

PROLOGUE

October 31, 1996

Tabitha Sweeney sat alone on a concrete barrier cordoning off the main thoroughfare of downtown Lauradelle, far from the crowd gathering near the City Hall's front lawn. Her mind remained clear, her thoughts indifferent. Oh, she had many opinions and emotions when it came to the soul of Lauradelle, Missouri. Damn hard not to when living in this shithole of a town. But, as she'd point out, she was indifferent to it all.

Some time ago, though she couldn't tell you how long some time ago actually was, Tabitha contented herself to observe the Halloween festivities from afar. This is mainly because no matter what the flyers and advertisements inferred, this particular party had little to do with Halloween.

So, when the townsfolk of Lauradelle made their way to the fairgrounds outside of City Hall and busied themselves with event preparation, Tabitha waited. She waited until twilight dimmed to dusk and floodlights illuminated the browning grass framing the dying annuals along the entryway to City Hall. There, people Tabitha had known for most of her adult life packed together like feasting rats, drinking and dancing, incoherently shouting above the nostalgic pop hits of the 80s. Tabitha rolled her eyes. Same ol' crap, same ol' month.

Hours passed in what seemed like heartbeats, the energy flowing around Tabitha in waves, tickling her senses like the brush of a feather against her bare skin. She swallowed and licked her lips. If she were anywhere else, she'd say this party looked like a good time, and Tabitha was known to tear up a dance floor when the mood struck her. Hell, she picked out three men casually chatting on the west walk she could—and probably had at one point—seduce with nothing more than wink and smile. If it were any other night, she'd certainly consider it.

An undulating wave of expectation licked at her heels, daring her to rise and give it a try. If she didn't know better, she'd almost say the whole

damned town held its collective breath waiting on her decision. Tempting, but not why she's here.

A tap on her foot pulled her attention away from the festivities. Tabitha didn't look, only smiled, then pushed her shoulder-length hair behind her ear. She bent and retrieved a palm-sized polished river stone and smiled.

"It's good to see you," Tabitha stated dryly. "I don't know if you remember me. Hell, I don't know if I remember myself," she said after a bitter swallow. She placed the stone in her lap, marveling at its eyes, left painted red, right blue, as if made from a fallen teardrop. She counted thirty total stitches painted across its misshapen smile. What these stitches sealed, well, that's why she's here. Maybe the answer could turn her indifference into something useful.

Tabitha reached into the pocket of her yellow print sundress, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one, and both watched the tendril of smoke stretch and roll through the chilled night air.

"Tabitha," she said, adding a pause before offering, "Sweeney." Tabitha glanced over her shoulder where the townspeople sang and danced, their voices a whisper lost in a sea of thundering song. A faint tinge suggested the object's interest, yet Tabitha frustratingly left it resting in her lap.

"I know I should be over there, drinking and dancing, lose myself to this town and this month, and not talking to a painted rock." Tabitha glanced down and smiled. "No offense, little one," she said sincerely, continuing her one-way conversation. "They call it an extravaganza, you know? A freaking Halloween party, and it's about as far from a Halloween party as one can get. It's all just preparation to wake up this crap town, 'cause that's what Lauradelle wants, you know? It's what we all wanted because it's what we 'lived and died for,' whatever that means. That's why we're here, right? To serve this crap-tastic town?" Tabitha asked. The stone didn't respond, at least not the way Tabitha wanted, but she felt its projected sympathy. Tabitha's slight nod suggested the message was received.

"So, that's what they do," Tabitha confessed. She stood, then turned so both could scrutinize the party spilling into the streets before them. "You see it, right?" she asked, lifting the stone so it could see above the wave of

costumed heads kicking and dancing to the thrum of music blaring out of far too many speakers. It, however, couldn't quite understand the point Tabitha was trying to make and relayed a feeling of confusion.

Tabitha explained how the townspeople had gathered hours before the entity in the stone opened its painted eyes, growing exponentially as if most "appeared" rather than arrived, to the point where one person's shoulder nearly touched another. Next, Tabitha scanned the lawn and adjacent street, lifting the painted stone above the crowd of waving hands, offering a birds-eye view of Lauradelle's building excitement. None of it said Halloween. All of it pointed to the 1st of November.

