

OCTOBER RUNS RED

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October Runs Red

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The Residents of Stewart Hollow

Carly Simmons – A young and pretty woman who took charge of the annual Halloween Festival at an early age. Her murder is the first in a serial killers sick plan.

Mr. and Mrs. Simmons – Parents who were out of town at the time of their daughter’s death. They were planning a move to Portland in the spring.

Sheriff Ben Carter – The young Sheriff of Stewart Hollow is a loner. He cares for the safety of his town and has never faced crimes this brutal in his career.

Deputy Allan Reed – Second in command to Sheriff Carter. His inexperience with horrific crimes like these echo that of his superior.

Stacy Reed – Allan’s beautiful wife. She works at the local hospital, and seems a little too excited with the suddenly high number of corpses.

Bethany Kidd –The sweet, old receptionist at the police station. The only thing she’s guilty of is having a crush on the mailman.

Kelly Rodgers – A pretty, yet stubborn journalist who keeps trying to break a huge story and get the police to slip up. She loves controversy, but she might have also done something that could upset a madman.

Ashley Penner – A young woman who was old friends with Carly Simmons. Carly’s death leaves her in charge of the festival planning.

Mark Jenson – Ashley’s boyfriend enjoys his holiday traditions and seems to always get off easy when working at the festival. Claims he has ‘a man inside.’

Brady Murphy – Marks best friend just got a job at the Halloween store in town. He shows an occasional shady side to his personality, almost like he’s protecting a secret – or someone.

Brandon Becker – Carly Simmons’ neighbor. He lives with his brother and lied to the police about his whereabouts the night of Carly’s murder.

Aiden Becker – Brandon’s younger brother. Concerned about the lying, he creates his own suspicions about his brother, even though he always has his back.

Bruce Slater – He runs the community center where he employs all of those that are involved with the festival. He loves the tradition and the attention the town receives from the annual celebration.

Ms. Eleanor Cook – An older and more grumpy employee of the community center. She works as more of a servant to Bruce than an actual receptionist.

Abe – A working veteran of the Postal Service, he delivers the mail on time everyday to the police station. He just happens to also deliver them the spark that ignites a bloody massacre.

Kristen Keller and Laura Nelson – Two friends of Ashley’s, who seem to have followed in her footsteps since high school. One’s slightly shy, and the other is a self-centered brat.

Officer Jamie Dart – A rookie cop who has only been on the job for roughly a month. He claims he’s “always looking for that first big break.”

John Blankenship – The owner who turns his general store into a Halloween costume shop every year. He’s willing to let some of his normal business suffer in light of tradition.

Bernard Hopkins – Stewart Hollow’s frustrated Mayor. He tries to stay out of the way throughout the investigation, but all hermits decide to show themselves eventually.

1

September 30th – 11:59 PM

A carved pumpkin sat on a bail of hay on the Simmons' Farm in the cool night. The candle inside was flickering on its last life. Knelt down in front of the pumpkin, a dark figure sat. He'd been watching the house for hours - keeping an eye on Carly Simmons, the beautiful 20-something in charge of the annual Halloween Festival. This would be the last year she would be in charge of anything.

The figure glanced at his watch as it struck midnight. October 1st – it was time to set the plan in motion. October was going to be remembered in Stewart Hollow from now on, but not because of the annual celebration. There was a new tradition taking form.

The figure's palms were sweating and his heart was pounding. It was all part of the experience – the tradition.

He watched as Carly passed by the kitchen window and then stood up. Sheltered by the night, he crept through the yard and towards the house - knife in hand.

October 1st – 10:15 AM

October had begun in Stewart Hollow, Oregon. The summer's warmth was fading faster than usual, and the trees had turned a bright orange-yellow with only hints of green remaining. Dying leaves littered the streets of downtown.

Stewart Hollow was a small town with only one really busy, name-fitting street – Main Street. It was home to dozens of shops and diners. People did all their shopping there instead of heading into the city for the larger franchises.

A beat-up mail truck pulled up along the side of the road where people were walking. It came to a stop and its' hazard lights began to flash. An older man, dressed in the required light blue uniform, stepped out of the truck with a hand full of letters and magazines. He walked two doors down from where he parked to the Sheriff's Department.

Inside, the receptionist sat at her desk. Bethany Kidd was an older woman, and had been with the department for over twenty years.

The mailman walked through the front door, rattling a string of ringing bells. Bethany looked up and smiled.

“Good morning, Abe,” she said in a friendly tone.

Abe smiled back, and dropped the stack of mail on her desk. “Good morning, Bethany. Happy October.”

“Same to you. Bring us anything good today?” Bethany rhetorically asked, while fingering through the stack of letters.

Abe smiled. “The planning committee called me last night. Looks like we’ll be in charge of the bake off this year. Mary has some really good recipes she’s been tinkering with.”

“Like?” Bethany grinned, knowing he wouldn’t tell.

“It’s a secret.”

“C’mon, Abe. Just a little hint?”

“Sorry, Bethany. I’ve sworn an oath to protect Mary’s recipes until the festival.” Abe turned and headed for the door. He tipped his hat on the way out. “Until next time.”

The bells jingled once more as he left.

Sheriff Ben Carter, tall dark and fairly young for his position, approached Bethany’s side. “I bet that if good old Abe there wasn’t married, you’d be all over that. Am I right?”

“All over that?” Bethany laughed at his choice of words and then nodded. “You bet I would.”

Carter laughed, and watched Bethany finish going through the mail. “Anything good?”

She pulled out two letters from the stack and tossed one of them aside – the electric bill.

“That can wait.” Carter joked.

“This one is addressed to the Stewart Hollow Sheriff’s Department.” Bethany handed the letter to Carter. He looked it over for a minute. There was no return address, and it had been postmarked from within the town. What caught his eye was a small pumpkin sticker at the bottom right corner.

“Early Halloween card maybe?” Bethany asked.

“Let’s find out.”

Carter tore it open and pulled out a folded piece of notebook paper. Once unfolded, he stared at a boldly typed message. Bethany saw a look of confusion in his eyes.

“What is it?” She asked, as her playful manner dissipated. He looked up from the letter, and finally laid it out in front of her.

*My demons have a thirst,
And my hands reek of death.
By October 31st,
In peace this town will rest.
Take heed on what I’ve said,
For this October will run red.*

2

October 1st – 11:56 AM

The Stewart Hollow Community Center was buzzing. The gymnasium had filled and everyone was waiting to hear his or her assigned jobs for the festival. It was tradition that on October 1st, everyone who would be involved would receive their job so they could start planning. The festival was only four short weeks away.

The crowd in the gymnasium was growing impatient. A tall man with gray hair stood in front of the crowd. He wore a brown suit with an orange tie. This was Bruce Slater. He had been running the community center for years. Next to him was a younger woman in her mid twenties. Her dark hair rested on her shoulders, and her black-rimmed glasses gave her a very professional appearance. This was Bruce's second in command – Ashley Penner.

Ashley noticed the crowd becoming uneasy. She leaned over and whispered over the noise. "She should be here any second."

Bruce, keeping his eyes in front, whispered back. "Carly knows what time the meeting is. This isn't like her."

“I spoke with her on the phone last night. She was worrying that we were going to be behind schedule. Trust me, she’ll be here.”

“She has two minutes, then we’re starting without her.”

“I’ll give her another call.” Ashley pulled out her iPhone from her pocket and went out into the hall where it was quieter. She dialed and got the voicemail. “Carly, it’s Ashley again. You better get here as soon as you can. Bruce is going to start losing his patience soon and everyone is waiting. You better not have overslept!”

Ashley ended the call and saw two guys walking towards her from the entrance at the end of the hallway.

“Mark!” She called out.

Mark Jenson and his buddy, Brady Murphy, walked in a generically ‘cool’ manner. Mark nodded to his girl.

“Well, hey beautiful.”

The three of them met in the hallway and Mark leaned in to kiss her, but she dodged it.

“What?” he said; his manhood crushed.

“Have you guys seen Carly anywhere?”

“No, we just got here,” Mark said, feathering his hair back.

“Why are you guys even late? The meeting is going to start any second.” She looked from Mark to Brady. Brady was

shorter than his friend, with a nerdy appearance, but he pulled it off well.

“I just got hired at the costume store, so we were checking out the stock.” Brady said.

“Yeah well, you guys are going to be assigned your jobs for the festival, so get in there.” Ashley was all business.

The guys followed Ashley into the gymnasium.

2:56 PM

Sheriff Carter hung up the phone in his office, just as his Deputy, Allan Reed, walked in. Allan was a shorter man, younger, and athletically shaped man. Carter looked up at him. Allan had a strange look on his face.

“What is it?” Carter asked, on the edge of his seat.

“There’s been a murder,” Reed responded.

“Where?”

“The Simmons farm. Carly Simmons was murdered.”

Carter looked at the letter, which was laid out in front of him. He then looked at Reed, who had a look of dread.

“Let’s go.” Carter grabbed his keys.

It was only a five-minute drive to the Simmons farm. When they arrived, the press was there to greet them. The farm had

been quarantined by crime scene tape. Carter went into the house, and Reed held off the media.

The scene was grisly. Carly Simmons was sprawled out on the kitchen floor. She had been stabbed numerous times in her chest, stomach and back. Blood splatter had hit the walls and cabinets and had pooled neatly beneath her body.

Carter walked outside minutes later, removing his latex gloves. He met with Reed by the attached garage.

“There hasn’t been a murder in Stewart Hollow in almost ten years. And now we get one on the same day we receive that letter.” Carter said, looking around at the cluttered mess of reporters, police and medics.

“So you think it’s safe to say they’re connected?” Reed asked.

“It would appear so.” Carter looked around with a purpose. “Where’re the parents?”

Reed pointed over by a police car. Carly’s parents were standing by the car, being questioned by another officer.

“The father’s doing alright, but the mother’s a wreck.” Reed explained.

“Wouldn’t *you* be if your daughter was slaughtered?”

Reed followed Carter over to the parents.

“Mr. and Mrs. Simmons?” Carter asked upon arriving.

They looked up and nodded. Mrs. Simmons' make up had run down her face and Mr. Simmons appeared to have been crying as well.

"I am so sorry for the loss of your daughter," Carter began. "We promise we are going to do everything in our power to catch her killer."

"Who would do such a thing?" Mr. Simmons asked, struggling to hold back his emotions.

"I don't know. Did Carly have any enemies or recent confrontations with anyone?" Carter asked. Reed jotted down notes in his pad behind Carter.

"I...I don't think so."

"Has there been anyone hanging around the house recently that you weren't familiar with? Any frequent visitors?"

Mr. Simmons thought for a moment. "Just our neighbor, Brandon. Brandon Becker. He's been over here a lot lately. I think he had a thing for Carly. She was getting annoyed with him constantly bugging her."

Reed wrote it all down.

"You found her body an hour ago, correct?" Reed asked.

"Yes, Deputy."

"You just got home from a...?"

“Business meeting. We were in Portland for the weekend. We were planning on moving there in the spring.”

“And your wife was with you?”

“Yes.”

“Someone in Portland can confirm this, I trust?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mrs. Simmons had her head buried in her hands. She was starting to lose control.

“When was the last time you spoke with your daughter, Mr. Simmons?” Carter asked.

“Last night around ten or so.”

“Did she act strangely at all?”

“She was hoping Brandon didn’t come over. She also mentioned something about a lit pumpkin out in the yard somewhere.” Mr. Simmons said, forgetting that fact from earlier. He looked around the farm, as did Carter and Reed.

“There!” Reed pointed out into the yard. Sitting in front of the cornfield was a bail of hay with an eerie looking scarecrow sticking out of it. On that bail of hay, sat a pumpkin. The officers made their way to it and examined it.

“What do you think, Sheriff?” Reed asked.

“Let’s get this thing in for fingerprints.”

3:33 PM

Mark Jenson was laying on his couch, shoes off and a bowl of chips on his chest. The late afternoon sun gleamed through the blinds in his living room and placed a glare on his television screen.

Ashley Penner walked into the room from behind him to see a black and white zombie movie on the television. She held a can of cola and sat down next to him, forcing him to adjust on the couch accordingly.

“What are you even watching?” she asked, disgusted by the sight of zombies biting into peoples’ necks.

“Zombie Invasion 4. It’s the 31 days of Halloween marathon. It’s tradition, Ash. If were going to be living together, you have to respect the marathon.” Mark said without once removing his eyes from the screen.

“Well, the only tradition I care about right now is the festival.” She rolled her eyes. “And I see you managed to get ‘Ice Cream Vendor’ again this year. How did you manage that three years in a row?”

“I have a man on the inside,” Mark joked.

“Who?”

“If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you,” he smiled.

Ashley gave him a hard slap on the shoulder, just as her cell phone rang. She stood up and walked the table in the other room of the apartment to grab it.

“Hello?” She answered in a perky tone. She quickly became horrified and quiet. The silence drew Mark’s attention. He looked at her and mouthed:

“What’s wrong?”

Ashley began to cry and she dropped to her knees. Mark was instantly by her side. “What’s wrong, Ash?”

“Carly’s dead!” Ashley cried, and buried her head into Mark’s chest as he hugged her tight.

5:59 PM

Sheriff Carter sat in his office, typing up his report. Deputy Reed entered the room with a knock. He leaned in and dropped the mysterious envelope on his desk.

“Any luck?” Carter asked with little hope in his voice.

“Aside from us and a few postal employees, there are no other fingerprints on it. Same with the pumpkin - it’s clean.”

“Well then.” Carter said, disappointed with the results. “I’m going to head over to Brandon Becker’s house, ask him a few questions. You want to come?”

“Can’t. I need to finish my report then I told Bethany I’d give her a ride home.”

“Suit yourself.”

6:20 PM

Carter arrived at the Becker house at dusk. The sun was setting and the air had cooled down quite noticeably. Leaves blew across the yard as Carter made his way to the front door. He knocked then looked off to his right where he could see the Simmons house across the field.

The door opened up and a young man in his twenties stood on the other side. He dressed in a red hooded sweatshirt and jeans torn at the knees.

“Can I help you?” he asked, confused by the sudden police presence.

“Are you Brandon Becker?”

“No, I’m his brother, Aiden.”

“Is Brandon home?”

“Sure, hang on.” Aiden turned and called for his brother. Moments later, Brandon arrived in the doorway. He was taller than Aiden, and wore an oversized white v-neck and kakis.

“Yes?” Brandon asked.

“Brandon, I’m Sheriff Ben Carter with the Stewart Hollow Sheriff’s Department. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about your neighbor, Carly Simmons.”

“Sure, why?” Brandon’s eyes began to shift in an uncomfortable manner. “Is everything alright?”

“She was murdered last night. The time of death appears to be around midnight,” Carter said, noticing Aiden looming behind his brother in the doorway.

“Oh my God.” Brandon appeared to get weak in the knees. He took a step back.

“I understand you frequently visited Carly. Is there any chance you were there last night?”

“No, no.” Brandon tried to settle his thoughts down. “I didn’t leave the house last night. I was here with Aiden the whole time.”

Carter glanced back at Aiden, who nervously nodded in agreement. Carter’s eyes returned to Brandon. “I was told you had a crush on Carly. Is that true?”

“Uh, yeah, kind of.”

“Are you aware that Carly’s family was thinking about relocating to Portland in the spring?”

“Yeah, she told me.” Brandon said.

“Did that upset you?” Carter asked.

“A little bit. But not enough to kill her, if that’s what you’re implying, Sheriff.” Brandon was obviously offended by Carter’s questioning.

“Okay, okay, calm down. I’m not accusing you of anything.” Sheriff Carter looked at Aiden once again, who strangely kept quiet. “Well, if either of you guys can think of anything you’d like to say, or maybe if you saw someone strange hanging around the farm lately, just give us a call.”

Brandon nodded, as did his brother.

“Take care, boys.” Carter tipped his hat and retreated to his car.

Brandon shut the door. He stood inside with Aiden, who looked at his brother curiously.

“You weren’t here last night,” Aiden firmly stated.

Brandon looked into his brother eyes and then walked in the other direction.

“Where were you last night, Brandon?”

Brandon stopped in the hall, with his back still facing his brother. “Just mind your own business, Aiden.”

Brandon walked down the hallway and out of sight.

