

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

CHRIS CARTER

HE TARGETS
HE TORMENTS
HE KILLS

THE DEATH SCULPTOR

THE NEW ROBERT HUNTER THRILLER

THE DEATH SCULPTOR

About the author

Born in Brazil of Italian origin, Chris Carter studied psychology and criminal behaviour at the University of Michigan. As a member of the Michigan State District Attorney's Criminal Psychology team, he interviewed and studied many criminals, including serial and multiple homicide offenders with life imprisonment convictions.

Having departed for Los Angeles in the early 1990s, Chris spent ten years as a guitarist for numerous rock bands before leaving the music business to write full-time. He now lives in London and is the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Crucifix Killer*, *The Executioner* and *The Night Stalker*.

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Also by Chris Carter

The Crucifix Killer

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The Night Stalker

THE DEATH SCULPTOR

Chris Carter



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One

‘Oh my God, I’m late,’ Melinda Wallis said, springing out of bed as her tired eyes glanced at the digital clock on her bedside table. Last night she’d stayed up until 3:30 a.m., studying for her Clinical Pharmacology exam in three days’ time.

Still a little groggy from sleep, she clumsily moved around the room while her brain worked out what to do first. She hurried into the bathroom and caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror.

‘Shit, shit, shit.’

She reached for her makeup bag and started powdering her face.

Melinda was twenty-three years old and according to an article she’d read in a glossy magazine a few days ago, a little overweight for her height – she was only five foot four. Her long brown hair was always tied back into a ponytail, even when she went to bed, and she would never go outside without at least plastering her face with foundation to hide her acne-riddled cheeks. Instead of brushing her teeth, she quickly squirted a blob of toothpaste into her mouth just to get rid of the night taste.

Back in the room, she found her clothes neatly folded on a chair by her study desk – a white blouse, stockings, a knee-length white skirt and white flat-soled shoes. She got dressed in record time and sprinted out of the small guesthouse in the direction of the main building.

Melinda was attending the third year of her Bachelor of Science in Nursing and Caretaking degree at UCLA, and every weekend, to fulfill her job-experience curriculum, she worked as an in-house private nurse. For the

past fourteen weekends she'd been working for Mr. Derek Nicholson in Cheviot Hills, West Los Angeles.

Just two weeks before she was hired, Mr. Nicholson was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. The tumor was already the size of a plum stone and it was eating away at him fast. Walking was too painful, sometimes he needed the help of breathing apparatus, and he spoke only in a barely audible voice. Despite his daughters' pleas, he declined to start chemotherapy treatment. He refused to spend days locked inside a hospital room and chose to spend the time he had left in his own house.

Melinda unlocked the front door and stepped into the spacious entry lobby before rushing through the large but sparsely decorated living room. Mr. Nicholson's bedroom was located on the first floor. As always, the house was eerily quiet in the morning.

Derek Nicholson lived alone. His wife had passed away two years ago, and though his daughters came to visit him every day, they had their own lives to attend to.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' Melinda called from downstairs. She checked her watch again. She was exactly forty-three minutes late. 'Shit!' she murmured under her breath. 'Derek, are you awake?' she called, crossing to the staircase and taking the steps two by two.

Derek Nicholson had asked her on her first weekend at the house to call him by his first name. He didn't like the formality of 'Mr. Nicholson'.

As Melinda approached his bedroom door, she caught a noseful of a strong, sickening smell coming from inside.

Oh, damn, she thought. It was obviously too late for his first bathroom break.

'OK, let's get you cleaned up first . . .' she said, opening the door, '. . . and then I'll get you your breakf—'

Her whole body went rigid, her eyes widened in horror and the air was sucked out of her lungs as if she had been suddenly propelled into outer space. She felt the contents of her stomach shoot up into her mouth and she vomited right there by the door.

‘God in heaven!’ Those were the words Melinda had intended to say as she moved her trembling lips, but no sound came from them. Her legs began to give way under her, the world began to spin, and she held on to the doorframe with both hands to steady herself. That was when her horrified green eyes caught a glimpse of the far wall. It took her brain a moment to understand what she was seeing, but as it did, primal fear and panic rose inside her heart like a thunderstorm.

Two

Summer had barely started in the City of Angels and the temperature was already hitting 87°F. Detective Robert Hunter of the Los Angeles Robbery Homicide Division (RHD) stopped the timer on his wristwatch as he reached his apartment block in Huntingdon Park, southeast of downtown. Seven miles in thirty-eight minutes. Not bad, he thought, but he was sweating like a turkey on Thanksgiving Day and his legs and knees hurt like hell. Maybe he should've stretched. In fact, he knew he should stretch before and after exercising, especially after a long run, but he could never really be bothered to do it.

Hunter took the stairs up to the third floor. He didn't like elevators, and the one in his building was nicknamed 'the sardine trap' for a reason.

