

Prologue

Aug. 3rd

Ron Langer was having a bad day. From the second his eyes opened that morning his day had been bad. To begin this horrible day, Ron was greeted with charred bacon and eggs so soggy a dog wouldn't even touch them.

"I don't know what's wrong with me this morning," Myrtle had said as she set the plate in front of him. Ron had only glared at his wife.

That soggy breakfast gave him the shits something fierce. Four times that morning he had to pull over his truck to shit in the grass along the road. This annoying situation was only made worse by the heat that summer. Sweat poured down his face while Ron knelt down and unloaded his bowels.

Right after lunch, after Ron's stomach had finally settled down, his tire blew out. Some jackass slammed on his breaks, forcing Ron to swerve to the side to avoid hitting him, and Ron's right front tire hit the curb and blew out. So once again Ron got to enjoy the heat of the day as he changed his tire.

After a miserable day like that, who could blame Ron for being on edge? After all, a man can only take so much. Of course, normally if he got home and found that his

slippers weren't next to his chair, he'd just go find them and leave it at that. But after a day like that one, when half of his misery had been caused by the bitch he'd had the misfortune of marrying, the same bitch, Ron added, who had moved his slippers, well, she had it coming, and that's exactly what he told Officer Hess when he broke down Ron's door after the neighbors heard Myrtle screaming.

Hess listened to Ron's story as he walked the man out to the cruiser. He listened as Ron tried to explain that beating his wife to death was a reasonable punishment for moving his slippers. Normally Hess would listen to this tale with a look of disgust and awe at the things people could do, especially after seeing what was left of Myrtle.

Hess didn't give much of a reaction to Ron's story. Hess wasn't going to go back to the station and tell his friends about the psycho wife beater, because the sad fact of the matter was that Ron's actions almost seemed normal. Over the summer, life in Tacit Falls had taken a turn for the worse.

After four years on the force, Hess considered quitting for the first time, and after living in Tacit Falls for the entire twenty-six years he'd been alive, he considered moving for the first time. Things were changing,

and you didn't need to be a cop and see it first hand to realize something very bad was happening.

"It's her fault, you know?" Ron said from the backseat as Hess pulled out of the driveway, the front door to the house covered in police tape. Other officers should've been with him, but their force was being stretched just a little too thin for that. "You understand, don't you?" Ron pleaded.

"Sure Ron," Hess sighed without glancing back. "You just keep telling yourself that."

Aug. 8th

"Did you hear about the shooting last night?" Sheila asked as she set down her cup of tea. "It was practically down the street from us. I've been telling Ray this area has been going down hill for years, and now we have a shooting of all things."

"I know exactly what you mean," Tammie replied, a cup of tea held in her own pudgy fingers. "It's because of this ghastly heat we've had to endure. Just awful weather."

"And did you hear about Jenny Reynolds?" Sheila smiled at Tammie, fully aware that she hadn't heard about Jenny because almost no one had yet. Being the wife of a police officer gave Sheila access to all kinds of juicy gossip.

"No," Tammie exclaimed, "not Jenny. What happened to her?"

Before, Tammie would've guessed that Jenny had been caught having an affair, or maybe shoplifting, but that summer their gossip had shifted to a darker note. If Sheila mentioned Jenny, the woman was injured or worse.

"Took her own life," Sheila said. She shook her head back and forth in a display of emotional theatrics.

"She didn't!"

The front door drew their attention. "Mums the word on Jenny," Sheila whispered. "No one is supposed to know yet." Tammie's lips formed a knowing smile that said clearly what she planned to do with the information.

Ray walked into the living room, deep bags under his eyes, and stared at the two women.

"How have things been Ray?" Tammie asked.

Ray opened his mouth to say something, but then shook his head and walked up the stairs. The two of them remained silent until they heard the bedroom door close.

"What happened to him?" Tammie asked.

"He's been depressed lately," Sheila said. "What with how bad things have been in the city and all."

"Mom?"

Todd entered the room, his face slightly pale, sniffing as he walked.

"You should be in bed honey," Sheila said.

For the past three days Todd had been sick with the flu. He wore pajamas with a picture of Spiderman on them and held a stuffed lion under his right arm.

"There's a monster in my room," Todd said, still sniffing.

Sheila sighed and glanced over at Tammie. "He's been harping about a monster in his room for the past few weeks." Tammie smiled and nodded.