3

October 3rd – 7:13 AM

The sun broke the horizon over the mountainous backdrop of Stewart Hollow. The sky was filled with an ocean of pink and orange. A cool wind blew down from the mountains and engulfed the town in an early autumn chill.

The town had sat for a day, mourning the loss of one of their own, and grasping the idea that the murderer was still out there.

8:30 PM

The day ended with no surfacing clues or persons of interest. There was a bit of an uneasy feel throughout the town – a nauseating thought of dread and nerves on edge.

The community center – about a mile away from the police station – was holding a candlelight vigil for Carly Simmons. The gymnasium was packed full of friends and family. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons sat in the front row, holding each other tightly. Sitting on a small table in front of them, surrounded by flowers of all different colors, was a picture of Carly looking beautiful, young and undeserving of death.

Down the row from the Simmons' sat Ashley. Mark sat by her side, comforting her every few seconds. Sitting by Ashley on the

other side were two of her friends – Kristen Keller, and Laura Nelson. They felt sympathy for their friend and for Carly

Standing once again at the podium in front of the crowd was Bruce Slater. Dressed appropriately, and now donning glasses, he read from a stack of index cards.

“Good evening,” he said, clearing his throat. “On behalf of the community center of Stewart Hollow, I would like to thank everyone in attendance tonight for coming out and showing their support for the Simmons family.

“Carly Simmons was heavily involved in her community. Some of you may not know that the Halloween Festival was actually her creation 15 years ago when she was ten years old. She has looked at it ever since like it was her own child. It’s amazing that something such a young mind came up with, has stuck over the years and is cherished now by the entire town.

“So in Carly’s memory, we shall continue to make this years festival the most memorable one yet.”

Bruce cleared his throat once again, and addressed Carly’s parents eye to eye. “And to Carly’s parents, we are deeply sorry for your loss, and we offer you hope, courage and all of our prayers as your family deals with this horrible tragedy.”

The crowd clapped respectfully. Not before long, the crowd had dismissed themselves from their seats, mingled in the gym

and the hallways, and snacked on refreshments in the commons room.

Ashley stood in the gym with her arms around Mark's waist. Kristen and Laura stood close – as did Brady. They told fond memories of Carly, all of which brought tears to their eyes.

Ashley looked over by the door at a glance, and noticed Brandon Becker standing by the exit. He turned and walked out into the hallway.

“I’ll be right back,” Ashley said.

In the hallway, Brandon was walking towards the exit. Ashley called to him and he turned to face her.

“Hey.” Brandon was obviously depressed, and torn up over the death.

“Are you alright?” Ashley asked.

“I’ll live. I’m just confused.”

There was a silence for a moment.

“Did Carly ever say anything about, you know?” Brandon asked.

“She was confused too. She didn’t know what to think of everything. She wanted to like you and I know somewhere down the line she would have wanted it to work out. But...”

Brandon stopped her by putting his hand up. He turned and left for the exit.

“Brandon wait!” Ashley called out, but she couldn’t stop him. He walked out of the community center and into the night.

Ashley shook her head then joined her friends again.

10:45 PM

The gathering of Stewart Hollow’s residents had diminished to all but a handful. In the office, Mark and Brady sat on the floor against the wall discussing Brady’s new job. Ashley, Kristen and Laura sat around a desk.

“So the police have no idea who did it?” Kristen asked. She and Laura had been friends with Ashley since high school. There was always a bit of jealousy in the mix, as Ashley seemed to be the leader of the group. Kristen and Laura acted as followers and pretended to be fine with it.

“Not that I’ve heard,” Ashley began, “But they probably wouldn’t tell me anyway. I’ll have to hear it from Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, although, I’m not really on great terms with the family anymore.”

“Why not?” Laura said, enticed by the idea of something not going right for Ashley.

“We just...grew apart.” Ashley gave no specific reason why.

Mark jumped up from the floor, and brushed his clothes off.

“Hey, Ash,” he said, “I’m heading home. See you there soon?”

“I’m coming.” She said, standing up from the desk chair. “I’ll see you girls tomorrow, right?”

“I am, right back here.” Kristen said.

Ashley walked over to Mark, throwing on a light jacket. She looked at Brady, who stood up. “Do we have to give him a ride?”

“Nah, I got my own wheels.” Brady said.

“You mean your bike?” Mark asked, getting a small chuckle from the girls.

“Hey, I’m helping the environment.” A cocky smile grew on Brady’s face.

“By helping the environment, you mean you have no gas money.” Mark got another chuckle from the girls.

Brady slapped Mark on the arm.

“A slap? What are you, gay?” Mark laughed, looking for another laugh.

“Alright guys, come on. I have to get to bed.” Ashley said, breaking up the ensuing fake fight. Ashley pushed Mark out of the office, and Brady followed. Brady dodged out of the way as an older woman entered the room as they left.

“Oh, Ms. Cook? We didn’t know you were still here.” Laura said, surprised to see her so late at the community center.

Ms. Cook had worked at the center for years as a receptionist. She found herself more of a go-to employee for Bruce than an actual respected receptionist.

“Yeah, I’m still here. It seems like I’m always still here.” Ms. Cook said angered, in a sweet old lady tone. It was hard to take her serious. “I have to find all of the Halloween sound effects CD’s for Bruce by tomorrow.”

“Aren’t they in the storage room?” Kristen asked.

“You’d think so, but no. They’re missing.”

“That’s where I saw them last.” Laura said.

Ms. Cook stopped and looked at Laura.

“Are you stupid, young lady? I just said they’re missing.”

Laura rolled her eyes as Ms. Cook scoured the room. Ms. Cook looked back at them, baffled. “What are you two still doing here anyway? Everyone else is gone.”

Laura stumbled over her words, afraid of making Ms. Cook angry again.

“We were just leaving,” Kristen said. She grabbed Laura by the arm and they left.

“See you tomorrow, Ms. Cook.” Laura tried to get back on her good side before her exit.

“Yeah, yeah.” Ms. Cook wished them away. Moments later, she was the only one in the building. She searched high and low for the CD’s.

She made her way back to the storage room, and opened box after box. She was becoming frustrated and started talking to herself:

“Maybe it’s a good thing I can’t find the darn CD’s. If I have to hear this town obsess themselves once more with *‘The Monster Mash’*, I’ll go crazy!”

In the heat of annoyance, she tossed a box full of fake spiders against the wall. They scattered all over the room.

Breaking the silence in the building was the PA system. It crackled just long enough to grab Ms. Cook’s attention. She looked up into the corner of the ceiling where the speaker was, and *‘The Monster Mash’* began to play throughout the community center.

Outside the storage room, someone was waiting.

4

October 4th – 9:23 AM

The early hours of October 4th seemed to drag on forever. The discovery of Ms. Cook's slain body at the community center sent the town into a panic. Two residents of Stewart Hollow had been murdered in a matter of three days. The town was not used to crimes like these.

Sheriff Carter sat at his desk frantically trying to catch up on his reports. His left over Chinese food sat opened on his desk, irritating everyone's senses in the department. Officers shuffled through the station with clear plastic bags of evidence, files, crime scene photographs, and for some, their third or fourth cup of coffee.

Bethany Kidd waddled into Carter's office with a stack of papers. She dropped them on his desk and turned to leave just as Deputy Allan Reed entered. He made himself at home.

"It's out of control out there. The media is practically breaking down our doors. They want all kinds of information." Reed said, flustered.

"We'll, they're going to have to wait. They won't know anything until we know something." Carter set his pen down and rubbed his eyes. "Any fingerprints at the community center?"

“Hundreds. Anyone who had any kind of respect for Carly Simmons was there last night. And that’s a good majority of the town,” Reed quickly responded, expecting to be hit with the typical questions.

“Security footage?”

“Bruce Slater says those cameras have not worked in years.”

“Why hasn’t he gotten those fixed? What the purpose of having security cameras if you don’t plan on securing anything.” Carter was obviously upset.

“This is odd, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve lived in Stewart Hollow for five years. I’ve never seen anything like this. I’ve never professionally had to deal with anything like this,” Reed said, adjusting in his chair. “Ten years, this town went without a murder. Why now?”

Carter shook his head, not sure exactly what to say. Bethany appeared in the doorway again, this time with a visitor. She was with a tall, blonde beauty, dressed in hospital scrubs.

“Deputy, your wife is here,” Bethany said before leaving again. Reed stood up, and greeted his wife with a kiss.

“Hey sweetheart,” Reed said.

Stacy Reed was in her early 30s and stunning in every way imaginable. She had a brown paper bag with her, folded over at the top. She handed it to him.

“Your lunch!” She spoke in a very chipper tone. She turned to Carter. “Good morning, Sheriff.”

Carter smiled in return.

“Well, I can’t stay. Busy day at the hospital – as you two already know.” She kissed Reed on the cheek. “See you at home?”

“You’re just going to run?” Reed asked, curious about her extremely short visit.

“It’s chaos down there,” Stacy said, as three officers in a hurry stumbled by the office, arguing. “Once again, as you two can imagine.”

“We’ll, alright,” Reed said.

“I’ll see you at home later.”

They shared one more passionate kiss, and then she was gone. Reed turned back to Carter with a huge smile on his face.

“Don’t be jealous, Sheriff. I know I’m a lucky man.”

“Wipe that dumb smirk off your face, Allan,” Carter said, shaking a smile from his face. “How’s she liking the job here? I mean - it’s no Seattle.”

“She loves it, but she says she wants more experience in the field. She’s actually been talking about moving back to Washington.”

“That means you’d be moving too?”

“That’s too far down the road right now. I’d hate to leave here. I love it here. But in a marriage, I guess you have to compromise.”

Carter nodded. Bethany’s voice came of the intercom: “Sheriff, these reporters are out of control. The phones are ringing off the hook. Are you going to address them soon?”

“I’ll get on it, Beth,” Carter responded.

Carter stood up and took a deep breath. “Time to calm the storm.”

Noon

The North Hollow general store at the corner of Main Street and Delta Place had been transformed into a costume shop for the season, as it always does. The owner was willing to let some of his normal business drop for the month in favor of tradition. There were plenty of other drug stores in the area where people could shop.

The sky was starting to cloud up over the town, and Ashley and Mark jogged down the Main Street sidewalk, holding hands as they ducked into the general store, trying to avoid any rain.

Inside, it was busy. It was still early in the month, but the store was still jam-packed with children trying on costumes, and parents telling them to “put it back, it’s too expensive!”

Brady Murphy stood behind the counter, ringing up a family of customers. They seemed pleased with their purchases, and then left. Ashley and Mark walked up to the counter, trying to catch Brady between costumers.

“Hey guys.” Brady saw them coming.

“Hey, buddy. How’s business?” Mark asked.

“Busy – as you can tell. We’ve been mobbed today, and it’s only noon.”

“When do you go on break? Can you grab lunch or something?” Ashley asked.

“I can’t. I...I’m probably going to skip my lunch today.” Something in Brady’s voice was a little off, and it caught Mark’s attention.

“Skip lunch?” Mark asked.

“Yeah, I need all the money I can get right now, and Mr. Blankenship is fine with the overtime. No gas money, remember?”

Mark nodded in agreement. Brady quickly changed the subject with a sense of urgency in his voice.

“Did you guys hear about Ms. Cook?”

“No. What happened?” Ashley asked, not expecting the worst.

Brady explained what he had heard. Silence fell between the three.

4:59 PM

Sheriff Carter had arranged for a press conference to begin promptly at five. In front of the Sheriff's department, he had set up a podium. All of the towns' media sources were there. Radio crews, newspaper journalists, and news reporters with their cameramen were all gathered around being lightly dampened by a misty drizzle.

Carter stood at the podium, waiting for his watch to strike five o'clock. Deputy Reed stood by his side, standing straight up with his arms crossed.

Carter glanced at his watch as the second hand hit the twelve. He looked forward and saw all the little red lights on the cameras ignite. He bent forward slightly, and spoke into the dozen or so bundled microphones.

"Good afternoon to all of you. I am going to address the recent events briefly, and take limited questions. Please do not take offense if I don't answer your question in full, or at all, as we are still filtering through piles of evidence."

He had the crowds' full attention, and continued. "Four days ago, on the 1st of October, Carly Simmons was found murdered at her parents farmhouse. There was nothing left behind at the scene of the crime that has been any help to us. This morning, the body of Ms. Eleanor Cook was found at the community

center. The coroner puts her time of death somewhere between 10 PM last night, and 3 AM this morning. Once again, there was not much left at the scene to help us come to any conclusions. I want the residents of Stewart Hollow to know we are doing everything in our power to track a lead and solve these unexpected and horrible crimes. We have dozens of officers working around the clock, trying to make you feel like you still live in a safe community. I will now take just a couple of questions.”

The crowd went crazy, raising their arms like grade school students, and shouting out their questions all in unison. Carter picked out a man from the crowd, near the front.

The man adjusted his tie, and spoke into his microphone. His cameraman was rolling. “Joseph Bright - Channel 10 News. Can you confirm that you currently have no suspects or persons of interest?”

“Correct. We currently have no suspects,” Carter said, then picking another question from the noisy crowd. This time it was a young woman, dressed spiffy, and holding a pen and pad of paper.

“Kelly Rodgers with the Hollow Gazette. There are rumors of a letter that your department received, prophesizing upcoming murders. Is that true?”

Carter's heart dropped. He was floored by the question. *How did that information get out?* He turned to Reed, who shrugged at him, just as baffled.

"Uh," Carter mumbled. His thoughts were jumbled now by the surprise inquiry.

"Sheriff, you have to be honest with the community. Any bit of information can help with a clue, or a lead. Is the letter rumor true?" Kelly Rodgers asked again, staying calm. The crowd settled down, as this was the first time the majority of them had heard the rumor.

Carter cleared his throat. "Our department did receive a letter on the morning of October 1st. I will not describe the letter in detail, but yes, it did hint at possible crimes."

The crowd roared. Questions were being tossed around in every direction. "What kind of crimes?" "How many murders?" "Will the killer strike again?"

Carter became overwhelmed. "One more question, and that's it." He looked out among the crowd and picked on one last journalist.

"Brent Tiles, Channel 4 News. I think it's safe to say with the letter your department received, the same killer is responsible for both murders. Do you currently know what connection the two victims had with each other, and do you think the killer will strike again?"

“We have not found a strong connection between Carly Simmons and Eleanor Cook, other than they both worked at the community center. As for the second part of your question, I cannot answer that at this time. We simply do not have enough information to address that.”

“If you don’t act soon, Sheriff, someone else might turn up dead!” Brent Tiles yelled over the noisy crowd.

“Thank you all for your time. We’ll address the public again if we have any major breaks in the case.” Carter stepped down from the podium and retreated back into the station; Reed followed.

Inside the station, officers stood around waiting to see Carter’s reaction. Carter took off his wet coat and hung it on the wall. He looked at this crew.

“Everyone better stop staring, and get to work. We have a very upset community and a looming threat,” he said, frustrated. The department went back to work. Carter turned to the receptionists’ desk where Bethany sat, quiet.

“Did you tell anyone about the letter we received?” He questioned her with authority.

Bethany hesitated then spoke softly, trying to explain herself. “I didn’t think much of it at the time. The press kept calling and I told them what I could just to get them to stop calling.”

Carter shook his head, and retreated to his office.

5

October 7th – 8:30 AM

The streets sat damp, collecting wet leaves in the gutters. The air was cool and the sun hid behind the gray clouds, casting a delicate purple hue over the town.

A flock of birds screamed through the sky over the Becker's farm. Aiden Becker was out in his front yard, raking up a pile of wet leaves.

The wind began to pick up slightly, injecting a chill into the air. Aiden flipped up the hood on his sweatshirt and covered his head. The front door to his home opened, and Brandon came walking out with his car keys in hand. He zipped up his jacket and walked down the sidewalk to his car.

“Brandon! Where are you going?” Aiden asked, laying the rake down on the grass.

“I just have to run into town for a bit.” Brandon seemed to be in a hurry.

“For what?”

“Look, I’ll be back in a little bit, alright?”

Brandon opened the car door, got in, and started the engine.

“Brandon!” Aiden yelled, rushing to the cars side. His brother looked up at him. “Why are you sneaking around? I mean, you leave at strange hours, you don’t come back for hours at a time, and you lied to the police about where you were when Carly was...”

“Stop, Aiden!” Brandon said, shutting the car door. Aiden knocked on the window, and Brandon rolled it down. “What?”

