

DEADLINE

by Dakota Banks

Amelia nestled into the oversized chair, running her fingertips lightly across the plump arms. The chair was her refuge, the place where she felt closest to Roger. It had been more than five years since she and Roger had pulled their chairs up to the fireplace, feet sharing the same footrest, for one of those long, intimate talks she so loved. It was during one of those talks that Roger had quietly given her the news about his heart condition.

Tonight was Halloween, one of Amelia's favorite holidays. Since her daughter was long past the trick-or-treating stage, Amelia was free to indulge herself with adult pastimes: a dinner prepared with the fall bounty and a home decorated with a harvest theme. Plus a few scary touches for fun. It was Halloween, after all!

Amelia levered herself from the comforting environment of the chair and returned to her work in the kitchen. The mixture of aromas that greeted her as she entered triggered memories of other holiday dinners. She and Roger sharing

a quick hug in the kitchen; Susan, just over a year old, toddling precariously across the dining room; the happy pandemonium of Susan bringing four friends home from college...

Aware that she was trying to recapture a happy portion of her past, Amelia was preparing all of her old favorite holiday recipes for a new, and she hoped appreciative, audience. Josh was coming to spend the weekend with her, four whole days of togetherness! As they made their plans, giggling like teenagers, Josh had hinted that something important might happen this weekend. Her heart raced as she chopped onions.

Her daughter was right about some things, though. Amelia didn't know much about Josh. He had a habit of turning aside personal questions in a charming, and disarming, way. She had told him much about herself, even opening the painful, sealed-off areas of her grief for Roger under his gentle and persistent questioning. In return, he had told her only that his parents had died when he was a child, that he had been raised by an aunt who was now dead, and that he was a photographer. That was, after all, how they'd met.



Nine Months Ago

Amelia attended the evening gala opening of an exhibition at the Saint Louis Art Museum, as she often did. It was one of the few things that she did entirely for herself, as Roger had no interest in art. The drive took about an hour and a half from her home in a rural area of Lincoln County, northwest of St. Louis. She'd worn a classic red dress with a low neckline, fitted waist, and slim

skirt, and had turned heads as she entered the room. Every now and then she caught a glimpse of a hauntingly familiar face—Roger, as he had been twenty-five years ago.

The man bent and stretched to take close up portraits of the Mayan pottery on display. He balanced his camera with great familiarity, as if it were an extension of his strong hands. Finally, she came face to face with her walking memory and he spoke to her.

“Rare, isn't it? Amelia Rare, author of ‘Rare Views,’ the syndicated column? I thought I recognized you from the picture next to your column. That picture certainly doesn't do you justice. What a pleasure to meet you! I do a little writing myself, nothing like your work, of course. My main gig's photography.”

He chatted on, glancing over his shoulder every now and then. Amelia followed his gaze to a stunning blonde who looked like, and probably was, a top model.

“I'm involved right now in a major project,” he said as he nodded in the direction of the blonde, “but I would really like to get to know you when I have more time to devote to you. I am such a fan of yours, and you could give me some writing tips, you know, like a mentor. Very attractive dress, by the way. The color sets off the highlights in your hair.”

Amelia was almost speechless at this sudden encounter that pulled her thoughts back so many years. Roger had always loved her in red, and she had loved wearing it for him. At the man's insistence, she gave him her phone number. At home, she berated herself for checking frequently for messages from him, and for not having gotten his phone number or even his name.

After a few days of silence, she tried to put the handsome stranger out of

her mind and get back to her work.

Her column, and the other writing she did for major publications, was not only a source of income but her lifeline as well. The struggle to get the words out had seen her through the rough months after Roger's death, and sustained her now as her routine.

One night in late September, when she came back into the house after a walk, she checked her cell phone and found a voice message. Cheeks reddened, russet hair pulled back into a careless ponytail, wearing Roger's old work shirt, she listened to a voice she heard months ago—or was it years?

“Mrs. Rare, sorry I missed you this evening. We met at the museum, I hope you remember. My name is Josh and I'm a photographer. Amelia—I hope I may call you that—please call me, here's my number...”



