

PROLOGUE

EVERY TOWN HAS ITS SHARE OF SECRETS. And when whispered by children in the dead of night, some secrets become stories. They percolate and brew and change. Sometimes, under special circumstances, the stories become legends, destined to survive even as the children who share them grow up and move on.

In a town called Hedston, a ruined building called Graylock Hall stood in the state forest like an enormous funeral monument. It had once been a notorious psychiatric hospital housing almost one thousand patients. Local kids referred to it as “the asylum in the woods,” and most of them knew well enough to stay away. Since its closing, the secrets contained within the hospital’s walls had given rise to a frightening legend of madness and murder. If you’d grown up nearby, the subject of that legend — a nurse who had worked the graveyard shift — would have haunted your nightmares from an early age.

It started with a storm.

Late one night while the hospital was still in operation, the building lost electricity in the midst of a summer thunderstorm. During the blackout, one of the patients from the youth ward went missing. The next morning, the staff found the girl’s body — drowned, bloated, and blue — facedown in the reeds at the water’s edge.

Then, several months later, a second patient drowned — another storm, another power outage. Some of Graylock's staff grew suspicious of the nurse who had been on duty during both accidents, but they said nothing. After a third drowning, the staff wished they hadn't kept their fears secret.

Three children lost. Three bodies discovered at the water's edge — small limbs tangled in lake weed, eyes staring blindly at the pale morning sky.

The people of Hedston refused to believe that the deaths were a coincidence. And so they arrested the nurse who'd worked the graveyard shift, claiming that the madness of the place had infected her — that she had decided death was the only way to end the suffering of the children in her charge. To add to the townspeople's horror, a day after her arrest, the police discovered the nurse's body hanging from a bedsheet that she'd tied to the bars of her cell.

With the nurse's death, the truth of the matter would remain her secret, a secret that became a story, a story that became a legend.

Within a few short years, the hospital was shut down. Graylock Hall was left to rot, but in the town of Hedston, the tale of Nurse Janet lived on.

And they say that, inside the abandoned building, a woman in white still wanders the corridors, her thick-heeled shoes click-clacking against the tile as she follows at an arm's length behind anyone who dares intrude. When she catches you, she sticks you with her needle, then drags you outside to the water's edge, down to the deep tangles of clutching lake weed.

They say she smiles as she holds you under — her face blurred as you stare up through the silvery surface, her teeth glistening

white — delighted to continue her murderous quest to end the suffering of the insane. For who but those with their own touch of madness would dare enter the asylum in the woods and pursue its terrible secrets?

Everyone knows you'd have to be crazy to do something like that.