“What’s going on with you?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I’m your brother, man. You can talk to me. Did you...”

Brandon waited for his brother to finish the question, but he never did. “I’ll see you later.”

Brandon rolled up the window and sped off down the driveway, kicking up dirt. Aiden stood in the dusty cloud, watching his brother drive away.

11:00 AM

Ashley Penner drove up to the community center and parked her yellow Beetle in the lot. She grabbed her purse and walked by a couple of idle police cars and into the building.

Bruce Slater stood in the hallway talking to a couple of officers. Ashley smiled at him as she made her way into the office.

Kristen and Laura were in the office - each sitting at their own desk. Kristen was on her cell phone speaking quietly. Laura stood up from her desk as Ashley made her way in. There were four carved pumpkins on her desk, creatively carved. An empty spot in the center split the four pumpkins into pairs of two.

“Hey, Ash. Where’s Mark?” Laura asked.

“He’ll be here.”

Laura handed her a folder. Ashley opened it and looked at the papers. “What’s this?” She asked.

“It’s the permit to begin erecting the booths and stands in the fairgrounds for the festival,” Laura said. “Since Carly is no longer with us, that puts you in charge. You need to sign the bottom so I can run this to the Mayor’s office today.”

“You got it.” Ashley grabbed a pen and happily signed her name. “When can they start building?”

“Today, if the Mayor approves. If they start today, it would only take until the end of the week to complete. Then we can bring in the decorators and assign booths.”

“Good deal,” Ashley said closing the folder and handing it back to Laura.

Bruce graced the office with his presence. “Alright, ladies, listen up.”

Kristen hung up her cell phone instantly, trying not to get caught at work.

“I just got done speaking with the police. There is no current threat to delay the festival, so that’s a plus. I’d hate to lose the festival for this year. People look forward to it,” Bruce explained. “With the recent tragic events, I would like to give the town a great festival this year. We have to remind them what Stewart Hollow is all about and known for. Maybe we can take their minds off of the murders for a bit.”

“You just want us to forget about the murders?” Laura asked, shocked at what she had just heard. “Ms. Cook worked here for over 10 years, and Carly was the sole creator of the festival. How can we just ‘take our minds off it’?”

“I didn’t mean for it sound like that, Laura. What better way to honor the deceased than with a great festival.”

Still in disagreement, Laura stood back and crossed her arms.

“Ashley, did you sign the permit?” Bruce asked.

“Yes.”

“Then Laura, would you *please* take it to the Mayor and get the approval. I want to start the construction immediately,” Bruce said, clapping his hands together once before leaving the room.

11:16 AM

The costume store was busy again. Kids were running around, and parents were trying to catch them. Brady stood

behind the counter with his phone out, texting. His boss came around the corner of one of the isles, holding a pile of plastic masks. He slammed them down on the counter, catching Brady off guard. He slid his phone back into his pocket.

“Texting? Really, Brady?” he said with a lifted brow.

“Sorry, John. I was just...”

John Blankenship interrupted him, “You know what, I really don’t want to know. The less I know about my employee’s personal lives, the better. Look, can you check some prices on these items for me? All the stickers keep getting ripped off by these stupid kids.”

“Sure thing.” Brady said, starting to sort through the masks.

“Any big plans for Halloween?” John asked. He acted like the typical ‘cool’ boss, trying to be more of a friend to his employee’s than an actual supervising figure.

“Besides the festival? Oh, I don’t know. I’m sure we’ll find our way to Ruins Avenue.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s a house on Ruins Avenue – they say it’s haunted. It sounds pretty cool actually.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“This guy I know told me about it. I guess he use to go all the time with his brother through high school.”

“Well,” John laughed, “have fun with that.”

Brady chuckled and John walked away back down a crowded aisle. At the other end of the aisle, Brandon Becker stood. He was holding a package of Halloween decorations, but kept looking up at Brady. He'd stare at him then would look back down at the decorations. He did this for a few minutes, until a small line of people began to form at the counter. He put down the package, and left the store.

October 8th – 9:00 AM

The fairgrounds next to the community center were crowded. Pick up trucks were scattered everywhere with people unloading wood, banners and pieces of the booths. Construction had begun on the festival's home turf.

Bruce Slater was walking through the fairgrounds with Ashley and Mark by his side. He had a clipboard that he was jotting notes down on, picking apart everything he was seeing wrong.

“Ashley, do all of the festival volunteers know their jobs? I want to make sure they all know. Maybe we'll have them come in for another orientation next week or something.” Bruce spoke, only half paying attention to what he was saying.

“I am pretty sure everyone knows, Bruce,” Ashley said, humoring him, and making a funny face at Mark at the same time.

“Well, send out a memo or something. Call them all to double check, will you?”

“I will do that.”

“Hey! No, no! I want the cider stands to all be next to each other! People shouldn’t have to go all over the place to get a freaking drink! Amateurs!” Bruce was yelling as he rushed off to a couple volunteers who were moving an apple cider stand.

Mark put his arm around Ashley’s shoulder. “Uh, I’m not sure, but I think Bruce might be a little too obsessed with this festival.”

“Oh, you are correct, sir,” she said.

“You don’t have to send me a memo. I already know my job.”

“Ice cream vendor is hardly a job, Mark. Switch with Brady or something. Do something different for change.”

“What does Brady have?”

“He’s suppose to dress up like a scarecrow and walk around, entertaining the kids.”

“Um, I’ll pass. I’d rather make kids happy with ice cream, than scare them to death.”

The two joked around until Bruce came back over.

“Uh-oh, party’s over,” Mark said, removing his hand from Ashley’s shoulder.

2:50 PM

Sheriff Carter pulled his cruiser up in front of the police station. He walked in and was met by a young officer.

“Sheriff.” The officer greeted him. He was fairly new, and Carter didn’t know all of the rookies by name yet.

“Yes, officer...”

“Dart. Jamie Dart,” the young man said, stuttering just a bit.

“What can I do for you, Jamie Dart?”

“Well, I have a theory I’d like to run by you.”

“About the murders?”

“Yes, sir.”

Carter nodded, and decided to give him a chance. “Come to my office.”

Carter sat behind the desk in his office, and Dart sat across from him.

“You’ve been here about two months now, right?” Carter asked.

“Yes, sir,” Dart replied.

“What kind of work have they had you doing?”

“Mainly file work. I’m not getting much experience in the field, but I guess that’ll come in time.”

“It sure will. Have you been on patrol yet?”

“Once, back in September. I wish it were more often though. I’m always looking for that opportunity – that first big break, you know?”

“I know. We’ve all been there. So, what was your theory?”

Dart sat up in his chair. “Well, I was looking into the murders a little bit, trying to find a connection between Carly Simmons and Eleanor Cook.”

“What did you find?” Carter asked, giving Dart his moment.

“Well, the only obvious connection is they both work for the community center. They weren’t in the same group of peers – except for fellow employees. I’m talking about out of work. Carly was in her twenties and had her friends. Ms. Cook was elderly with no immediate family in the area. She kept to herself mostly.”

Carter was all ears and interested.

“So putting all of that aside, this is what caught my attention. The autopsy reports indicated that the victims possibly put up a struggle, right?”

“Yes, the coroners report mentioned maybe a slight struggle,” Carter said.

“The two deceased were female. One was young and lean, and the other was old and weak. That means very easy targets for a

male killer – no struggle. He would have been able to come in and claim his victims with no problem.”

Carter was paying close attention.

“However, at the same time, the chosen victim’s would have been an even match for a female killer. Maybe someone roughly the same size, same build, the same weight. There might have been a slight struggle, as the report indicated.” Dart sat back. “What do you think, Sheriff?”

Carter pondered it for a moment. “It’s interesting for sure. A female killer.” He stood up. “Are you ready for an assignment?”

Dart stood to his feet.

“We don’t have much to go on right now. No clues, no suspects. We haven’t even made an arrest yet. We need to make the public feel safe and make it look like we’re making progress. Why don’t you go to the community center and interview the women who work there. It might end up leading to nothing, but at the same time, we may be able to grab something, anything from it.”

“You got it, Sheriff.” Dart excitedly said. He saluted Carter and left the office. Carter smiled and shook his head.

9:55 PM

Stewart Hollow sat in the night. With a cool and quiet wind blowing down Main Street, and crying cats in the alleys, the last costumer walked out of the North Hollow general store.

Inside, most of the lights had been turned off. Brady was counting the cash in the register. John walked by the counter, putting his jacket on.

“It’s getting colder out there. You have jacket, right?” John asked.

“Yeah, I’m good.” Brady responded.

“Alright, Brady, make sure you lock the front and back doors when you leave. Don’t make it too much longer, though, I set the alarm for a little after ten.”

“You’re leaving already?” Brady asked.

“Yeah. I can’t keep my girl waiting.” John winked at him. “I’m sure you know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah,” Brady blushed.

“You don’t want to make them mad.” John walked for the door. “You’ll be here in the morning, right?”

“Yeah, but I have to stop by the community center first. I’m working the festival this year, so I have to get all my information.”

“What is your job anyway?”

“Don’t ask. I have to dress up as a scarecrow.” Brady was obviously embarrassed by his specific involvement in the festival.

“You’re the mascot?” John laughed. “Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

John left and the store was dead quiet. Brady looked around at all of the scary masks and costumes staring back at him in the dimly lit store. He looked back down and finished counting the money.

Brady stepped outside and leaned against the wall. He lit up a cigarette, inhaled deep, and let the smoke ease back out of his mouth and into the night. He heard footsteps coming from his right. He turned, and underneath the streetlights, Brandon Becker emerged. He leaned up against the wall with Brady.

“I thought you would have come by today,” Brady said, taking another puff.

“I was with Aiden all day. I came by yesterday, but you were busy,” Brandon responded.

“I haven’t seen much of you.”

“Well, I’ve been kind of confused.”

Brady turned and faced Brandon. “You haven’t told Aiden yet, have you? “

“I haven’t told anyone.”

“I don’t think this can work then.”

Brandon looked at Brady with a sense of shame.

“Do you like me? Or do you not like me?” Brady asked firmly.

“Brady, this whole thing is new to me. I had a crush on Carly for almost seven years. Then you came, and...”

“You’re ashamed of yourself, aren’t you?”

“You must be too! You haven’t told any of your friends or family.”

Brady turned and faced forward, putting the cigarette back into his mouth.

“You just have to let me get to that point on my own. That is, if I ever even get there.”

Brady blew out more smoke and turned back to Brandon once again. “I hope you do.”

Brandon leaned in and kissed Brady.

Across the street, hidden in the dark shadows on an alley, Aiden stood. He watched in shock as his older brother, the guy he had looked up to all his life, kissed another man. Brandon’s secret life was starting to unfold. Aiden hung his head, disappointed and appalled.

The deep clearing of a man’s throat caught Aiden’s attention. He lifted his head quickly, glancing around to see if someone saw him standing there. There was nobody. He leaned out of the alley and noticed a dark figure sitting on a sidewalk bench about

ten yards away. The figure sat with one leg resting on the other. He seemed to be watching Brandon and Brady. The man cleared his throat again, and Aiden cowered back into the alley.

The figure sitting on the bench turned and looked at the dark alley, but saw no one. He then faced forward again, watching Brandon and Brady.

6

October 9th – 5:54 AM

The phone rang in Sheriff Carter’s quiet and dark bedroom. The rapidly blinking green lights on the phone illuminated the room for seconds at a time. Carter rustled out of his sleep, and ripped the phone from the machine on his nightstand.

“Hello?” he said, barely awake.

“Sheriff, it’s Bethany.”

“What’s going on? It’s not even six yet?” Carter said, glancing quickly at the clock radio as it changed to 5:55 AM.

“There’s been another murder.”

Carter froze. His gut told him this was inevitable.

Carter sped through town with his sirens blaring, waking up everyone in the town. He arrived on Main Street at a quarter after six. He fought his way through a crowd of onlookers who were yanked out of their sleep by an army of police cruisers, fire trucks and paramedics. Crime scene tape had been strung around the North Hollow General Store, and the onlookers were kept across the street by more caution tape and officers.

Red and blue lights from the emergency vehicles were flashing all over the block, acting as strobe lights, bouncing their reflections off of windows and cars parked in the street. A news van sat across the street with a reporter and photographer arguing with police, trying to get closer.

Carter stopped his cruiser and jumped out, ducking under the police tape and racing up to the store.

“Sheriff!” a voice called out from behind him. Carter stopped and turned around to see Deputy Reed hopping out of the passenger’s seat of his wife’s car. He slammed the door shut and chased after Carter. Stacy Reed sat in her car for a moment, looking at the mess on Main Street before a couple officers approached her and told her to move.

Reed caught up with Carter. “Bethany called me. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. I just got here.”

Carter and Reed jogged up to the scene together, and were ultimately horrified when they saw the body.

A young man had been hung; a thick rope wrapped sloppily around his neck. He dangled from the second floor of the store. Twisted around the rope was a string of orange and purple holiday lights. Blood covered the man’s front and back, still dripping from the body and into a pool of red on the sidewalk below.

“Oh my God,” Reed said. Carter stood speechless, looking up at the latest victim.

An officer rushed by the two of them, and Carter grabbed him by the arm.

“Who is that?” Carter said, referencing the deceased.

The officer was in a rush, but quickly spilled all he knew.

“We identified him as Brady Murphy. He worked at the store. He was closing last night, and that’s the last time anyone saw him. The owner left a few minutes early. He was the last one to see Brady alive as far as we can tell at this time. The owner showed up early this morning to do his weekly cleaning and arrived to this.”

“Where is he now?” Carter asked.

“He’s over there with Dart.” The officer pointed across the street where Dart was talking to John by a police car.

“Thank you.” Carter jogged off. Reed looked at the body once more then joined Carter.

John sat in the car with his feet hanging out the side.

“You were Brady’s boss, right?” Carter asked.

“Yes. My name is John Blankenship.”

“You were here with Brady last night?”

“Correct. I told him to lock up the store after I left.”

“Tell us about Brady real quick. Was he a good employee? Hard worker?” Reed asked.

“He was great employee; a little weird at times though. I kind of always got the impression he was gay. He was suppose to work tomorrow, but had to stop by the community center first.” John explained.

“The community center? Why?” Carter asked as his interest piqued.

“Well, he worked there part-time. He was going to be working with the Halloween Festival this year,” John said, watching Carter’s reaction.

“Really?” Carter pondered on that for a moment, then looked at Officer Dart.

Dart was starting to catch on. “All three victims worked for the community center.”

“And all three victims were directly involved with the festival,” Reed added.

“Exactly,” Carter said with a small glimmer of hope in his emotions.

1:30 PM

A small, carved pumpkin sat on the windowsill of the police station, facing out into the streets. Bethany Kidd lit a match and removed the top of the pumpkin. She lowered the match in and

brought the pumpkin to life. Blowing out the match, she placed the lid back on it.

Carter stood behind her with a hot cup of coffee in his hand. “Bethany, I’ve calling a meeting. I’d like you there so we’re all on the same page with this situation.”

“You got it, Sheriff.”

Soon after, everyone in the office had gathered around. Carter stood in front of his department with Deputy Reed by his side. The group was chatty. Carter cleared his throat, quieting down the room. All eyes were on him. Behind him was a dry erase board with names, locations and dates written on it – all detailing the murders.

“Alright. I wanted to get everyone up to date with the current situation, and let you all know what we plan to do now. On October 1st, we received a letter – or a poem, if you will – threatening violence on our town throughout the month. So far, this has come true. On October 1st, we were called to the Simmons farm where we found the body of Carly Simmons. She’d been stabbed multiple times.”

Carter turned around and referenced the dry erase board before continuing. “Three days later on the on the morning of October 4th, we found Ms. Eleanor Cook stabbed to death at the community center where she worked. The security system had not worked in some time, so that, along with the lack of fingerprints and witnesses didn’t fair too well for us. Now, this

morning, we have our third homicide in the last nine days. Brady Murphy was found stabbed several times, and hung from the second story of the North Hollow General Store where he worked. I will now pass the torch to my Deputy, Allan Reed for his further analysis.”

Carter stepped aside, and Reed took center stage. He referenced a small pad of paper that he carried around and took notes on.

“Up until this morning, we didn’t have any concrete way of connecting the victims. We now know that not only were all three employees of the community center, but all three of them were directly involved in the annual Halloween Festival that Stewart Hollow puts on each year.