Present Time

The onion slipped under her fingers. The knife nicked her fingertip, jolting Amelia from her memories. Startled, she put her finger in her mouth, pressing her tongue against the cut until the bleeding stopped. Rummaging around in the kitchen's junk drawer, she found the first aid kit and did a better job of treating the wound, bandaging it so that she could continue cooking.

She had to admit there were some disturbing things about Josh. Not that she was worried about the difference in their ages—after all, they were both adults. He was quite mature for thirty, and she had always looked young for her

age. Still, there was that feeling she would get sometimes when he looked at her, or particularly when he wasn't looking at her—just staring out into space. What was he seeing that so occupied his attention? She felt that Josh was like the ocean, brimming with life, but also dangerous. Was she seeing only the surface of the man, like the surface of the ocean, and missing the cold currents and lightless depths beneath?

The doorbell rang. She headed for the front door, pausing in the hallway at the intercom station to speak to the guest outside. It was Josh, right on time. She opened the door, letting in the chill air and catching a glimpse of the beautiful sunset over Josh's shoulder. Later there would be a full moon, and she was hoping he'd like to go for a romantic walk in the woods.

“Oh! Thank you for the flowers. How thoughtful.”

Josh shook his head with mock disappointment. “What? No kiss for the weary traveler?”

She stepped into his arms, awkwardly holding the bouquet behind his back. But there was nothing awkward about the kiss they exchanged.

“Your Halloween decorations ... they're, uh, unique.”

He looked around at the array of jack-o-lanterns with glowing innards, their faces frozen in horrific expressions of terror, and his eyes settled on the body propped up next to the fireplace with realistic-looking rats gnawing on its bloody flesh.

“I hope you don't think it's over the top,” Amelia said. “Come into the kitchen while I get the roast in the oven.”

“You have a lovely place here,” he said as they walked into the kitchen. “The land is beautiful.”

Romantic walk in the woods: check.

“And the house is so distinctive. Not every farmhouse has a tower on it.”

“It isn't a farmhouse, exactly,” she said. “Roger designed it to seem like a part of the woods. The tower was supposed to be like a tree house in the upper branches of the oaks. It's my favorite part of the house. I do all my writing up there.”

“How much land do you have?”

“We ... that is, I have a hundred acres. I like the peace and quiet, and I've always liked to live where I could see the Milky Way at night.”

“Doesn't the isolation worry you? Being all alone in a place like this?”

“No. And anyway, I'm not alone now. You're here.”

“Maybe that should worry you,” he said, “being so far from help with an animal like me prowling around.”

Amelia laughed. “There's always 911. Are you planning on chasing me around the house later?”

“Hmm,” he said, nuzzling her neck. “Are you planning on running away from me?”

“Builds anticipation. Heats the blood. Works off the calories from the meal.”

“You're all I want for dessert.”

She slipped away from his side and went back to putting the finishing touches on the beef roast.

“I hope you like rare. I could leave a couple of slices in the oven longer for you if you want.”

“Rare's perfect.”

He watched her wield the knife for a moment, then left to bring in his bags from the car for his four-day stay. When he rejoined her in the kitchen, he was carrying a small box.

“Amelia, I was saving this for your Christmas present, but this seems like such a great time.”

She opened the box. Inside was a heart-shaped ruby suspended from a delicate gold chain.

“Oh, it's beautiful. I don't know what to say ...”

“Don't say anything, except that you'll wear it tonight with your red dress, the one you were wearing when we first met.”

Amelia nodded. She hadn't been planning to dress up for dinner, but now it seemed like a wonderful idea. Since there was little left to do in the kitchen, she excused herself to shower and dress.

Upstairs she noticed that Josh had firmly installed his bags in the master bedroom, not in the guest room she had prepared. Although their relationship had progressed to the stage that she should be comfortable sharing a room, she didn't feel ready to share this *particular* bedroom.

I'll see how the evening goes.