He opened the door to his one-bedroom apartment and stepped inside. The apartment was small but clean and comfortable, though people would be forgiven for thinking that the furniture had been donated by Goodwill – a black leatherette sofa, mismatched chairs, a scratched breakfast table that doubled as a computer desk, and an old bookcase that looked like it would give under the weight of its overcrowded shelves at any minute.

Hunter took off his shirt and used it to wipe the sweat off his forehead, neck and muscular torso. His breathing was already back to normal. In the kitchen, he grabbed a pitcher of iced tea from the fridge and poured himself a large glass. Hunter was looking forward to spending an uneventful day away from the Police Administration Building, and the RHD headquarters. He didn't get many days off. Maybe he'd drive down to Venice Beach and play some volleyball. He hadn't played volleyball in years. Or maybe he could

try to catch a Lakers game. He was sure they were playing that night. But first he needed a shower and a quick trip down to the launderette.

Hunter finished his iced tea, walked into the bathroom and checked his reflection in the mirror. He also needed a shave. As he reached for the shaving gel and razor, his cellphone rang in the bedroom.

Hunter picked it up from his bedside table and checked the display – Carlos Garcia, his partner. Only then he noticed the small red arrow at the top of the screen indicating that he had missed calls – ten of them.

‘Great!’ he whispered, accepting the call. He knew exactly what ten missed calls and his partner on the phone that early on their day off meant.

‘Carlos,’ Hunter said, bringing the phone to his ear. ‘What’s up?’

‘Jesus! Where were you? I’ve been trying you for half an hour.’

A call every three minutes, Hunter thought. This was going to be bad.

‘I was out, running,’ he said, calmly. ‘Didn’t check my phone when I walked in. I only saw the missed calls now. So what have we got?’

‘A hell of a mess. You better get here quick, Robert. I’ve never seen anything like this.’ There was a quick, hesitant pause from Garcia. ‘I don’t think anyone has ever seen anything quite like this.’

Three

Even on a Sunday morning, it took Hunter almost an hour to cover the fifteen miles between Huntingdon Park and Cheviot Hills.

Garcia hadn't given Hunter many details over the phone, but his evident shock and the slight trepidation in his voice were certainly out of character.

Hunter and Garcia were part of a small, specialized unit within the RHD – the Homicide Special Section, or HSS. The unit was created to deal solely with serial, high-profile and homicide cases requiring extensive investigative time and expertise. Hunter's background in criminal-behavior psychology placed him in an even more specialized group. All homicides where overwhelming brutality or sadism had been used by the perpetrator were tagged by the department as 'UV' (ultra-violent). Robert Hunter and Carlos Garcia *were* the UV unit, and as such, they weren't easily rattled. They had seen more than their share of things that no one else on this earth had seen.

Hunter pulled up next to one of several black-and-white units parked in front of the two-story house in West LA. The press was already there, crowding up the small street, but that was no surprise. They usually got to crime scenes before the detectives did.

Hunter stepped out of his old Buick LeSabre and was hit by a wave of warm air. Unbuttoning his jacket and clipping his badge onto his belt, he looked around slowly. Though the house was located in a private street, tucked away in a quiet neighborhood, the crowd of curious onlookers that had gathered outside the police perimeter was already substantial, and it was growing fast.

Hunter turned and faced the house. It was a nice-looking two-story red-brick building with dark-blue-framed windows and a hipped roof. The front yard was large and well cared for. There was a two-car garage to the right of the house, but no cars on the driveway, except for more police vehicles. A forensic-unit van was parked just a few yards away. Hunter quickly spotted Garcia as he exited the house through the front door. He was wearing a classic white hooded Tyvek coverall. At six foot two, he was two inches taller than Hunter.

Garcia stopped by the few stone steps that led down from the porch and pulled his hood down. His longish dark hair was tied back into a slick ponytail. He also promptly spotted his partner.

Ignoring the animated herd of reporters, Hunter flashed his badge at the officer standing at the perimeter's edge and stooped under the yellow crime-scene tape.

In a city like Los Angeles, when it came to crime stories and reporters, the more gruesome and violent the offence, the more excited they got. Most of them knew Hunter, and what sort of cases he was assigned to. Their shouted questions came in a barrage.

'Bad news travels fast,' Garcia said, tilting his head in the direction of the crowd as Hunter got to him. 'And a potentially good story travels faster.' He handed his partner a brand new Tyvek coverall inside a sealed plastic bag.

'What do you mean?' Hunter took the bag, ripped it open and started suiting up.

'The victim was a lawyer,' Garcia explained. 'A Mr. Derek Nicholson, prosecutor with the District Attorney's office for the State of California.'

'Oh that's great.'

'He wasn't practicing anymore, though.'

Hunter zipped up his coverall.

'He was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer,' Garcia continued.

Hunter looked at him curiously.

'He was pretty much on his way out. Oxygen masks, legs weren't really responding the way they should . . . The doctors gave him no more than six