“This morning, we took a man by the name of John Blankenship into custody as a person of interest. He was the last person to see Brady Murphy alive last night. We are currently talking to other witnesses who were in or around that block last night. Not only will we be interviewing Mr. Blankenship, but tomorrow we are going to bring in the rest of the employees from the community center for questioning. It would seem appropriate to say that since the three victims are specifically linked to the center and festival, it would be extremely wise to interrogate all who are involved.”

Reed stepped down and Carter stood in front again. “We will issue small details to the press this afternoon to get the word out,

and to let the public know that we are trying to solve this problem. In the meantime, any information you may receive or hear of is going to be considered valuable to the case. Respond to all calls and tips. Let's not let these murders make our town fearful. Remember, we live in a very peaceful community, and I would like to keep it that way."

Carter stepped down and Reed followed him to his office. The rest of the department went back to their daily grind.

Carter sat down at his desk, and Reed stood in the doorway, sipping his cup of coffee. Officer Dart appeared behind him.

"Um, Sheriff?" Dart said, trying to squeeze by Reed.

"What can I do for you, Dart?" Carter asked.

"I wanted to give another thought on the case."

"Okay." Carter shoed Reed away and invited Dart in. He sat in the chair across from Carter.

"It's just a thought, but don't you see that all of the murders seem kind of, theatrical?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, these types of crimes don't really happen in the real world."

Carter was once again interested in his theory. Dart intrigued him. His thoughts were outside of the box, and he looked at the case like no one else did. Dart continued:

“In the real world, a killer would murder someone and either try to hide the body, or cover it up somehow. But these three homicides seem to be the work of someone who is grasping for attention – not to mention they are all themed.”

“Themed?” Carter asked.

“Halloween themed. First off, the obvious – the killings are happening in October. When Carly Simmons was killed, the report said that there was a carved pumpkin sitting in the yard that the family denies putting there. When Ms. Cook’s body was found, *The Monster Mash* was playing over the PA system – a very popular holiday song. This morning, Brady Murphy’s body was found hung outside of the general store, which has been transformed into a costume shop. Throw in the poem we received and the fact that that all of the victims were working on the festival - you have all the ingredients of an extremely unstable person who is obviously looking for attention. Someone who wants to be the next national news story.”

Dart sat back in his seat, satisfied with his theory, and waiting for a response.

Carter smiled. “You’re acting more like a detective than a rookie.”

“Well, like I said. I’m looking for that big break. I want to retire from the FBI one of these days, Sheriff.”

“Keep this kind of thinking up and you very well may.”

3:45 PM

Sheriff Carter and Deputy Reed sat inside the Oregon Trails Diner about a mile from the station. They sat at a booth in the far corner of the crowded dining room, finishing up the food on their plates. The coffee in their mugs was cold and nearing the bottoms. The waitress came over and offered a refill, but they refused. She left, and they continued talking.

“I don’t want the chance of another murder happening. The killer may be angered by the festival for some reason, or have something against the community center in general – we don’t know at this point.” Carter downed the last drops of his cold coffee. “I think we may have to consider canceling the festival.”

Reed finished off his coffee and set the mug down. “Do you really think that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, like you said, we don’t know anything official yet about the killers intentions or motives.”

“His intentions appear to be knocking off the festival’s staff for some reason. I think that canceling the festival might help save some lives.”

“I know I haven’t been living in Stewart Hollow as long as you have, Ben, but I have been here long enough to know that unfortunately, that festival is all this town has going for it. It

brings the community together, and let's not forget about the money it brings to the local economy. People travel from all over the state to go to it."

"So you don't think it's a good idea?"

"I just say we think about it more before we do it. We don't want to upset the town."

Reed pushed his plate to the end of the table, and put his used napkin and fork on it. A woman's voice shot out from the booth behind the Deputy.

"So, canceling the festival *is* an option?" Her voice spoke in a sweet, yet devious manner.

Sitting behind Reed was Kelly Rodgers, the pushy reporter from the Hollow Gazette.

Carter's expression became one of annoyed. "Rodgers, if I remember correctly?"

"Yes, sir, Sheriff. Good memory. I'm surprised you remembered my name. You looked very nervous and flustered at the press conference the other day." Kelly stood up, throwing down money on her table to pay for the food. She stood at the end of their booth.

"What are you doing here? Spying?" Reed asked.

"I'm not spying. I was having lunch and just happened to overhear the conversation you were having." Kelly tried to play

innocent, although Carter and Reed could see right through her lies.

“You cannot repeat what you just heard, Ms. Rodgers. This is official police business and it shall be treated as such until the media is addressed by us,” Carter stated.

“Yeah, we got your little briefing a couple hours ago. You have someone in custody and you’ve connected all the victims by where they worked. Do you think somebody working at the community center is the culprit?”

“You already know that we’re setting up interviews with the other employees tomorrow, Ms. Rodgers. That is all you need to know right now,” Carter said, trying to shut her up.

“Have you looked into that community center’s manager? Bruce Slater? That drunk tried to come onto me once when we were doing a story about a baseball tournament. That guy gives me the creeps,” Kelly said.

“We are going to look into everyone,” Reed said, as he could see that Carter was getting furious.

“Well, I will let you gentlemen get back to your ‘official police business,’” Kelly said, mocking them. “I hope you catch the Harvest Slasher before he strikes again.”

“The Harvest Slasher?” Reed questioned. They looked up at Kelly, who was smiling.

“It’s catchy, huh? We needed a moniker for the killer - something to catch our readers’ attention. I kind of like it.”

“You can’t print that name.” Carter stood up, and towered over Kelly by a good foot and a half, trying to intimidate her.

“Why not?” she asked, not backing down.

“Because you can’t.”

Reed stood up and backed his Sheriff. “The killer may read that and get a big head. If it is attention he’s looking for, you would have just supplied him with more motivation. You don’t know how he will react to a name like that.”

Kelly Rodgers shrugged her shoulders with a smile, turned around, and left the diner.

Carter shook his head. He was worried now. “If she prints that name, she might have just made things a heck of a lot worse for us.”

7

October 10th – 10:00 AM

Sheriff Carter walked into the police station, taking off his coat and hanging it on the rack by Bethany's desk. Standing next to the desk, talking to Bethany was Abe. He had his mailbag hanging from his shoulder and a tall stack of letters and magazines in his hands.

"Are you guys making any progress?" Abe asked. Bethany looked up seeing Carter there. Knowing she got in trouble last time for spouting off too much information, she kept her mouth shut.

"I'm not aloud to say, Abe." Bethany said.

Abe looked up and felt uncomfortable with Carter there. He nodded at him then returned his attention to Bethany. "Alright, then. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a nice day." Bethany said as Abe left the station. She looked at Carter. "What?"

"Nothing."

Bethany sighed and started fingering through the mail. "Everyone from the community center is already here. They're all separated in different rooms."

"Thank you very much, Bethany."

“Uh huh.”

Carter shook it off and made his way back to his office, grabbing a cup of coffee and the newspaper from the break room first. He sat at his desk and opened the paper. The headline on the front page stood out: *‘Stewart Hollow Falls Victim to The Harvest Slasher.’* Carter quickly skimmed through the story angrily.

“Son of a...” he said aloud to himself.

Deputy Reed walked in, removing his coat. He saw Carter’s disgusted look. “What’s wrong?”

Carter held up the front page of the paper. Reed looked it over.

“Now the entire town knows.”

“Do you think the killer read it?” Reed asked.

“Well, unless the killer is some drifter who has made his way into our town and already left, then I’d say yes.” Carter slammed the paper into the trashcan beside his desk.

“So are we doing these interviews now?” Reed asked.

“Yeah.” Carter said, removing his coffee mug from his lips.

“How should we split them?”

Carter fingered through the files, splitting them in half. He handed a stack to Reed. “You take these, and I’ll take these,” he said, keeping half for himself.

Reed stood up with his files and started out the door. He stopped, remembering something and turned back around. “Oh yeah, I forgot.”

Carter looked up.

“We had to let John Blankenship go,” Reed said. “His alibi was confirmed. We called his girlfriend and she said that he was home early from work that night, and they were both there until morning.”

Carter shook his head. “We better have some luck with the community center gang then.”

Sheriff Carter sat in the interrogation room. Officer Jamie Dart escorted in Ashley Penner, and sat her down in the seat across from him. Dart left, and the room was silent. Carter looked down at the files in front of him, and then back up to Ashley. She appeared nervous. Carter could tell she’d been crying as some of her make up was smudged below her eyes.

“You have nothing to be nervous about. We’re just asking questions today.” Carter said, trying to ease the tension.

She nodded.

“First I need to know where you were during the time frames that we’ve determined the murders to have taken place during. During Carly’s murder, you said you were with your boyfriend, Mark, correct?”

“Yes.”

“He can confirm this?”

“Yes.”

“What is your job over at the community center?”

“I’m on the event planning staff.”

“You were basically second in command, right? Second to Carly Simmons?”

“Yes.”

“But now your first in command, due to her death.”

“Um, yeah.” Ashley knew where Carter was heading with this. She didn’t like it. “I didn’t kill her.”

“I never said you did.” Carter paused for a moment and looked over his notes. “You guys were friends, right?”

“Since high school.”

“What kind of relationship did you have with Ms. Cook and Brady Murphy?” Carter suddenly strayed from the original question, catching her off guard.

“Um, I didn’t know Ms. Cook very well. No one really liked her much. She was always in a bad mood.”

“And Brady?”

“Brady was a friend. He was Mark’s best friend. We’ve known each other since high school.”

“Did you or anyone else ever have any kind of problems with Brady? Did he ever behave strangely?”

“None of us had any kind of problem with him. Strange? Not really. He did seem distracted once in a while though. I always got the impression he had a crush on someone, but he never spoke of her. So I don’t know who it was.”

Deputy Reed sat in another interrogation room, sitting across from Bruce Slater. Bruce sat up tall in his chair. He was ready for any kind of question.

“I understand you’re the manager over at the community center. The man in charge, right?” Reed asked.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Bruce answered calmly, yet irritated by the departments demand of him to be there.

“You personally hired and employed the three people who are now dead, correct?”

“Yeah. What are you saying here?” Bruce began getting defensive.

“Nothing, Mr. Slater. These are simply just questions. We’re doing this for everyone at the community center.”

Bruce sat back in his chair and crossed his arms, letting out a purposefully loud sigh.

“It appears that you really don’t want to be here. Is there somewhere you have to be?” Reed asked.

“I guess not. The community center is closed until we all get back there anyway, so why would I be in a rush?”

“Alright.” Reed flicked through the files in front of him. “Where were you on these dates, around these times?”

Reed pushed a piece of paper in front of Bruce, which had the dates and times of the murders.

“I can’t remember exactly where I was the first night. It was late, so I was probably home. As for the night Eleanor was killed, I had left shortly after the vigil. I told her to stay there and locate some items for the festival.”

“You instructed her to stay there that night?” Reed said, jotting down notes.

“Yes I did. But I had left. I wasn’t there when she was killed.”

“The report says that your security system and cameras were not functioning that night. How long have they been out of service?”

“For a while. I was going to get them fixed, but thought I’d wait until November so I could put more money towards the festival.” Bruce desperately explained.

“And what about the night of the 8th? Where were you?”

“I was home that night.”

“You didn’t leave for anything?”

“No. I said I was home all night.”

Sheriff Carter was now interviewing Mark Jenson.

“Mr. Jenson, I understand you were best friends with Brady Murphy?”

The mention of Brady’s name almost brought a tear to Mark’s eyes. His lips quivered. “Yes.”

“Can you confirm that on the night Carly Simmons was murdered, you were with Ashley Penner?”

“Yeah. We were home that night.”

“Where were you when Ms. Cook was killed?”

“We were all at the vigil that night. Ashley and I went home together.”

“What did you do that night?”

Mark was trying to remember. “I was watching TV, and Ashley was in her room all night crying.”

“Carly’s death really affected her, huh?”

“Yeah, they were best friends.”

“What were you watching on TV?”

“Does that matter?” Mark asked, baffled by the random question.

“Not really, I’m just curious. I watch a lot of TV myself.”

“I was watching the horror movie marathon.”

“Oh. I don’t watch much horror anymore. They are all the same.”

Mark nodded. “I watch the marathon every year. I’m a sucker for tradition.”

“So that’s why you’re involved with the festival year after year?”

“Yeah. I enjoy it. It brings the town together.”

“What is your job for the festival?”

“I’m an ice cream vendor. That’s the job I always get.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“I pay off Bruce to give me an easy job. I’m not a big fan of working, but I like to be involved.” Mark said, with a small laugh.

“I see.”

Brandon Becker sat nervously across the table from Deputy Reed. He bounced his foot up and down and tapped his fingers repeatedly on the table. Reed took instant notice of this.

“Nervous?”

“A little.” Brandon said in a shaky voice.

“I’ll just ask then. Did you kill anyone?”

The abrupt question stunned Brandon. His fingers and leg stopped moving. “No!” He exclaimed.

“Okay. It’s just that you seem *really* nervous. Mind telling me why?”

Brandon didn’t say anything, and appeared to start staring. Reed snapped his fingers, bringing Brandon out of his daze.

“Why are you so nervous?” Reed asked again.

Brandon glanced behind him at the two-way mirror, and then up at the security camera in the corner of the room. He looked into Reed’s eyes. “Does all of this information stay private?”

“It depends on how serious the information is. Look, you might as well come clean. We’re dealing with three dead bodies and the possibility of others. What do you know?”

“I’m gay.”

“What?” Reed was surprised by the hasty confession.

“I mean, Bi. I don’t really know. I’m very confused.” Mark’s admission seemed to take a lot of pressure off him. He was able to sit back in his seat and breathe a little.

“How does this information help with the murder case?”

“The night Carly was murdered, I was with my...friend. I wasn’t at the house. When you guys questioned me, I said I was home all night with my brother. I lied, and Aiden covered for me. You guys knew I was lying, didn’t you?”

“Well, we had our doubts. We’re the police – we question everything.” Reed glanced at his notes and then back up at Brandon. “So, your ‘friend’ - can he confirm your whereabouts that night?”

Brandon froze. Reed cocked his head, curious as to why Brandon was hesitant. “Brandon, who is your boyfriend?”

Brandon’s nerves were back. He stuttered out the name. “Brady Murphy.”

Reed sat back in his chair. “You originally said you had a crush on Carly Simmons.”

Brandon nodded rapidly.

“So,” Reed began, grabbing his pen and paper, “You can be romantically connected with two of the victims.”

Brandon hung his head, embarrassed.

“When was the last time you saw Brady?”

A tear formed and fell down Brandon’s cheek as he opened his mouth. “Two nights ago. Around ten.”

Reed smiled. “That’s about the time he was murdered.”

Brandon’s face turned a shade of bright red. “I didn’t kill him. Why would I have? He was helping me deal with this; all of this crap that’s rushing around in my brain.” Brandon stopped to catch his breath then continued. “He went out for a smoke break before he closed up the store. I met him there and we talked for a

few minutes before I left. As far as I know, he went back in, set the alarm, locked up and went home.”

Reed wrote down every detail.

“You can’t tell my brother. He’d be heartbroken.” Brandon pleaded.

Carter sat in the other interrogation room. Officer Dart had escorted in a pretty blonde in her mid twenties. She sat down across from him as he opened up the files.

“Kristen Keller, I presume?” Carter asked, smiling at the gorgeous specimen in front of him.

“Yes, sir.” She said, smiling back. She brushed her hair away from her eyes, crossed her legs, and rested her hands on her lap. Carter could see right through the seduction attempt.

“I’ve been in this business for a while,” he said. “I know all the tricks. Don’t do anything that will make you look suspicious.”

The fake smile on Kristen’s face disappeared. “Sheriff, I didn’t do anything. I actually don’t even know why I’m here. I didn’t know Carly very well, I hated Ms. Cook with a passion and I barely ever spoke to Brady.”

“You’re kind of quick to dismiss yourself from everything.” Carter said, closing the file.

“I just don’t want you to waste your time on me when you could be looking for the real killer, Sheriff.” Kristen’s cutesy smile returned.

“Well, *you* might not see your importance to this case, but I do. The way I see it is that three people from your work have turned up dead. There is a killer who seems to be targeting the festival workers. So I can either consider you a suspect and you can answer my questions, or I can let you go right now, and you could be a possible future victim.” Carter said, cuffing his hands together and placing them on top of the files on the table.