Josh's suitcase was on the corner of the bed. She tried to shift it slightly so that she could sit down to put on her shoes. It was unexpectedly heavy, so she gave it a firmer shove. To her chagrin, it toppled over the edge and spilled on the floor. She realized that Josh must have opened it to remove the gift and then forgotten to latch it. She righted the suitcase and turned her attention to the tumbled contents.

She was surprised to see that there were few clothes and personal items.

The suitcase contained mostly paperwork, envelopes fastened together in three bundles, and two hardback books. She reached for the books first, thinking that finding out what type of books Josh read could give her a glimpse into his hidden side.

The books were true crime stories written by the best-selling author Terrance Covington. *The Corpse with Class* was about the brutal murder of a Senator's wife who had been having an affair with a mysterious man who had, so far at least, eluded the police. *The Corpse was Blonde* described the unsolved murder of a fashion model. Amelia had heard of these books and remembered the news stories when the murders happened, but she hadn't read the books. True crime was not her choice for relaxing reading, especially when these crimes were so hideous. She remembered from the newspaper accounts that the murders were tied together because in each case the murdered woman had been given a distinctive piece of jewelry that was found on her body.

She tucked the books back into the suitcase and reached for the bundles of paper. On top of the first was an envelope with a neatly typed label. It said *The Corpse with Class*. She knew she shouldn't pry into Josh's belongings, but curiosity always was her worst temptation. Inside she found scraps of paper with notes about the Senator and his family and photographs of the murdered woman. The photographs were personal, even intimate, as though taken by a lover. Finally there was a sequence of photographs showing the murder itself and the state of the body afterward.

Amelia gasped at the graphic images, such a contrast to the warm scenes of the earlier photographs. It took several moments for the implications of what she was seeing to register. The photographs of the body after the murder could

have come from police files, but the ones that showed the woman still alive—barely—could only have been taken by the murderer.

Hastily she stuffed all the loose papers and photos back into the envelope. She picked up the next bundle, which was labeled *Corpse with the Classic Profile*. That title was scratched out, and penned underneath, in Josh's script, was the word *Blonde*. Inside was a similar package of notes and photos.

In the silence of the bedroom, Amelia could hear her heart beating in her chest and the breath whistling in and out of her lungs through her parted lips.

Numbly she reached for the third bundle, her fingers moving almost against her conscious wish. Neatly written on the front, not yet typed on a label, was the title: *The Corpse Wore Red*.

Her trembling fingers fumbled with the envelope. Clippings of her columns, a picture snapped at the museum, others she hadn't known were taken... She fingered the ruby heart at her neck.

Jewelry found on each victim's body.

"What do you think of my latest project?"

Amelia started at the oddly flat voice, and turned to face Josh. In his eyes she saw curiosity, as if he were asking her opinion on the latest motion picture. She sat motionless on the bed, unable to will her legs to stand up and move.

"I imagine writing has always come easy to you," he said. "Some people just seem lucky that way. Well, I wasn't. I had to work at it."

He moved into the room and closed the door behind him. He unzipped the second bag he'd brought to the room and began setting up a camera on a tripod.

"All my early manuscripts were rejected. Too stilted. Not original. Not *authentic*." His face flushed as he spoke. "The fools! So I gave them what they

wanted—juicy details. You can't get true crime stories more authentic than that!”
He gestured at the bundles lying on the bed.

The video camera was running, and Amelia felt pinned in place by its pitiless red recording light. She smoothed the red dress with her hands.

“I suppose I should be flattered. I'm not a Senator's wife or a model. Why did you pick me?” she said.

He shrugged. It was the most unfeeling gesture Amelia had ever seen.
“You're nobody, it's true, but I had a deadline to meet.”

[Alternate Ending 1](#)

[Alternate Ending 2](#)

① He reached for the photos she had been examining. As he bent toward the bed, Amelia saw her chance. She dashed for the bedroom door, opened it, ran down the steps—and came to a halt at the front door. Josh had pulled a heavy desk in front of the door to block her exit! She quickly picked up the oak coat tree that stood in the front hallway and smashed it through the front window. As shattered glass fell about her feet, she felt her shoulder gripped by strong fingers—*claws*? She swung around and shoved the coat tree into Josh's chest. Momentarily off balance, he grappled with the wooden pole, trying to knock it out of the way.

