she believed in was that there were good and bad people in the world. Unfortunately for her and Frankie, they rarely got to see the good. Their work was dealing with murdering scumbags who didn't care about anyone except themselves. Even so, as she stepped into the entrance of the once grand house, which had been turned into apartments, she felt a cold chill run down her spine. It was so violent, her whole body shuddered.

"You, okay?" Frankie whispered in her ear, his hand touching the small of her back. A look of concern etched across his face.

She nodded. Two paramedics came down the dark oak stairwell carrying their heavy bags.

"Evening Maria, Frankie. There's nothing we can do for the patient. God bless their soul." The paramedic crossed himself.

"How bad is it, Don?"

He made a swiping gesture with his hand across his neck and Maria grimaced.

"We better suit up now," Maria said. "I was kind of hoping it was a mistake. That it was just a serious assault."

"You and your wishful thinking, kid. I suppose we better had." Frankie sighed, passing her a plastic packet.

They both pulled on the paper suit, nitrile gloves, shoe covers and a mask and went upstairs. Maria quickly surveyed the first two floors they came to, casting her eye around and finding nothing out of the ordinary, pointed up. Frankie held out a hand gesturing for her to go first; they climbed on in silence.

An officer was stood at the foot of the next staircase, his face whiter than the paper suit Maria was dressed in. "Next floor. I hope you have a steel stomach because this isn't pretty."

A gut lined with steel was a requirement for her job. She didn't ask him what had happened, preferring to take in the scene herself without any preconceptions. The stairs up to this floor had been brightly lit, the hallways

of the first two floors warm. She stared up at the uncarpeted, almost black wooden steps which led up to the attic, a terrible sense of dread filling the pit of her stomach as she sensed a definite shift in the atmosphere. It wasn't as well maintained as the rest of the house. Frankie grabbed her arm and she turned to look at him. His bright blue gloved fingers began to play out rock, paper, scissors. She formed a fist as he opened his fingers, and he groaned.

"You won, it's your call."

"I'll go first." She tugged up the face mask around her neck, covering her nose and mouth, and inhaled deeply, ready to hold her breath. Even though every nerve ending in her body was screaming at her to get out of here she forced herself to carry on.

The wooden stairs creaked and groaned as Maria walked up, staying close to the wall in case the killer had grabbed the handrail. As she reached the top, a whiff of the all-too familiar tangy, coppery smell threatened to overpower her. She crossed the small landing toward the open apartment door and stood at the threshold, staring at the sight which faced her. Blood, splattered all over the painted, antique white walls and beige carpets of what was otherwise a light, airy open-plan living space.

That was one of the reasons she preferred to go first. Once she'd seen what was waiting for her, she could cope. Her mind would switch to cop mode and she'd be fine. She always was.

It was a nice apartment—would have been a nice apartment. Maria tilted her head and stared at the kitchen, trying to figure out what it was that was on the worktop.

"Jesus Christ where's the head? Where are the arms and legs?" Frankie muttered behind her.

In that moment, she realized she was staring at a naked torso drenched in blood, with torn bits of muscle, tendons and bones protruding from where the limbs should have been. She stepped closer, her mind trying to process the scene and what had happened. The most beautiful, intricate tattoo of roses and vines ran from where the thigh should have been up the side of

the torso and snaked across from one side of the body to the other, ending between the two breasts.

Frankie spoke. "Nice tattoo."

It was a nice tattoo; a quality piece of art done by someone who was very talented. This wasn't your average drunken girl's night out, "let's get matching tattoos done" down a back street in Hell's Kitchen.

Maria tore her eyes away from the bloody torso and looked around. She approached the huge fridge, opened the blood-smeared door and let out a shriek. She barely managed to move back in time as the missing limbs fell out, narrowly avoiding being covered in blood and gore. Frankie grabbed her arm, dragging her back.

"Where's her head?" Maria whispered, her eyes wide in horror at the assortment of appendages that had fallen to the floor next to her feet.

ONE

THREE YEARS LATER

Frankie drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he stared at the run-down building that had once been the City Hotel but was now abandoned and condemned. Maria, who was trying to decide how many grey hairs had sprouted in her bangs since the last time she'd had it colored, turned to stare at him.

"Give it a rest. I'm bored out of my tree as well."

He looked at her and scowled. "Two days we've been hanging around here and for what?"

"You know what. The perp is hiding out in there. You know it, I know it. He has to come out at some point."

"You think so? What if he doesn't need to? What if he's got lots of supplies and is holed up in there for a month?"

"If he doesn't put in an appearance by the end of—" She stopped mid-sentence and elbowed him. A man wearing a navy hooded sweatshirt with NYPD blazoned across the front, and a matching NYPD baseball cap, appeared at a third story window and stepped out onto the fire escape. With aviator shades covering his eyes, he stood on the top rung of the rusted, metal ladders and surveyed the street. Seemingly happy, he climbed down the steps and began to walk toward Seventh Avenue.

"Well I'll be damned." He stared down at the black-and-white photograph of Jackson Quinn, the man they'd been waiting for and who was wanted for the murder of his wife and attempted murder of her lover.

Maria didn't gloat, she just gave him a knowing look. "Follow him as best as you can; when it gets too busy I'll jump out and follow on foot. As soon as I'm sure it's him, we'll go for it."

The man was walking briskly toward Seventh Avenue and she wanted him apprehended whilst they were still on Barrow Street. A taxi pulled in front of their car, narrowly missing them. Frankie instinctively honked the horn and their guy turned around. He stared at Maria, then turned and began to run.

"Crap, he's onto us."