Kristen’s smile disappeared for the second time. She uncrossed her legs and stood up. “I’d like to leave.”

“Excuse me?” Carter questioned.

“I feel insulted and I take your comments as a threat,” she said, getting emotional.

“A threat?”

“You basically said that if I’m not a suspect, I’m a victim. I don’t want to be either! I didn’t do anything!” Kristen began to raise her voice.

“Ms. Keller, if you are refusing to cooperate, I’m going to put you in a holding cell.” Carter said, aggravated.

Kristen’s eyes widened and arms dropped to her side.

“Are you going to answer my questions?” Carter asked one last time.

Kristen stayed strong and crossed her arms. “I don’t have to answer any of your questions.”

“Dart!” Carter called out.

Officer Dart returned to the room.

“Please put Ms. Keller in a cell, and confiscate her belongings.” Carter firmly instructed.

“Yes, Sheriff.” Dart grabbed Kristen and hand cuffed her. She looked back at a smiling Ben Carter and pouted.

“Now you’re nobody.” Carter said with a grin. Dart removed her from the room.

Deputy Allan Reed sat in the other room conducting his last interview. The pretty Laura Nelson sat before him. She was quiet for the most part, but answered his questions as completely as she could.

“Alright, let’s move on. I got your whereabouts for the times of the murders, and I will look into your alibis. Now, what is your job exactly over at the community center?” Reed asked, ready to add to the file.

“I’m basically a receptionist. Bruce and Carly tell me...I mean, Bruce and Ashley, now, tell me what to do and I do it. I take phone calls, run errands, etc.” Laura said, innocently.

“So you’re like the puppet.”

“Basically. I want to be an artist, so I don’t plan on being there much longer.”

“What kind of art?” Reed asked.

“We’ll, I’ve always been good at sketching. I’d like to do portraits someday. I was thinking of going to college in the spring.” Laura said. The mention of her future seemed to bring life to her.

“How did you get the job at the community center?” Reed asked, bringing the topic back to the important matter.

“Ashley, actually. Her and I and Kristen were friends in high school. Carly got Ashley the job, then Ashley got Kristen and I a job there.”

“And you’re involved in the festival too, correct?” Reed asked.

“Yes. I’m the judge of the pumpkin carving contest.”

“That’s fitting, I guess. You being an artist and all.” Reed wrote down the info. “Do you carve pumpkins yourself?”

“Yes. I carved a few that I’m going to display at the judging table.”

Reed nodded as he fingered through the files. He pulled out a picture of the carved pumpkin found at the scene of Carly Simmons murder. He placed it in front of her.

“Did you do this one?”

Her eyes shot open and she looked up at Reed. “Yes! That’s mine! Where did you find it? It disappeared from the office after I carved it.”

“It was found at Carly Simmons house the night she was killed.” Reed said.

“I carved five of them for my desk at work. The middle one went missing the day after I put them out. That was like, September 29th, or something.”

“Is it possible someone from your office took it?”

“Possibly. But the center is open to everyone. Plus, with the security cameras not working, anyone could have strolled in a taken it.”

Carter flipped through the files in front of him, then looked back up at his last interview – Aiden Becker.

“Aiden, as you know, we are conducting interviews with all of the employees of the community center, and more importantly, the festival.” Carter explained.

“I know, but I don’t work for the community center and I am not involved with the festival at all. I’m not a big fan of crowds or celebrating Halloween in general.” Aiden said, not completely sure why he was there to begin with.

“Well, there are a couple reasons why I wanted to interview you. First of all, we know your brother lied about where he was

the night Carly Simmons was murdered. We questioned him about it at your house that next day, he lied, and you seemed to cover for him. Did you know where he was?”

“I had no clue. He was leaving the house a lot and not telling me where he was going. He became very secretive. But, um, I think I know why.” Aiden said.

“Why?”

“Brandon’s gay.” Aiden said – a depressed sigh spewing from his mouth.

Carter’s eyebrows contorted. “Brandon confessed that to us a little while ago and pleaded us not to tell you. How did you already know that?”

“Because I saw him the night Brady was killed.”

“You saw him? Where?”

“Like I said, he’d been sneaking out and keeping things from me. He wouldn’t talk to me about anything. So I followed him that night. He and Brady were outside of the store talking right before ten. I saw them kiss, and...”

“And what?”

“Well, there *was* someone else there. I was across the street in an alley when I saw them. Right around the building from me was a bench on the sidewalk and there was someone – a man I think – sitting there.”

“Did you see who it was?” Carter was getting interested.

“No, it was dark. I couldn’t really see. I could make out some minor details, but unless he was right in front of me again, I don’t think I could identify him.”

“Any info could help, Aiden.” Carter said, as he jotted down the minor details Aiden gave. It was nothing more than an approximate height and build, but any details were good details.

5:25 PM

The interviews were complete and the sun was beginning to make its way behind the mountains to the north. The wind was picking up, and there a sense of unnerving dread in the air.

Stacy Reed pulled up in front of the police station. She walked in and sat in an empty chair next too Bethany’s desk.

“Allan should be out any second, dear.” Bethany said, blowing out the pumpkin on the windowsill behind her.

“Not a problem.” Stacy said, checking her phone for messages. She looked across the office at a row of holding cells. Only one was occupied, and it was by Kristen Keller. She sat on a chair inside, and looked out at Stacy with a pissed off grin.

“What the heck are you staring at?” Kristen yelled. Stacy ignored her. Carter walked by the cell, putting on his coat. He banged his arm on the cell doors, startling Kristen.

“Shut up, Ms. Keller. We’ll talk in the morning.” Carter said, approaching the front of the office where he saw Stacy.

“Hey, Stacy. Giving Allan a ride home?”

“Yeah. Is he almost ready?” She asked, smiling.

“Yeah, he’s just putting some files away. How’s the job?”

“It’s great. I really love what I do.”

“That’s good to hear. I love what I do too, but not when there’s a psycho killer on the loose and our clues are limited and suspects are few and far between.”

“How’d the interviews go today?” Stacy asked.

“Not bad. We were able to talk to everyone. I’ve been reviewing the reports and files all afternoon. A couple things have caught my attention, so hopefully we can go from there.”

“Good. I hope you guys can catch this guy soon.” Stacy said, standing up as Allan approached from behind Carter. “Hey, honey, you ready?”

“Yes ma’am.” Reed said, patting Carter on the back. “Tomorrow, Carter?”

“I’ll be here.”

“Great.”

“Bye, bye!” Stacy waved to Carter and Bethany as Reed wrapped his arm around her shoulder and left.

Carter looked at Bethany as he zipped up his coat. “Have a good evening, Beth.”

“Thank you.” Bethany said. She appeared to be very tired, and Carter noticed.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

“Yeah, I’m just worn out. Don’t get old, Ben.” She joked.

“I’ve heard some rumors that you might be retiring.”

Bethany looked at him, unaware there were rumors. She smiled. “We all have to sometime.”

Carter nodded. “Why don’t you take tomorrow off?”

“Oh I couldn’t. We’re just so busy.”

“I insist. Please. Rest up.”

“If you say so, Sheriff.”

Carter smiled. “Take it easy, Bethany.”

Carter left. Bethany put on her jacket and picked up her purse. She grabbed her keys from the stack of mail that had sat on her desk all day. She totally forgot about.

“Oh no.” She said glancing out the window, looking for Carter. He was already in his car and driving away. Two officers walked by the front desk and Bethany grabbed their attention.

“Hey, you guys. I’m off tomorrow, and I forgot to give the Sheriff the mail. Would one of you put it on his desk for me?” Bethany asked. It was hard to turn down a favor from a sweet old lady.

“Sure,” one of the officers said grabbing it from her. Bethany thanked them and left.

The officers walked by Carter’s office on the way to the file room. The officer with the mail leaned into the dark office and dropped the stack on his desk.

The stack of letters had shifted, revealing the bottom envelope. It had no return address and was addressed to the Stewart Hollow Sheriff’s Department. In the bottom right hand corner, was a small pumpkin sticker.

8

October 11th – 9:03 AM

The police department was quiet. Not everyone had yet arrived for the day. Bethany Kidd's desk sat empty in the front of the office for the first time in months, and Kristen Keller was sitting the in the corner of her cell, still awake and consumed by fatigue.

Sheriff Carter sat in his office, trembling as he held the envelope in his hands. He was afraid to open it. He was afraid of its contents and what they may include. He made eye contact with pumpkin sticker in the bottom corner; he feared it.

Deputy Reed stood in the doorway waiting for Carter to open it, as was the rest of the antsy department.

“Do you want me to open it?” Reed asked.

Carter shook his head, and forced himself to tear the envelope at the top. He pulled out another folded sheet of notebook paper. He pushed the empty envelope to the edge of his desk.

“This gets examined as soon as possible, you hear me? I want fingerprints, DNA – I want everything from it.” Carter demanded.

He gently unfolded the paper to reveal another handwritten letter. This time, the page was full. It wasn't a poem this time; it was more in depth. It was something more sadistic.

Reed watched his Sheriff read and absorb the entire letter before dropping it to the desk. Carter rubbed the bridge of his trembling fingers.

“What did it say?” Reed asked calmly.

“It’s not over.” Carter replied. He handed Reed the letter and left the room. Reed proceeded to read the thick, dark and menacing handwriting:

‘The Legend of Stewart Hollow’ dates back decades. The legend tells of a crazed local who targeted a group of people and stalked them throughout the month of October. One by one, as the month continued, he murdered the group. Each murder was increasingly more brutal and vial than the last. As the middle of October arrived, the myth grew even more eerie. Strange sightings around the town, and mysterious encounters with the local legend begin to surface. The legendary madman is known to Stewart Hollow as The Harvest Slasher - a mysterious entity who hides in the shadows of the night, striking quickly and silently before vanishing back into the dark. The legend is said to continue year after year, with more and more innocent residents of Stewart Hollow falling victim to The Harvest Slasher. It starts with a puzzling poem, and culminates on Halloween, when the unexpected is the center of a horrific scene of repulsive horror. October, in Stewart Hollow, belongs solely to its’ legend. The Harvest Slasher will continue to live on for eternity.

9

October 13th – 6:58 AM

It had been raining all night` and continued to drizzle as John Blankenship parked his car on Main Street. He hopped out, and covered his head with his hooded raincoat. He jogged through the puddles on the sidewalk and up to the front door of his store.

John went to unlock the front doors, but someone had already done so. He crept through the eerily quiet building, hearing nothing except for the pitter-patter of the hard rain hitting the windows of the store.

He walked into the office behind the counter and looked directly at the security monitors. One of the monitors had been focused on the rear of the building, looking over the dumpster and beyond the fence.

Taped to the fuzzy monitor, was a sheet of paper with the words, *'Watch Me'*, written on it.

10:05 AM

The community center was open. Ashley sat at her desk in the front of the office, and Laura sat at her desk in the back corner. Kristen Keller walked into the office removing her jacket, and

setting her purse on top of the filing cabinet. Laura looked at her and smiled.

“First day back from jail!” Laura said, clapping. Ashley looked up and smiled. Kristen didn’t appreciate the humor.

“Don’t even joke about it. It was bullshit, and I plan on suing that damn department.” Kristen pouted.

“What even happened? They wouldn’t tell us anything. Were you a suspect?” Ashley said, interested.

“I’m not a suspect. All I did was refuse to answer their questions.” Kristen said, sitting down at her desk.

“Which would make you...suspicious. Why didn’t you answer them?” Ashley asked again.

“Because it was insulting. How can they even think I had anything to do with the murders?”

“They questioned everyone, Kristen. Not just you. Not everything is about you.” Laura said. Kristen stared at her in disbelief.

“You’re kidding? How dare you, Laura!” Kristen shouted, leaving the office. As she left, Bruce walked in, folding up his dripping umbrella.

“Is that rain ever going to stop? We can’t continue construction if it’s going to be pouring all day.” Bruce was disgruntled. He looked around. “Where the heck is Mark?”

“He’s at home. It’s been a rough couple of days for him, Bruce. Give him some time. He said he’d be in later this afternoon.” Ashley said.

Bruce stood there with his hands on his hips. “I’m sorry, is he the boss now? Since when does he make his own hours? Call him, Ashley, and tell him to come in right now.”

Bruce left the office, slamming the door behind him. The girls looked at each other.

“What’s up his butt?” Laura asked.

Ashley had an idea, and spoke quietly in case Bruce was still outside the door. “He’s afraid they’re going to cancel the festival. There was something in the paper about it.”

“So what if it gets cancelled? That’s probably the best thing that could happen right now.” Laura said.

12:30 PM

Bethany sat at her desk in front of the office. She watched as Allan Reed stood on a stepstool in the corner, and applied fake spider webs and toy spiders to the wall.

“How’s this look?” Reed asked.

“Looking good. Just stretch the webs down a little more.” Bethany wanted to make the office look as festive as possible.

The front door chimed as it was opened. John Blankenship walked in, unzipping his jacket. Reed watched him come in with a sense of urgency. Bethany stood up, startled by his sudden entrance.

“Can I help you?”

John held up a two-gig flash drive. “Is Sheriff Carter here?”

Carter sat at his desk, staring at his computer screen. John stood behind him, watching from over his shoulder. Reed stood by with his arms crossed. They were all watching the security footage from the store.

The footage was in black and white, and the angle the camera was set at showed the dumpster sitting behind the store, in front of a fence. Behind the fence was the Hollow’s End Cemetery. John reached down and hit the spacebar on Carter’s computer, pausing the video. The date and time at the bottom of the screen read: 10/13 – 1:03:01 AM.

“Right there. See that in the top corner?” John said, putting his finger on the screen.

Carter leaned forward to try and get a better look. Reed moved in closer too.

“It’s a light.” Reed noticed it.

There appeared to be a dark mass in the middle of the cemetery, with a small, but bright light accompanying it.

“Yup. That’s where it first comes in. Now watch.” John hit the spacebar again, and the footage continued to roll.

The dark mass moved through the cemetery with the light attached to it. As it weaved its way through the gravestones and monuments, the image became clearer. Carter was stunned.

It was a black-cloaked figure with a hood covering its head. The figure walked, hunched over and at a snail's pace, through the cemetery, holding out in front of ahead of it, a yard lantern with a burning wick. The mysterious figure made its way across the screen, and eventually disappeared out of the frame.

The hair stood up on the back of Carter’s neck. He looked up at Reed, who couldn’t remove his eyes from the screen.

“That is some creepy stuff right there.” Carter said, standing up. “Does he come back into view?”

“No.” John said. “I fast forwarded to the end of the footage. That was the only time he was there.”

“Okay,” Carter tossed his jacket on. “We need to check the cemetery.”

2:45 PM

Brandon Becker sat on his front porch as the wind started to nip at his neck. He pulled the hood from his sweatshirt over his head, subconsciously hiding his shame. He was disheartened, embarrassed, and disgusted with himself. He rocked back and

forth in the chair and watched the world in front of him. The dying cornfield next to the house danced in the wind. A murder of crows squawked in the sky above. Brandon watched as they flew over the cornfield and past the Simmons farm in the distance.

A silver minivan pulled up their driveway and parked in front of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons climbed out of the van and held each other tightly as they walked into the house. They were still mourning the loss of their daughter. Brandon was mourning as well. The girl he secretly loved through high school was gone. The man whom he confided his feelings in and helped him look at the world and love in a different way was also gone.

Brandon focused his attention on the scarecrow in the Simmons yard. It hung there with its arms out to its sides. It was stuffed full of hay and disregarded cornstalks. It was a fake. There was nothing real about it. What was once alive in the Earth was now dead and hanging in the yard for everyone to look at and criticize. It was wrong.

The front door of the house opened and Aiden walked out onto the porch. He saw his brother sitting in the rocking chair. Aiden stood by his side.

“Brandon. Can we talk?”

Brandon did not respond.

“It’s been days since you said anything to me. Sheriff Carter told me everything. I know what you’ve been going through lately. Can’t we just talk about it?”

Brandon shook his head.

“I don’t look at you any differently, Brandon. You’re my brother. That’s what you’ll always be to me.”

Aiden stood there. The only sound in the otherwise haunting silence was the creaking of the rocking chair.