Amelia, heart pounding with fear and effort, ran into the kitchen. The back door was unbarred.

Free!

She started toward the door, but was yanked backwards and shoved hard against the kitchen counter. Josh pressed the length of his body against her and she felt the amazing strength of his muscles growing moment-by-moment. He was unrecognizable as the man she knew, his face contorted, his bones cracking and reshaping as fur grew to cover his once-attractive face. Suddenly she realized what she was dealing with and was grateful she hadn't made it to the back door and out into the woods. She'd be in his territory, where his kind were supreme, and wouldn't stand a chance.

A cold resolve formed in Amelia's mind. She wasn't going to end up like the other women in those grim photos. She groped on the countertop with one hand and closed her fingers around the knife she had used to chop onions. She raised the knife, twisting her arm as much as possible, and plunged it into the

only part of Josh that she could reach—his hand. He howled in pain and surprise as the knife pinned his hand to the butcher block counter. She knew that would give her only a scant few seconds' head start.

She ran from the kitchen and made it to the circular stairway to the tower. Taking the steps two at a time, she went up, higher, desperate to get away, her heart pounding. She heard loud snuffling noises from the werewolf, searching, smelling her footsteps, then four paws pounding heavily on the stairs below her.

She reached the top, slammed the heavy wooden door behind her, and locked it just in time. The creature threw itself against the door, making it shudder in its frame, and then began ripping at the wood. As Amelia tried to catch her breath, the pounding started again, rattling the door. It couldn't withstand much more punishment from the powerful beast outside.

Amelia went to the roll top desk that had belonged to her husband. They'd shared the space at the top of the tower. She slid open the second drawer on the right. Inside was a gleaming revolver, loaded, ready for instant use.

She sat in semi-darkness, the light from the full moon flowing in through the expansive windows. All around her, Roger's research was pinned to the walls. He'd spent his life tracking down werewolves, until a weak heart had put an end to his calling.

Amelia pointed the revolver, loaded with silver bullets, at the door and waited for the terror that used to be Josh to come crashing through it.

THE END

② Josh crossed the bedroom, intent on subduing her. She sidestepped his advance and tried to move past him. He was trying to turn their room—her bedroom with Roger—into a death chamber, and she couldn't stand to share the space with him. In spite of the danger to herself, the violation of the memories of the wonderful times she'd spent here with her gentle husband burned hot in her mind.

Josh grabbed her by the right arm, digging his nails in painfully, scratching her as she tried to keep moving. Blood dripped down her arm, the wound a distraction she didn't need now. She shoved him hard with her left hand, making him let go of her, and she saw him stumble back onto the bed.

The doorbell rang.

She took off toward the front door, but Josh was right on her heels and ran into her full-force, knocking her against the hallway wall just when she was reaching for the intercom switch.

Her life with Roger had been an unusual one. A sacrifice, certainly. She'd had to make accommodations, but when she did, the results were beyond her expectations. Roger fit snugly and lovingly with her, and she had tailored the glove of her life to his warm hand within it. It was only temporary, she'd known that. As much as she longed for him to be her permanent soul mate, Roger hadn't wanted immortality, and she respected that.

It had been only recently that she'd shrugged off Roger's request to stop drinking human blood, five years after his death. She'd gone back to associating with her kind.

The doorbell rang again.

Enough of this.

She whirled so that it was Josh pressed against the wall. Closing her fingers around his neck, she lifted him off the floor a few inches. He struggled, both hands trying to pull her grip from around his neck. She showed her fangs, and he struggled more.

The Corpse Wore Red, *hah. So much for that series.*

Reaching over to the intercom, she pressed the button.

“I’ll be there in a minute, love. Dessert’s a little friskier than I thought.”

THE END