Frankie swerved to the sidewalk and they both jumped out. Maria felt a surge of dread as the newly opened Manhattan Media Corporation loomed into view. The vast glass-fronted office block was owned by Harrison Williams, who ran the mass media enterprise. The only reason Maria knew this was because she'd recently skimmed over an article about him in the *New York Times*.

Jackson Quinn glanced behind him, then darted through the revolving door of the tower into the huge glass, marble and oak entrance.

Unluckily for the receptionist, as she walked out from behind the reception desk Jackson skidded to a halt, pulled the .38 revolver from his waistband and grabbed onto the receptionist, pointing the gun at her head. She let out a deafening scream as Maria came through the doors, closely followed by Frankie, both of their weapons drawn.

"Drop your gun, Jackson, come on. Nobody needs to get hurt here, just put the gun down and we can sort this out."

Frankie carried on talking whilst Maria moved to where she could get a clear shot.

"Fuck you. Drop your gun."

"You know I can't do that whilst you're pointing a gun at the lady's head. Come on, man, you know you don't want this."

The woman whimpered as Quinn tightened his grip on her. Frankie whispered to Maria. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Maria didn't take her eyes away from Jackson but nodded her head. In the perfect situation, she would aim for his chest and shoot to kill. She

wasn't fond of using her weapon to kill unless it was a matter of life or death, which this situation was—especially for the petrified woman Jackson was holding hostage. Without a clear shot of his head, Maria glanced down at his legs, aimed and fired twice. Frankie lunged for the woman and dragged her away as Jackson let out a loud howl and fell to the floor.

“That bitch shot me... she shot me! Get me a medic!”

Maria didn't waste any time and in a matter of seconds had kicked his gun away from him and cuffed his wrists.

“Sorry Jackson, does it hurt real bad?”

“You bitch.”

Maria smiled at him. “Really? Jackson Quinn, I'm arresting you on suspicion of homicide. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.”

Sirens filled the street outside, swiftly followed by paramedics and officers streaming through the doors. She stepped aside to let the paramedics work on Jackson; he was bleeding like a pig all over the new white, pristine, marble floor.

A tall blond-haired man in a pair of Nike shorts and a tank top came running toward her. “That was outstanding, thank you, officer. I don't know what to say. You saved her life.”

He held his hand out and Maria shook it, wondering if he was the security guard and had nipped to the gym on his lunch break.

“Just doing my job, thanks.”

She turned and walked back to Frankie who was talking to two uniforms. He looked at Maria and grinned. “Nice shooting, shame about all the paperwork but at least they're both alive. Are you okay?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Gee thanks, Frankie, nice of you to ask.”

“Come on Miss Smarty-Pants, let's go back to the station. Quicker we fill out the forms, the quicker we can call it a day.”

TWO

GREENWICH VILLAGE, JUNE 1952

The brownstone situated along West 10th Street was Emilia Carter's favorite place. She laughed as she helped roll out the dough for the fresh bread for breakfast in the morning. She was never happier than helping Missy down in the kitchen. She loved being in the city, away from her suffocating mother and odd brother. Everyone stayed in the sprawling mansion on Staten Island from June to September; everyone except her father who used the town house as a base for when he had business to attend to in the city. Her mother stayed at the Staten Island home full stop, refusing to come into the city, much to Emilia's relief.

Tomorrow was a big day for Emilia. She was meeting Mae for lunch and it still made her stomach swirl thinking about it. She was still not sure what to call her, though *her father's lover* was probably the most accurate description.

Emilia and Mae had met under the most peculiar circumstances a week ago. Emilia had been downstairs before bed, helping Missy again, and had paused when she'd heard the laughter and music coming from the parlour. She'd looked at Missy, who shook her head.

"It's nothing to do with us miss Emilia. Maybe you should stay down here. It might be best you don't go up there."

"Why? Do you know something that I don't?"

Missy shook her head.

Emilia washed her hands in the sink, drying them on the warm dishcloth off the stove door handle, and went upstairs to investigate. She didn't know who was more shocked—her or her father—as she pushed open the heavy oak doors and found him with a woman who was most certainly not her mother perched across his knees. The woman's arms were wrapped around his neck, their lips about to touch. Emilia screamed, and they pulled apart. She turned and ran for the stairs, mortified, her father running behind her. He'd reached out and grabbed her arm, tugging her back.

“Emilia, I'm sorry. I know it's wrong, but she's my best friend. I need you to listen to me. Your mother knows all about Mae and me. She doesn't care—in fact she doesn't care too much about anything. I don't know if you've noticed, but she barely speaks more than two words to me. She makes me sleep in a separate room... But I love her, despite how this all looks. She isn't a well woman, you know yourself how she suffers with her nerves.”

Emilia didn't know what to say to him. She loved him dearly. Despite their differences, she also loved her mother, who was an outspoken woman and not the most affectionate of people. Suddenly, she realized that her parents were adults and probably deserved to lead their own lives—lives which had nothing to do with their grown-up children. Emilia looked at her father for the first time as a man and not her protector.

“I'm sorry, it was just a shock. It's none of my business... I'm going to bed now.”

“Why don't you come and say hello to Mae. She's an actress. She's starring in a play at The Belasco. We could go and watch it if you like. I know how much you love the theatre.”

Emilia was intrigued; she did love the theatre. Hesitantly, she followed him, all the time wondering if she was betraying her mother by agreeing to speak to the woman who made her father happy when she couldn't.

When Emilia walked into the parlour; the beautiful woman with bleached blond hair and ruby red lips was stood staring out of the huge bay window, onto the leafy, tree-lined street, her back toward them. As she turned around, Emilia realized that she wasn't that much older than herself. Emilia