5:34 PM

The sun was on its way over the Pacific and Stewart Hollow was shutting down for the day. Dozen’s of police officers had been combing the Hollow’s End Cemetery for hours, only to come up with nothing. The spine-chilling video of the cemetery from the night before stuck with everyone who saw it. What was the purpose? Was it the so-called, media-dubbed Harvest Slasher? Whoever it was made one thing perfectly clear. He was haunting Stewart Hollow.

10

October 14th-20th

The following seven days proved to be less violent, but more surreal. Someone was making it their number one priority to induce fear and anxiety throughout Stewart Hollow. After the general store's video footage was brought to the public's attention, similar reports began flooding the Sheriff's department.

People were calling in reporting sightings of a strange, hooded figure walking through their farms at night, setting off their floodlights. He'd always disappear into the dark before being approached.

Residents would awake to find words written on their garage doors, driveways and cars. It was always the same report: dark red paint spelling out frightening and vulgar statements. It was truly the work of a psychopath.

Store owners reported small, carved, and lit pumpkins sitting in front of their businesses when they arrived in the morning on several occasions. The mysterious culprit was really trying to get inside the heads of everyone, and plucking at their nerve endings one at a time. Families were afraid to leave their homes at night or let their children play outside.

By the middle of the week, a handful of residents had been targeted by a series of sinister phone calls that repeated the *'Legend of Stewart Hollow'* as many times as possible before being hung up on. Even though a few of the residents were called multiple times, no one was able to identify the whispering voice of the madman.

The Harvest Slashers' game was flawless. The clues were few and far between, and the fingerprints at every crime scene were non-existent. Every incoming tip from the public, no matter how bizarre it seemed, was being followed up on.

By the end of the week, the daunting sightings and occurrences had dwindled down to a quiet and uneventful weekend. But as the final eleven days of October crept in, an unexpected phone call reignited the panic.

11

October 21st, 10:15 AM

The phone at the Sheriff's Department was ringing off the hook. Bethany was down the hall filing a vandalizing report and came jogging back into the front of the station. Out of breath, she answered the phone.

"Sheriff's Department. How can I direct your call?"

"Bethany?" a bothered voice sobbed on the other line.

"Yes?" she asked, trying to put a face with the voice.

"It's Abe."

"Abe? What's wrong, honey?" Bethany was concerned. She looked at her watch. Abe usually had the mail delivered by now.

"I found a body. I'm on my route right now." Abe was trying to stay calm, but it was obvious that he was distressed by what he'd seen.

"Where are you?" Bethany was quick to grab the nearest pen and notepad.

"Plain Woods Road."

"Abe, do you recognize the body? Who is it?" Bethany said, crossing her fingers for an immediate answer.

Abe's voice trembled on the other line. "I...I can't tell."

Bethany's heart began pounding. She slammed the phone down and ran back to Carter's office, calling for him.

10:35 AM

Sheriff Carter's cruiser came to a screeching halt, painting the road with black tire marks. He kept the lights flashing as he leapt out and raced to the idle mail truck. Reed jumped out from the passenger seat and quickly followed his Sheriff.

Sirens ignited in the background as Carter and Reed rushed to Abe, who was sitting down outside of his mail truck.

"Abe! Where's the body?" Carter came off as demanding, but it was necessary.

Abe had been vomiting. He lifted his shaking arm and pointed to the ditch on the side of the road, just ahead of his truck. Carter bolted for the ditch and Reed was right behind him.

Carter stopped and looked in horror into the ditch. It was worse than he imagined. The mangled body of one of Stewart Hollow's very own was spread out in the ditch. Limbs hung by single tendons, deep cuts had spilled blood into the grass, and the throat had been completely ripped out. The slashed face had been beaten to a pulp and was covered in blood. It was impossible to identify the victim, although it was clearly a female.

12:16 PM

There was a media circus outside of the First Untied Hospital five miles outside of town. Police guarded the entrances as every single reporter and photographer was trying to get in. Flashing lights shot from cameras and reporters were yelling at one another, speculating as to what was happening.

Inside the hospital, down a clean, bright hallway, a room held the gory remains of the girl on Plain Woods Road. Stacy Reed left the room and entered another one where Carter and Reed stood by. The town's Mayor, Bernard Hopkins, stood by Carter, angered.

Stacy approached the three men in her blue scrubs and pulled down her surgical mask.

"We have an ID on her. Her name is Kristen Keller. Looks like she worked at..."

"Let me guess," Mayor Hopkins eagerly interrupted, "the community center?"

Stacy nodded.

Mayor Hopkins turned to Carter, who cowered. "Sheriff, it appears you have not done your job here. You have let some sick psycho walk all over this town for the past 20 days, killing innocent people for his own sick pleasure. You have no person of interest at the moment, no leads, no clues, and worst of all, you have what use to be a peaceful, family oriented community,

afraid of its own shadow. You need to do something to fix this, and you need to do it now. And if I don't have an arrest or a solid lead by the middle of the week, you're fired. You hear me?"

The Mayor was livid. He loosened the tie around his neck and stormed out of the room. Carter bit his lip, and tried to hold back all the emotions he was feeling. Reed patted his partner on the back.

"What can I do, Sheriff?" Reed asked calmly.

"I'm going to address the media. Get them ready," Carter responded without hesitation. He turned and followed the Mayors exit. Reed stood there with his wife. She started to cry. He grabbed her and they hugged.

Thirty minutes later, Carter stood in front of the media outside of the hospital. Reed stood beside him, and the restless Mayor stood on the other side.

Carter calmed the crowd then spoke into the microphones.

"I've called this abrupt press conference to address recent developments in the killing spree that has frightening our town. The past week has been tense for everyone, and we are sorry to inform you all that we still have no leads. All of the tips the public is calling in are being looked into, no matter their severity. We urge you to keep this up. Report anything you find unusual.

This morning a fourth body was discovered on Plain Woods Road. I cannot confirm a name until the family has been notified, but I can tell you that it was another volunteer for the Halloween Festival. Due to these recent events, I am declaring that the Halloween Festival this year will be cancelled, and all work on it will be stopped effective immediately. This is not open for negotiations. Parents should keep a close eye on their children, and I would strongly recommend no one goes out after dark until we can put an end to this. Thank you.”

Carter stepped down without taking questions, and the media went nuts. They were shouting in every direction. Carter followed the Mayor back into the hospital with Reed right behind them. They gathered in the lobby.

“Good idea canceling the festival, Carter. Now, please, make some progress here and bring this guy to justice,” Mayor Hopkins said what he needed to, and walked away.

Carter sighed in relief. This was the first step. Canceling the festival would hopefully please the killer. It appeared he wasn’t too fond of it.

Carter’s pocket began vibrating, and he reached in, pulling out his cell phone. He looked at the incoming call: ‘Bethany’.

“Yes?” Carter cautiously answered.

His face immediately went pale. He looked at Reed:

“Laura Nelson is dead.”

12

October 22nd, Noon

The community center had been nearly torn apart looking for clues after the discovery of Laura Nelson's slain body. It was the fifth murder of one of the centers' employees and the second one committed at the center itself.

In the 24 hours after the press conference, forensics were able to tell that the murder was committed the night of the 20th, or in the early hours of the 21st, no less than an hour or so before Kristen Keller. The murder weapon was once again a knife or some sort of sharp blade – it had become the killers' signature tool.

Laura Nelson was found stabbed to death, and was left sitting at her desk with the four remaining pumpkins on display around her. The room had been pitch dark when Ashley Penner arrived for work. She flipped on the light and was greeted by the horrific sight.

Bruce Slater arrived shortly after to see Ashley in a hysterical frame of mind and called the police himself.

Carter walked up to the police station with a handful of journalists and photographers pestering him. Kelly Rodgers was among them.

“I’m sorry, I cannot speak on the topic right now.” Carter kept repeating that as he tried to dodge them all. He was growing tired and more stressed as the days passed. He finally fought his way through and entered the police station where Bethany was just hanging up on a call.

“Beth, one of those infuriating reporters is Kelly Rodgers. Will you please get her and bring her around back. I want to speak with her,” Carter said.

“Sure thing, Sheriff.” Bethany stood up and went to the door, where the reporters were disbanding. She stopped and turned around. “Oh, Sheriff, Jamie Dart is in your office. He said he wanted to run something by you.”

“Great,” Carter laughed, “probably another theory that will end up going nowhere.”

“At least he’s trying, Sheriff,” Bethany said as she walked out the front door. Carter stared back at her, not sure if that was a jab at the investigation, or in defense of Dart.

Carter sat down in his office where Officer Dart was waiting. He put his hands together and placed them on his desk. He looked across at Dart.

“Okay, what do you have?” Carter asked.

Dart was holding a packet of papers. The top one was a copy of the latest letter the killer had sent, explaining the legend.

“Thanks for hearing me out, Sheriff,” Dart said politely, and then continued with his newest theory. “Well, as we know, the killer is obviously trying to become a local legend. In doing so, he’s putting on a production for the world. Everyone across the country has heard about our situation by now. He’s sending letters, creating surreal scenarios for the locals, and he’s murdering everyone who was involved in the festival. Now, he will either be satisfied with the cancellation – if that is what he was trying to accomplish – or he will be furious. He obviously wants this town to be known for something big. He wants attention.”

“So your saying...what exactly?” Carter questioned.

“We need to be looking into either of those two types.” Dart laid out a few more files on the desk. “I was going through the interrogation interviews and files on the individuals. If the killer was looking for the cancellation the whole time, we should look into Aiden Becker. He’s not involved with the festival, and in a nutshell, he doesn’t even like it. Throw into the mix that his brother has been living a secret life and is not the person he thought he was looking up to, you have yourself a pretty solid case for more questioning.”

Carter nodded his head, pondering the theory.

“Now, for the complete opposite.” Dart pulled out another persons file and pushed it in front of the Sheriff. “Bruce Slater. He employed all of the deceased. He has easy access to the

community center, as well as his employees personal and work schedules. It also seems, from numerous tips and quotes that he is grossly obsessed with the festival, even wanting it to continue after the creator of the event was killed. He likes the attention the festival brings to the town and him. Who is to say he's not just raising the bar this year?"

Carter sat back with a smile on his face. "Good work, Dart. Keep up this kind of work and you may *actually* retire from the FBI one of these days. Let's bring these guys in."

Dart smiled, satisfied with his theory, and in the back of his mind, crossed his fingers that he was right. He stood up and left the office just as Bethany was escorting in Kelly Rodgers.

Kelly sat down, and an arousing scent of a flower based perfume wafted in Carter's direction. Kelly smiled and pointed back to the exiting Jamie Dart.

"Did I just hear you say, 'let's bring them in'?" Kelly asked, eager for a new story. "Does it have to do with the Harvest Slasher?"

"Stop," Carter said, trying to remain professional. Kelly's smile disappeared.

"Stop what?"

"Stop prying. Stop speculating. Stop investigating and most importantly, stop fueling the killer. Deputy Reed and I specifically told you not to publish that 'Harvest Slasher' crap.

That is exactly what he wants. He wants to make a name for himself, and you pretty much just handed it to him. Do you know how much more dangerous you have made this whole situation?”

“Don’t accuse me of ‘fueling’ a psychopath. He was going to do all of this with or without my little nickname. I’m a writer. A catchy nickname will grab the readers’ attention. The more attention the story receives, the more attention people will pay to the case – that means more tips. And don’t tell me to stop investigating. That’s my job. I don’t tell you to stop Sheriff-ing, do I?”

Carter was disgusted by her sarcasm and stubborn attitude. The two of them sat in silence for a moment as they calmed down. Kelly stood up.

“I have a story to write. If I were you, I’d ‘bring them in’ so we can put an end to this, because if you honestly think I want to be writing about innocent people being butchered, then you’re dead wrong. I’d rather write stories on the festival, high school football, or maybe even a hero piece now and then.” She pointed at him during her last example. “Maybe I’ll be able to write a hero piece pretty soon.”

Kelly Rodgers calmly left the office. Carter was silent.

Deputy Reed and Officer Dart exited the police station from the back, and headed towards their cruisers.

“So we’re getting Aiden Becker and Bruce Slater for more questioning?” Reed tried to confirm.

“Yeah.”

“And this was an order from the Sheriff?”

“Yeah.”

“What tipped him off?” Reed asked.

“I was doing some research on the side and it would appear that these two individuals might be worth looking into a little more.” Dart explained.

Reed was impressed. “Good job, rookie. You might survive around here after all.”

“Thanks.” Dart was sincere.

“Okay, I’ll grab Slater, you get Becker,” Reed said, jumping into his cruiser. Dart jumped into his vehicle as well, and they sped out of the parking lot, sounding the lights and sirens.

13

October 22nd, 1:15 PM

Deputy Reed sped down West Summit Avenue and came to a stop in front of a large colonial style home with white siding and brown shutters.

He jumped out of the car and with one hand on his gun, he jogged up the walkway and onto the front porch. He knocked on the door.

“Mr. Slater, this is the police. Please open up!”

There was no answer. He pounded the door a few more times, repeating his initial dialogue. The residence was silent. He reached for the doorknob and turned it. The house was unlocked. Reed pushed the door open and walked in.

The house was cold. The heat had not yet been turned on and with the fifty-degree temperatures outside, it was definitely uncomfortable. Reed made his way through the home, which looked like a pigsty. He could hear a television on upstairs.

Reed positioned himself at the bottom of the stairs and called up. “Bruce? Are you up there?”

A rustling noise in the room above him caught his attention. There seemed to be a groaning coming from upstairs. Reed ran up the stairs and turned the corner, raising his police issue Beretta.

“Bruce?” Reed called out as he peered into the bedroom. He swung to the left and saw Bruce laying on the floor in a t-shirt and gym shorts. He had blood dripping from his forehead.

“Oh my God, Bruce. Are you alright?” Reed asked, hurrying to his side. He rolled him over, and Bruce moaned. His eyes fluttered but finally opened, revealing them extremely bloodshot.

“What happened?” Reed asked.

“I was trying...trying to sleep. I reached over for...for the...the...” Bruce was slurring his speech and waving his arm around aimlessly.

“For crying out loud, Bruce, you’re drunk!” Reed looked up at the nightstand, which had blood on one of the corners. Reed shook his head and helped Bruce to his feet.

“What’s the deal, Deputy? Did you find him yet? Is the festival back on?” Bruce spoke in a tired and groggy manner.

“Is that what this is about, Bruce? Your precious festival gets canned and you drink yourself to death? No, its not back on and no, we haven’t got him yet. That’s why I’m here. We need you to come down to the station for some questioning.”

“What?” Bruce grew loud and pulled himself from Reed’s grip. “I don’t need to come down there!”

“Bruce, I suggest you cooperate.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Bruce stumbled away, causing a ruckus. “That jerk Slasher ruined everything for me!”

“Darn it, Bruce!” Reed grabbed a hold of him, wrestled him to the ground, and cuffed him.

Officer Jamie Dart left his cruiser running in the dirt driveway at the Becker house. He walked up the front steps and rang the doorbell. Aiden answered the door within seconds. His eyes were red, and he was surprised to see the officer.

“Can I help you, officer?” Aiden asked.

“Yeah. We have orders from the Sheriff to bring you in for further questioning. So, you need to come with me,” Dart said, staying calm and professional.

“Questioning? Am I a suspect?” Aiden was stunned. He rubbed his eyes and sniffled.

“It’s procedure. We have a few more questions. Are you...crying?” Dart said, noticing the tears.

“You weren’t supposed to see that,” Aiden said, wiping his face. “It’s Brandon. He was in a really depressed mood, you know, because of everything that’s happened. I haven’t seen him in about a week.”

Dart’s eyes shot open. “He’s missing? Why didn’t you call us?”

“Because I wasn’t thinking anything bad. I knew his mind was all over the place. He was unstable. I just thought he wanted

to get away for a bit, so I didn't think anything of it. But all of his stuff is still here. He just disappeared."

"Okay, I still need you to come with me. We'll find your brother, Aiden."

"Do you think he could be a..." Aiden stopped in mid sentence, and Dart waited for him to finish. "... killer?"

"We're not excluding any possibilities at this time. C'mon, we'll talk about it at the station."

3:35 PM

Ashley Penner sat in the living room of her apartment. The TV was on, but was on mute. She had a dazed look on her face.

Mark Jenson walked into the room, zombie-like. They had both been devastated by the recent events. Friends had been killed and the town was in a state of dread. Mark cleared his throat behind Ashley, snapping her out of her infinite stare.