"Nothing is in your room honey. It's just your imagination." Todd opened his mouth to protest. "But if you really want," Sheila continued, "I'll send dad in to check things out. For now just go back to bed."

Todd wasn't pleased but didn't argue with his mom. He turned and shuffled out of the room while Sheila and Tammie got back to their gossip. He climbed the stairs and walked into his dim bedroom, the shades pulled down to help him sleep.

He climbed into bed and pulled the sheet up to his chin even though the room was hot. He stared at his open closet door and the darkness within it. His father was a cop. He'd make sure nothing hurt Todd.

A boom echoed through the house and Todd stifled a scream of surprise. He pulled the sheet tighter to his chin while he listened to his mother scream his father's name.

His father wasn't coming in to protect him.

Aug. 10th

"How many is this now?"

Officer Tolbert didn't answer his partner. He knelt down and stared into the girl's eyes. He couldn't keep up the eye contact for long before he found himself averting his gaze. When he stood he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"You've been on this case from the beginning, haven't you?" Officer Riley asked. He absently picked up a picture on a small table near the front door and saw the dead girl in happier times.

"Not quite. I've just managed to get lucky enough to be at most the crime scenes."

"It the same guy?"

"Seems so."

According to her driver's license, the victim's name was Kristi Craft. Tolbert snorted and wondered how many times people had joked about her name. She wouldn't have to worry about it anymore.

"God damn it's hot in here," Riley said. They stood in Kristi's home, and Tolbert figured that the air conditioning had been off in the small house for at least a day, probably more. That's how long he thought she had been dead. A rank odor hung around them.

"When are they coming for the body?" Tolbert asked.

Riley let off a hearty laugh. "I'd expect an hour at least, probably more. I heard they got a shooting near the mall. Not sure on the details but I heard three people died. That's where they're probably at right now."

Tolbert ignored his partner and knelt down again to take in the damage done to Kristi. They needed to put more men into investigating the killer. He'd been at it for a while, but he didn't seem to really take off until the summer, and by that point the police were too busy to worry about a serial killer. There was plenty of violence to go around that summer, and more than they were able to handle as it was.

Ropes stretched out her arms and held the body in place. Her legs were tied together, and from all the others Tolbert already knew that she hadn't been raped. Whatever the killer got out of it, sex just wasn't important. Most of her body had been mutilated, only her face left untouched.

"That's some kind of freak," Riley said from behind Tolbert.

"Why don't you go out and try to find out when the others are getting here, okay?"

Riley threw up his hands and started for the door. "Don't take this shit too seriously or you're only going to cause yourself a lot of grief. You've been doing this for long enough Tolbert. You should know that."

He didn't answer. He watched Riley walk out the front door and up to the cruiser. Once Riley was gone Tolbert turned back to Kristi and tried to follow what he knew was good advice. If ever there was a time to keep his calm, that summer was it. Still, there was something about the scene that disturbed him, the way each victim was tied in the exact same way.

It seemed like the city was going just a little insane, but that insanity had no direction. Whoever had set up this freakish display had a purpose, and that scared the shit out of Tolbert.

Aug. 12th

Tom grabbed the drunks left arm while Terry latched onto his right. Three nurses hurried into the small room to

help and within thirty seconds the man was on the floor, still struggling.

"I'm not staying here," he screamed, and a wave of hot, foul smelling breath blew across Tom's face.

"Get the straps," one of the nurses yelled. Tom looked up and watched a nurse at the door hurry off.

The five people there picked up the struggling man and put him on the bed. The nurse who had gone for the straps ran into the room with a box. She handed a strap to each person, and they got to work. Soon the man's arms and legs were bound to the bed.

They backed away, the man unable to move much now, and the other nurses left the small-whitewashed room leaving only Tom. His job had been to make sure the man didn't leave, a job that had become largely meaningless. Now he stayed to make sure the drunk didn't injure himself.

"Please don't make me stay," the drunk said. His roar had become a whisper; rage dwindled into something close to fear. "They'll kill me."

"We only want to help," Tom said, but his heart wasn't in it.

The drunk didn't have anything to worry about. He was only in the hospital until he sobered up. As for the people

coming in for treatment, well, Tom didn't want to think about it.

Things were already bad with the recent rise in violent crimes. On top of that the hospital was starting to get a reputation. They'd had six botched surgeries in the past two months and lost over half of the people who were rushed into the emergency room. Most of this was from a doctor's mistake, and not just one doctor. Everyone was screwing up, Tom included.