"I'm leaving for a bit," Mark impassively said.

"What? What do you mean?" Ashley asked.

"I need some time. I'm feeling sick. I'm getting angry and I don't want you to have to see me like that."

"Mark, we've known each other since high school. You can let me see you however you are. Plus, you would just leave me here alone? With a killer out there?"

“I’ll be back. I just need to find some kind of peace.”

“I can’t believe how selfish you’re being!”

“I’m not being selfish, Ashley. Please, I need time.”

Mark grabbed his jacket off the hook and left the apartment.

“Mark, you jerk!” Ashley cried from the couch.

6:00 PM

Deputy Reed walked into Carter’s office, where the soft, bouncy music of The Beatles played from a portable radio on his desk. Carter was leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed. He sensed his Deputy’s presence, and woke up.

“Why don’t you go home and get some rest, Sheriff.” Reed said.

“No time.” Carter gathered his thoughts. “How’d the interviewing go?”

“Well,” Reed began, “Bruce Slater passed out due to intoxication, and Aiden seems to be more worried about this brother. We’re going to hold them both overnight and try again tomorrow.”

Carter nodded. He noticed Reed had his coat and hat on. “Are you leaving?”

“Yeah. My shift is up. I’ll be in tomorrow to help with the questioning.”

Carter yawned and nodded again. “See you then.”

Reed left and Carter stood up, walking out to the front desk where Bethany was putting on her coat.

“Are you out of here too, Bethany?” Carter asked.

“Yup.”

“Have a good night. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Sheriff,” Bethany said, shutting off her computer monitor. She bundled up and left. Carter stood in the lobby by himself. He looked over at the holding cells where Bruce was passed out in one of them. Aiden was lying on the bench inside the other one – he appeared to be asleep.

He could hear other officer’s voices throughout the station. Carter felt alone. How could a month long murder spree take place, and his department couldn’t even get one break, tip, clue or lead. They were missing something. The answer had to be easier than it appeared.

The killer was looking for attention – local and national. He wants to be known. He was to create a legacy – a tall tale that people will be telling for years. He’s trying to put Stewart Hollow on the map. Why had he specifically chosen Halloween themed killings? He could have done this anytime in the year, but he had chosen to do it now. *‘The Legend of Stewart Hollow’* suggested the legacy would live on forever – how could the killer be so sure of this?

But who was it? Could there have been a random person passing through and killing people before he decided to leave? Or could it be someone they'd already questioned? Someone who excels in lying? Someone involved in the festival? Someone not involved, but just looking on, hiding in plain sight. The one gut feeling that kept coming back to Carter was the most haunting. Someone in Stewart Hollow was not who they appeared to be. Someone who seemed like an average Joe, a neighbor, a friend or an acquaintance – was moonlighting as a serial killer.

Something else was bothering Carter; something that 'The Legend' spoke of: *It starts with a puzzling poem, and culminates on Halloween, when the unexpected is the center of a horrific scene of repulsive horror.*

What did that mean? Were they still in for a surprise?

14

October 25th, 9:35 AM

Stewart Hollow had become Hell. It was now known for its body count instead of its 'Peaceful Family Community' like all the signs said. Thanks to news coverage from all over Oregon and locally by Kelly Rodgers, The Harvest Slasher was now being mentioned on new stations from San Francisco to New York City. It was not the publicity the Mayor wanted for his town.

The month had grown cold. The dead trees loomed over the town, their branches extending like brittle fingers from a beast – naked of their leaves. They acted as portentous reminders of the time of year.

The streets were nearly bare during the day and completely vacant at night. Families were in their homes by dark and their doors and windows were latched shut shortly after.

Bruce Slater and Aiden Becker had been released from their holding cells a day earlier. Neither of them could supply any further information. They had planned to keep a close eye on Bruce because of his unstable emotions. Aiden was truly worried about his brother's whereabouts. The police presence around town was enhanced, and everyone was searching for Brandon.

Sheriff Carter entered the police station with a cup of coffee in hand. Due to fatigue and stress, he hadn't paid too much attention to his appearance in recent days. His hair had grown long enough to the point where he'd just throw on his Sheriff's hat everyday. His normal five o'clock shadow was traded in for a dark gray scruff and bags under his eyes were proof of little sleep. He really looked like a different man.

Carter passed by Bethany, who was on the computer, and walked directly into his office. The desk was scattered with papers and files and the rest of the office was just as messy. He sat down and cleared a spot off for his coffee. He looked around, not sure exactly what to tackle first.

Before he was forced to dive into the stacks of files in front of him, a knock at the door lifted his eyes. Stacy Reed stood before him. She had her coat on, and was holding two cups of coffee.

"Good morning, Carter," she said in a perky manner.

"Good morning, Stacy. What are you doing here?" Carter asked.

"I stopped by to see Alan before I went into work. I have a coffee for him."

"I haven't seen him yet. I just got here. Did you ask Bethany?"

“Yeah, she hadn’t seen him either. He left this morning at 7. I thought for sure we would have been here by now.” A slightly worried look slowly crawled over her face.

“I’ll try his radio.” Carter pulled out his radio and called for Reed. “Deputy Allan Reed, please report. Over.”

They waited for a moment and the only response they got was static. Carter repeated himself twice more with the same results.

“Alright, Stacy, you should go to work. We’ll find Alan and I’ll call you as soon as I hear anything. Was he driving his cruiser?”

“Yeah.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard to find. I’ll head out right now.”

“And you’ll call me?”

“I sure will.”

“Carter, you don’t think anything happened to him, do you?” Stacy asked, honestly worried.

Carter made eye contact with her and firmly said, “We can’t think that way. I’m sure he got side tracked. Maybe he got a tip or something that he’s following up on.”

Stacy nodded without saying a word.

Carter drove through town and the outskirts for nearly an hour and came up with nothing. There was no sign of Reed’s cruiser,

and no answers from him over the radio. Carter kept telling himself over and over: *I'll find him. Nothing has happened to him. Nothing has happened.*

On his way back to the station, Carter's cell phone rang.

"Hello?" he asked without looking at the incoming callers name.

"Sheriff, it's Bethany."

"What is it?"

"I just got a call from Abe. He said he found an abandoned police cruiser on Roots Mill Road."

"Abe? We might as well just hire him!" Carter closed his eyes tight and calmed himself down. "Thanks, Bethany. I'll check it out."

Carter tossed his phone onto the seat next to him and ignited the lights and siren on his car. He skid in to a full 180 degree turn, and sped back the other direction towards Roots Mill Road.

Carter arrived on Roots Mill only a few minutes later, with his sirens screaming into the countryside. He passed by several mailboxes and saw Abe's truck sitting up ahead. He slammed on his breaks and stopped right behind the mail truck.

Carter got out and approached Abe who was standing by the side of the road. "Tell me, Abe. Why are you the lucky one who

gets to find all of this stuff? Not to mention you hand delivered us two letters this month that I have not been very fond of.”

Abe stared at Carter, understanding why he snapped, but tried to defend his dignity anyway. “I work for the Post Office, Sheriff. With all of the places I deliver to, I am usually always in the right spot at the right time. You’d be surprised how many strange things I’ve seen out here that I haven’t called in. But this one, I figured you’d be interested in.”

“Where’s the car?” Carter asked.

Abe pointed off the side of the road where there was a thicket of trees that stretched back across the land into a large wooded area. Sitting not that deep into the trees was a Stewart Hollow police cruiser.

Carter looked at the side of the road where there had been tire tracks cutting into the grass. He stepped into the thicket and examined the car.

“It’s my Deputy’s.” Carter called back to Abe.

“Why would his car be way out here?”

Carter shook his head. “I don’t know.”

15

October 27th, 3:15 PM

Mayor Hopkins stood at the podium in front of City Hall. Sheriff Carter stood by his side, as did an increasingly larger amount of security for the Mayor. The crowd before them was filled with all media types, but this time not just from the local area. There were news crews from California, Washington, Nevada – pretty much every state in the west. Citizens of Stewart Hollow were also scattered in the bunch, ranting in resentment.

Hopkins tapped the microphone a few times, making sure it worked. He was nervous about his speech. This was the third press conference they had to call in connection with the killings. It was three too many.

“Good afternoon my fellow citizens of Stewart Hollow,” the Mayor began, breathing in the fresh air. The sky was blue and the sun was out, providing somewhat of a relaxed, regrouping atmosphere for the town. “I am here this afternoon to update you on the serial killings case. I’ll be frank, honest and cut right to the chase. We currently have six identified dead bodies and now we find ourselves with two missing persons, Brandon Becker and our very own Deputy Sheriff, Allan Reed.

“It is of great importance and priority that we locate these two individuals and bring them back to their homes and jobs safely. I have been in contact with a local bureau of the F.B.I., and they are not happy with our approach. They are, and I quote, ‘one more body away from taking over’.”

The crowd roared. A reporter from a California news station shouted at the Mayor. “This is terrible police work, and none of this has looked good for your town, Mayor!”

The reporters comment sparked more havoc in the crowd. Hopkins jumped in and tried to take control again. “We are working around the clock to make this a safe community again.”

“That’s what you’ve been saying for almost a month!” Someone yelled out.

“At this rate the whole town will have to be murdered in order to find the killer! The last one standing is guilty!” A reporter yelled.

“Folks, please. I need everyone to stay calm!” Hopkins shouted.

The crowd disagreed. Hopkins threw his hands up in the air in defeat and stormed back into City Hall. Carter followed him and his crack team of security tough guys entered the crowd to restore order.

Cater stood before the Mayor’s desk in an office about six times the size of his, and decorated with American flags and

presidential portraits. Hopkins rubbed his temples gently then looked up at Carter.

“You’re putting me in a tough spot, Ben. I have six bodies and two missing people. One of which is a cop. Now how does that assure safety? A cop has gone missing? Now I have the Feds breathing down my neck. This situation does not look good for any of us, you know that right?”

Carter nodded, trying to stay professional. Deep down he was ashamed. Ashamed and scared – his partner was missing.

“You need to take care of this now. Actually, you needed to take care of this about three weeks ago. Don’t make me use disciplinary actions on you, Carter. I will if I have to. I need the re-election next year.”

Hopkins waited for Carter to say something, but he never did. He left the office quietly, holding onto his diminishing dignity.

October 28th, 1:55 AM

Ashley Penner was asleep on the couch. She had barely moved in the past week. The only time she would get up was to eat or go to the bathroom, but even then, she tried to avoid it. The killings had completely messed with her mind. She was scared, grieving and alone.

Mark had left a couple days ago to clear his mind, and he still hadn’t returned. Ashley feared the worst, but then again, she

thought the worst about everything nowadays. Life seemed to be crumbling. Her friends were dying and the town was aghast in fear. It wasn't safe to go outside. It wasn't safe to talk to your neighbor. The killer could have been anyone.

The TV was on but muted, flickering shades of blue through the dark room. 'Zombie Invasion 3' was on. Ashley hated those movies, but they reminded her of Mark. She needed to be comforted by his presence somehow. This was all she had.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

The knocking on the door violently woke Ashley up. She jumped to her feet in a fraction of a second. Her mascara had smeared down her cheeks and remained there for days. She wiped some of it away.

"Who is it?" She asked. There was no answer. She asked again, this time a little louder. "Who's there?"

No answer.

"Mark?"

No answer. Maybe there wasn't anyone even there. Maybe she had dreamt the 'knocks' and woke herself up.

But there was someone there. Someone was breathing heavily on the other side of the door. Someone who held a rusted butchers knife in the cold grip of his trembling hand.

16

October 28th, 7:39 AM

Police tape was stung all over the Willow Tail apartment building. Some cops were outside, holding off the media, while others were inside, snapping photos. A coroners van sat in the parking lot next to an ambulance and a fire engine.

Sheriff Carter pulled up to the scene and walked heavily into the building where an officer in bloody latex gloves awaited him.

“Good morning, Sheriff,” the young officer said.

“I don’t think it is, is it?”

“Uh, well, no. Not really,” the officer stuttered.

“What do we have?”

The officer began to explain the scene to Carter as they hopped on the elevator and rode it to the fourth floor. “It’s a single victim – as far as we can tell. Her name was Ashley Penner.”

Carter cringed, already expecting it to be a familiar name.

The young officer continued, “Her neighbor went for an early morning walk and saw Ashley’s apartment door was kicked in. She looked inside, and well, called us.”

“What kind of condition is the body in?” Carter hesitantly asked. By this time, they had reached the outside of Ashley Penner’s apartment. The officer lifted the crime scene tape over Carter’s head.

“Why don’t you look for yourself?”

Carter entered the room and stopped. It was appalling - absolutely unspeakable. The room was soaked in blood. The walls, the couch, the carpet – all of it was stained dark red. Carter walked in, strapping on a pair of latex gloves. He approached the back of the living room where the main attraction was. Ashley Penner was sitting straight up in a wooden chair. Her head was missing, but propped on top of her torn up shoulders was a carved pumpkin. The face of the pumpkin was nightmarish. Blood dripped down the smooth, orange sides and onto the floor next to her.

Carter turned his attention to the wall behind her. Sketched in blood on the wall, were the words: A DWELLING HAUNTED...

What could that possibly mean? Carter turned back to the young officer who subtly refused to enter the room again. “Where’s her head?”

The officer pointed to the trashcan in the kitchen area.

“And where is Mark Jenson? He’s Ashley’s boyfriend.”

The officer responded vaguely. “The same neighbor said Mark left a few days ago. No one has heard from him since.”

“Another missing person?” Carter began to feel overwhelmed. He felt like quitting right then and there; leave it all to someone else.

There were literally hundreds of photos snapped at the latest crime scene. It stuck with killers’ signature – Halloween themed. Besides her head being replaced by a carved pumpkin, toss in the fact that it was an employee of the community center and festival worker, and the answer was simple – it was the latest work of the Harvest Slasher.

Carter and Dart flipped through the hundreds of crime scene photos looking for anything. The most interesting pictures to Carter were the ones of the writing on the wall.

“What do you think that means? ‘A dwelling haunted?’” Carter asked, sort of intrigued by the newest addition to the legend.

Dart grabbed a photo and looked at the words. “Something about a haunted house I would guess. I mean, dwelling means house or home. Haunted is, well, haunted. He might be saying that since Ashley Penner was murdered there, her dwelling might be haunted now? Is he trying to create a landmark?”

Carter didn't answer right away. He just thought. He also thought about the three dots at the end of 'haunted'.

"This is part of a message," Carter said. "The three dots at the end suggest that there is another part to it."

"So what do we do? Wait for the next message?" Dart asked, hoping that's not what Carter meant. But it was.

"We're going to have to. Unless we can catch this guy before he needs to make it known." Carter stood up. "Dart, get an officer over to Bruce Slater's house and have him keep an eye on the place. Bruce is one of the last one's that could be on the hit list. Mark is missing, Brandon is missing and Deputy Reed is missing. Either something horrible has happened to them, or one of them might be involved or at least know something."

"You would consider Deputy Reed a suspect?"

"At this point in the investigation, Dart, I would consider you a suspect."

Dart was shocked.

"No one is off the hook at this point. No one."

The next day, zero progress had been made. The investigations continued, as did the search parties. The missing persons were broadcasted around the country just to be safe, but everyone knew they had to still be in Stewart Hollow somewhere.

Bruce Slater was ordered to stay in his home for the remainder of the month. There was twenty-four hour police protection in front of his home.

Sheriff Carter also assigned police protection to guard the Becker house. Aiden was alone and afraid for his brothers safely.

The investigations on the 29th turned up nothing new for the case.

October 30th arrived and the Mayor made a public announcement that trick or treating would be cancelled – the first time in Stewart Hollow’s one hundred and seven year existence. The killer was really making an impact on the community.

The children were disappointed that there would be no costumes, candy or pranks, but the parents felt relieved. They wouldn’t have to worry about their children out at night or keeping an eye on them in the dark streets with a serial killer possibly eyeing them from behind a house or the bushes.

The day ended and the night began. It was cold. There were few clouds in the sky, and the moon was so bright that it made the streetlights in town redundant. Small gusts of wind kicked up dead leaves off the grass and hurled them into the streets. The grass had been damp from a light rain earlier in the day, and the air smelled of pure autumn. The night grew menacing as the crickets sung until the early morning hours. Halloween was upon the town.

17

October 31st, 8:40 AM

It was Halloween - the prophesized, and dreaded, final day in the Harvest Slasher's rampage through Stewart Hollow. According to the legend, on this day, *'the unexpected is the center of a horrific scene of repulsive horror'*

Sheriff Carter drove into the station expecting the worst. A pile of bloody corpses on the doorstep, Bethany's decapitated head sitting on his desk, a psycho with an axe hiding in the back seat of his car waiting for the perfect time to strike. Carter looked over his shoulder and the backseat was empty.

He arrived at the police station and there was still no word on Deputy Reed or the other missing people for that matter. Could one of them be responsible?

He sat at his desk and rifled through the ever-growing stack of files and folders. He was looking for anything - anything that could possibly tip him off. Did they miss something? Was there some subtle clue that was overlooked?

Carter pulled out the original poem they received at the beginning of the month. He read it over about a half a dozen times. It was haunting knowing that someone had planned this.

It had been on someone's mind for a while. What drives someone to actually go through with something like this?

He pulled out the second letter he'd received – 'the legend'. He read through it again, more than once. He glanced down at the envelope and stared at the little pumpkin sticker. He moved his attention to the postmarking in the top corner. It was postmarked in town. Someone just dropped it off in front of the Post Office in a collection box. The killer physically did this. Would he be on the Post Office's security footage? Sure he would. But so would everyone else. It was a small town and everyone used that office. It was a useless endeavor.

It was postmarked on October 9th at 5:11 PM. A ridiculous 'fake legend' was physically typed, sealed and sent. Who would waste their time? What was this all for?

A light switched on in Carter's head – a revelation. October 9th? He rustled back through the stack of papers again and pulled out a few of the Hollow Gazette's. He scoured for the October 10th issue. On the front page, the story was titled "*Stewart Hollow Falls Victim to the Harvest Slasher.*"

This was the first story that referenced that name - that God-awful moniker that Kelly Rodgers had created. Carter flipped the envelope back over and read where he had scribbled the date he actually opened the letter – October 11th.

He thought for a moment. The first time that name was used publicly was on the 10th. The only time before that that it was

mentioned was at the Oregon Trails Diner where she presented it to him and Deputy Reed. The letter was postmarked on the 9th – after the diner incident. The only people who knew the killer by that name then was Kelly, Carter and...Reed?

Deputy Reed was missing. The only person missing that had nothing to do with the festival at all. Carter wondered why Reed, of all people, would be missing. He wasn't even involved with the festival. He was an outsider.

Carter sprung to his feet and rushed into the office's lobby.

"Everyone gather around!" He called out to all of his officers. "I need officers out and about today. This is the killers' big day. I don't know what he has planned, but we all need to be on our guard. Keep your eyes open for anything and everything suspicious, and it is very important – and I can't stress that enough – that we locate Deputy Allan Reed. Let's get moving!"

There was energy in the room now. The officers were focused and ready to bring the serial killer to justice.

Carter looked over at the front desk where Bethany was holding the phone to her ear with one hand, and waving him down with the other.

"What is it, Beth?" Carter asked.

"It's John Blankenship. He wants to talk to you."

Carter grabbed the phone. "John? What is it, we're a little busy here."

“Sheriff, someone broke into my store.” John spoke quickly and urgently. “The windows are shattered and the place is a complete wreck. Someone wrote graffiti all over the back wall in red paint or something. I think it’s something you may want to see.”

“I’ll be right there.” Carter hung up the phone. “Dart!” He called into the sea of officers. Jamie Dart came squeezing through.

“What?”

“Come with me. The Halloween store was broken into. This could be the start of the killer’s final plans.”

Carter and Dart dashed outside and into the Sheriff’s cruiser. They flipped the sirens and sped off.

The police cruiser came to a screeching halt in front of the general store. The siren shut off, but the lights still spun. They jumped out and ran up to the store’s entrance.

John was right. The front pane glass windows were shattered. The store’s alarm system was ringing at painfully annoying levels. Carter put his hand on his gun and stepped through the broken window. Dart followed suit.

The store was trashed. The shelves were tossed to the ground and the merchandise was scattered all over the floor – ripped up and broken.

“John, are you here?” Carter called out. There was no response. Carter and Dart made their way to the back of the store and stared at the wall.

John was right again. In a dark red paint – hopefully paint – there were words written on the wall: ...IS A DEWLLING ON RUINS.

“It’s the other half of the message,” Carter said. “A dwelling haunted, is a dwelling in ruins.” He looked around at the mess again. “This place is certainly in ruins. Is the killer talking about the store?”

“On ruins,” Dart corrected him. “A dwelling *on* ruins.”

“Huh?” Carter was confused.

“A dwelling haunted, is a dwelling on ruins.” Dart thought for a moment. “Something about a haunted house on ruins.”

Dart stopped speaking. It came to him. “Ruins Avenue. There’s supposedly a haunted house on that street, right? I’ve heard the local kids try to break in there for scares each Halloween.”

“Oh my God, you might be right. Come on!” They rushed back to the police car.

They drove down Ruins Avenue – a long stretch of country road where lines of dead oak trees on either side of them reached unnaturally for the gray sky above them. When a clearing on the

right side of the road came into view, they saw the ‘haunted house’ sitting ominously back in the fields. Carter turned onto the long gravel driveway and they bumped and shook their way up to the house.

A green Honda sat out in front of the house with the drivers’ window rolled down. Carter parked the car and let the lights on top continue to swirl. He stepped out and investigated the Honda. There was no one in it and the seats were empty. No trash; no nothing.

He poked his head in through the window and was greeted with a sudden and overwhelmingly familiar scent – flowers.

Carter retracted his head and looked up at the towering house sitting there quiet and dark – waiting for them.

“Whose car is that?” Dart asked.

Carter drew his Beretta. “Kelly Rodgers’.”

With both of their guns now drawn, they walked up the creaking wooden steps and saw the front door was cracked open.

They entered cautiously.

The house reeked of stereotypes. Thick cobwebs hung in every corner. Melted candles were scattered about on old tables and counter tops. Dusty sheets covered the rotting furniture and the floor was chock-full of cracks and holes. It was a lot of hard work by the Harvest Slasher to deliver his long awaited finale.

On a dirty table on the far side of the room, there was a small printed note propped up in between the only two burning candles in the room. It read: BURRIED ABOVE YOU.

Carter looked up at the ceiling.

“What now?” Dart whispered.

“We go upstairs,” Carter quietly responded. They looked around the crypt-like living room. The house was hauntingly quiet – not a single sound.

Carter grabbed his walkie and spoke softly into it. “Beth, I need backup at the old house on Ruins Avenue.”

“I’ll dispatch them now, Sheriff,” her voice crackled back.

Carter and Dart quietly made their way up the stairs. Death’s scent hung in the air. At the top of the stairs they turned the corner away from a dark bedroom, and into the hallway. Their eyes widened and their jaws dropped.

Four bodies sat in the hallway – two against each wall. The tops of the bodies were covered in old burlap sheets. Blood had soaked into their visible clothing.

Dart made a move but Carter stopped him immediately.

“What?” Dart asked quickly, startled by Carter’s grip on shoulder. “Should we wait for backup?”

“No,” Carter said, examining the bodies from a distance. All of them seemed motionless – dead.

“Who are they?” Dart asked, his voice becoming slightly louder.

CLICK!

The hammer on a pistol, locking into place, echoed through the hallway. The cops swung around, raising their guns. From the blackness of the bedroom behind them, Kelly Rodgers materialized, aiming a police issue Beretta at them.

The three of them stood in silence for a moment, before Carter broke it. “What’s going on here, Kelly?” Carter grit his teeth in anger.

“Happy Halloween, Sheriff.” Kelly said with a smile on her face.

“What the heck were you thinking!” Carter shouted as his temper flared.

“I have to be honest, Carter. I never actually intended to write a hero piece on you – or at all. The only story I wanted to tell was a good old fashion horror tale. A Halloween story – you know, Poe-like. A story that would live forever.”

“What?” Carter dumbly said in disbelief.

“We just put our town on the map, Carter. Everyone will know Stewart Hollow, Oregon now. It’ll be famous. We’ll be famous.”

“We have the festival! The Halloween Festival! That’s what our town is known for. Family fun, not bloody murder!”

“Oh please, Carter. That festival’s attendance has been in a downwards spiral for years now. People are bored with it. People want something new. Something exciting. Why not just get rid of the festival, and start something new. Something fresh! Like what? Like a legend – a real, living, breathing legend. Tell me that wouldn’t be fascinating! People would come from all over the country to visit our town!”

Kelly’s tone was off, as was the state of her mentality. She began mocking future, hypothetical visitors. “Oh look, mom, that’s the police station that gets harassed every year!’ ‘Look, honey, that’s the farm where the first murder took place! I heard he waiting in the fields until midnight, the stabbed that poor girl to death!’ ‘Look there, son, that’s the haunted house where the end of the legend takes place!’”

Kelly’s eyes were wide – she hadn’t blinked once during her rant. She was excited and shaking nervously.

“And what do you have to gain from this?” Carter questioned, keeping his gun pointed directed between her eyes.

“Are you kidding me? Fame. I wrote the articles on the Harvest Slasher! He attacks each year, and dang it, I’m going to be there every year, for every death. I’ll be the go-to girl! National news coverage, documentaries, tours - merchandise maybe? Who knows, but I’ll be there for it all. Maybe I’ll write a book or two about it. He’s our very own Green River Killer,

our Zodiac. The Harvest Slasher - each year, he appears and stalks the sleepy town of Stewart Hollow.”

Carter noticed that Kelly was losing control of her mind by her increasingly neurotic tone. “Kelly, I am only going to tell you this one time. Drop the gun, turn around and put your hands on your head.”

Kelly smiled with an evil grin. “No.”

“Don’t test me, Kelly!” Carter shouted, sweat dripping from his forehead. “After all the people you killed this month, I would have no problem putting a bullet in your skull. Drop the gun!”

“I didn’t kill anyone.”

“What?” Carter asked. Dart still held his gun out, shaking. The rookie was obviously nervous.

“I said I didn’t kill anyone. I don’t think I even have it in me to kill a person.”

“Then why else would you be pointing a gun at us?” Carter calmed down, only slightly, trying to understand her.

She smiled again – this time even more evil. “Every good story has a twist, Sheriff.”

Carter cocked his head. Something wasn’t right. Something was off. Instinct kicked in and Carter turned around in a flash. Standing before him was one of the blood drenched, burlap covered bodies. It raised a blood-rusted butchers knife into the

air and slammed it down hard into Officer Dart's back. He cried out and dropped to the floor, spilling blood through its' cracks.

Carter lifted his gun and fired a shot at the concealed killer. He let out a loud grunt and fell backwards, dropping the bloody knife.

POP!

Kelly's gun rang out and pierced the top of Carter's shoulder. He spun around, smearing blood on the wall. He lifted his gun again and fired another couple of shots towards Kelly.

POP! POP!

Kelly flew back into the dark room, spitting blood like a fountain, and dropping her Beretta. Dart was on his knees, bleeding profusely from the wound on his back.

The mystery man on the ground rolled around, groaning. He had been hit in the chest by Carter's bullet. Carter stumbled over to him and ripped the blood stained, burlap sheet off.

John Blankenship lay on the floor in the hallway, bleeding from his chest. The searing pain consumed him and he began to yell out obscenities.

Sirens screamed in the distance. Help was on the way. Carter took a deep breath and watched as John Blankenship – The Harvest Slasher – rolled around in the pool of his own blood.

Dart collapsed to the floor and Carter rushed to his side. "Hang in there, buddy. I'm going to go flag them down."

Dart nodded in approval and Carter ran downstairs and met a squad of police cars out front.

Carter was treated at the scene. A quick bandage job was done on his shoulder and he was good to go. Paramedics wheeled out the deceased body of Kelly Rodgers, covering her face before the stampede of media saw her.

John Blankenship – in cuffs – was loaded into an ambulance and taken way to the hospital where Jamie Dart had also been taken.

A black car pulled up to the scene. Mayor Hopkins hopped out and ran to his Sheriff.

“What happened?” he yelled, out of shape and out of breath.

“The Harvest Slasher happened. Kelly Rodgers and John Blankenship.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Hopkins was shocked. “I just bought decorations from John earlier this month. And Kelly Rodgers? I gave her a private interview last month regarding the festival plans!”

Mayor Hopkins was stunned.

“It’s always the people you least expect,” Carter said.

“What about Deputy Reed?” Hopkins questioned.

Carter pointed over to one of the four coroners vans. “He was in the house.”

“Christ, Ben, I’m sorry.”

Carter nodded.

“Mark Jenson was also in there. As was Brandon Becker.”

The Mayor shook his head. They stood there and watched as the coroners vans all drove away with more bodies to add to the Harvest Slasher’s collection.

18

November 1st, 10:30 AM

Monday started the new month. It was a fresh start for the small community. The sky was still gray, and even a flurry or two danced in the air.

Inside the police station, Bethany's windowsill pumpkin now sat in her trashcan. She was working on something new. She was decorating a very small, desktop Christmas tree. She wrapped a small cord of lights around it and plugged it in. It lit up, grabbing attention from all over the office.

The front door opened and a bundled up Abe walked in with a stack of mail. He set it down on the desk and talked with Bethany. There were smiles on each of their faces. Relief was definitely in the air.

Carter entered the building just as Abe was leaving. He smiled at the Christmas tree.

Carter laughed, "Christmas, already?"

"I want to forget about Halloween. I want to forget about October and all the monsters, ghouls and goblins that come with it. I want to focus on Christmas now," Bethany said.

"I don't blame you."

“Stacy Reed called a little while ago. She said she’d be in touch with you at some point today about funeral arrangements for Allan.”

“I’ll be waiting for that call. Thank you, Bethany.”

She smiled.

“Did the hospital call yet?” Carter continued.

“They sure did. Jamie Dart is in recovery – his surgery went very well.”

“Good to hear.” Carter sighed in relief. He chuckled, “That guy was always looking for his first big break. He helped take down the Harvest Slasher – it doesn’t get much bigger for a rookie.”

Mayor Hopkins entered the station with his now excessive security team.

“Carter,” he called out upon his entrance. “Did he talk?”

“Yes he did.”

“And?”

“Come to my office,” Carter said, leading the way.

Mayor Hopkins and Sheriff Carter sat in his office. This security team stood outside the closed door.

“Well, what did our little psycho say?” Hopkins asked.

“John Blankenship gave a full confession,” Carter began, noticing a satisfied smile on the Mayor. “He confessed to all nine

murders – in graphic detail. This guy was seriously disturbed. He’s going to go through a psychiatric evaluation first, but he’ll be going away forever. They transported him early this morning to a place in Portland.”

“What else did he say?”

“Apparently he and Kelly were dating. That would explain why when Brady Murphy was killed and we called John’s alibi – who apparently was Kelly – she backed his story. He claimed he left early that night from work, but in reality he just waited outside of the store for Brady to be alone.”

Hopkins nodded, listening intently.

“He was afraid of her,” Carter continued. “She wore the pants, if you know what I mean. She was demanding and impatient with him. He was a coward and did everything she said – a lap dog with an unhinged mind. She was the brains behind the Harvest Slasher, and he did all the dirty work.”

“It’s sickening.”

“It sure is.”

Mayor Hopkins stood up, as did Carter. They shook hands.

“I am not pleased with the investigation by any means, Carter. The killings should not have gone this far. I am going to have to arrange for some kind of disciplinary action for you – I apologize. But I am so thankful this is over. Stewart Hollow can now rest and try to make the best out of the coming holidays.”

Carter nodded without speaking as the Mayor left. Carter walked him and his security clique out the front door. He sighed and turned back around to Bethany. She had an unexpected look on her face. She was scared.

“Bethany, what is it?” Carter asked, concerned. Her hand was shaking uncontrollably as she handed him an opened envelope addressed to the Stewart Hollow Sheriff’s Department. The bold letters stared him in the face like an old enemy looking for revenge. There was no pumpkin sticker on the envelope, so that was good. Or was it? He opened the envelope and pulled out a folded piece of computer paper. He became light headed and his stomach churned as he read the words inside:

*I've sat and I've watched.
I've admired what he's done.
As my promise to this town,
There will be more to come.
You can beg and you can plead,
But this I guarantee,
Next October,
Again this town will bleed.*