Twice while drawing blood Tom accidentally broke the needle off in the patient's arm, and once he nearly gave someone the wrong medication. His mistake was caught in time, and a life was certainly saved because of it. That's why he stayed in the room on guard duty when he normally would be with the other nurses. Tom didn't trust himself.

His sister had told him to get away from it for a while, come visit her, and Tom had to admit he liked the idea. He hadn't seen his niece in far too long. When things quieted down, he told himself, he would take that trip, but right now just wasn't the time.

Over four families were threatening to sue the hospital and one lawsuit had been filed. They were the only hospital in the city. If they went under, Tom didn't know what Tacit Falls would do.

At the very least the drunk would walk out alive. The hospital could still help a drunk sober up, if nothing else.

Tom took up a seat next to the man, let out a long, weary sigh, and put his face in his hands.

Aug. 15th

Five bags of trash were piled in the corner of apartment C6. The hardwood floor was slick with both fresh and dried vomit. Near the trash bags, four sheets had been wadded into a ball, all of them stained with sweat and blood.

In the kitchen the once white tiled floor had turned dark, brownish red. On the kitchen table stacks of plates and bags filled with half eaten fast food had been left out to rot; yet, no insects covered this decaying meal. In fact, not a single insect buzzed around in apartment C6.

Drops of black sludge slowly fell from the faucet and oozed down the drain. Dirty cups covered the countertop, which was also splashed with black, brown, and red liquid, depending on which part of the counter one looked at. The window above the counter, which gave one a beautiful view of the downtown district, had a black sheet draped over it.

In the bedroom the once well-kept bed was without a sheet, the white mattress now yellowish brown. Some clothes were strewn across the floor, many of them stained with dried blood. The only TV in the apartment was normally on the dresser across from the bed; now it was busted on the floor.

Everything was silent in C6 aside from the sound of retching as Sam leaned over the toilet. The mirror above the bathroom sink was shattered, the broken shards collected in the sink.

Not long ago this apartment was clean. Sam woke up each morning bright and early to go to work. He sold insurance and was good at what he did. The life long resident of Tacit Falls had been happy enough, at least on the outside. He didn't let the past trouble him anymore, or at the very least, had come to terms with it.

His ex-co-workers would not have recognized the person bent over the toilet, a thin string of bloody saliva hanging from his chin.

His once thick head of brown hair was nearly gone. Over the past two months Sam's weight of one hundred and ninety eight pounds had been reduced to something just a little over one hundred, if that.

Tears streamed down his emaciated face covered in thin stubble and dirt. Only four teeth remained in his mouth, his gums almost black and rotted. If a doctor got a good look at him they'd question how he was still alive, especially if they knew what had been going on inside apartment C6 over the summer.

Sam didn't know anything about the madness spreading across the city, or the fact that if one traced it, they'd realize that it began around Sam's home and spread outward. He didn't know because he never left his apartment—not anymore.

Many of the things Sam had seen he wrote off as nightmares. Such things couldn't really be happening no matter how real it seemed. The walls didn't crawl with things almost like bugs. Blood didn't pour from the faucet; just as his the mirror hadn't really reflected what he thought it had before he shattered it.

What was happening to him right then also couldn't be happening, no matter how much the pain told him that it was.

More watery blood poured from his throat into the toilet. His stomach bulged inside of him, the pain so great he thought it might've broken open. Sam stumbled to his feet. He took a few shaky steps out of the bathroom towards

the kitchen. He needed water to wash away the horrible taste. Sam couldn't recall the last time he'd put anything into his stomach, not after he saw what was coming out of it. Still, at that moment he needed something to drink.

Sam never made it to the kitchen. He collapsed on the living room floor. The swelling in his stomach traveled up his body. It clogged his throat and stopped him from breathing. Sam fell on his side, gagging in a poor attempt at dispelling the object making its way up his throat.

And then it came out, a massive ball of bloody flesh that splattered wetly onto the floor. There was so much of it; too much given how little he had eaten. No, what he stared at was a mound of his own flesh.

He briefly thought of his brother, and wondered if this was happening to him, too.

All thought cut off. A deep, almost welcoming strength actually came over him as if muscles sprang to life beneath his skin. In the back of his mind a familiar presence awoke, so deep and powerful and beyond Sam's ability to comprehend. He almost welcomed it, the end to his pain, and then the swelling returned in his gut. Sam clutched his stomach and felt as his body tore itself apart.

He tried to scream, but no sound came.