They all serve, the little entity projected, and Tabitha nodded in agreement.

You can hear me?

"I can," Tabitha replied. "At least I can now," she clarified.

Who do they serve? The little entity asked in a small, curious pitch.

"I can't tell you who, little one. Just settle with the town for now," Tabitha stated coldly, offering no further clarification. Tabitha turned to gaze into the little entity's painted eyes, and it rewarded Tabitha with an image of its projected smile.

"I did too. Serve, I mean. I suppose I enjoyed it for a time. I suppose we were on a mission to save souls," she chuckled. "Do you remember?" Tabitha glanced into the small entity's colored eyes and sighed. "No, I suppose you don't. You never do, just like the rest of us. Except I do, even when I don't want to. Service to Lauradelle means I get to submit, body and soul. It doesn't matter that it hurts. You're just supposed to bear it, even like it. You have to, no matter..." Tabitha shook her head. The muscles around her jaw pulsed, and she swallowed hard. "I have so many scars. I've died so many times. I don't want to do it anymore. I can't..." Tabitha wiped a tear from her eye and turned away, facing the festive crowd again.

A batch of floodlights sparked to life at the far end of the gathering, illuminating a recently constructed stage. A man dressed in full pirate

regalia sat in the center of the platform, hands tied behind his back. He didn't appear to be conscious.

Two women walked to the podium with arms raised, and the crowd responded with a resounding cheer. They nodded excitedly and pumped their fists, then raised their glasses and drank, the partiers falling suddenly silent as they upended their cups in unison. The first, a tall, swanky rail of a woman, reinvigorated the crowd by cracking the glass over the man's hung head. The second did the same, sparking a chant uproar: *One more time! Ten down, two to go! Kill him now or let him go!* Again, the crowd cheered, adding, *November*—followed by a unified clap—*One!*

Tabitha shook her head and turned from the podium.

Wait! I want to see!

"No, you don't. You've seen it so many times—seen him, so many times," she said, gesturing to the man tied to the chair. "All *he* is, is anger and hate, and I don't want you to see either." Tabitha smiled. "That's going to be my job, little one. I want to be your guiding arrow, the tip of your spear, the eye of your storm. If you'll let me."

The small entity emitted a perplexed aura as it was baffled and saddened by the unconscious man sitting center stage, though it knew not why. The women—too far to discern appreciatively—pricked at a nerve buried deep within its bound soul. It didn't like either of them, just like it didn't like the dark aura of this town nor the feeling that it grew weary of those residing within its borders. It projected its frustration, causing Tabitha to shift uncomfortably and stow an urge to scream. A feeling of rage enveloped them both, and Tabitha suddenly understood that the little entity wanted, nay, it needed to heal this town.

Tabitha swallowed, forcing down a building pool of bile as her mind slipped into what she later described as a raging storm. *It's you, isn't it?* Tabitha asked. *You're pulling me in!*

The painted stone refused to answer and offered Tabitha an exhilarating moment where she could swim in a pool of their combined emotions. The painted stone attempted to fuse and extend their consciousness, careening

through the crowd, sifting through mind after mind, encouraging the partygoers to live and ignore the town's demand to serve. Their conjoined minds were collectively snubbed, as if these scurrying ants could do nothing beyond feeding the town's hunger, following a route so far beyond Lauradelle's original path they'd likely never find their way home.

Their souls were lost, their minds tortured; all they knew was what Tabitha felt when she gazed upon her neighbors: hate, betrayal, isolation, and desperation. She couldn't say where she or anyone in Lauradelle stood on this crazy road, only that she could save them—together, with the entity in the stone. They *could* lead them back to the righteous path, one meant for Lauradelle and the people living within its city limits. Yet, no matter how they tried and whose mind they attempted to sway, neither could break the town's rigid shell. Tabitha nearly fainted after the entity's consciousness collapsed with a sudden jolt.

She could feel the town's spirit laughing as if the two were children, and the town dared their combined storm to make landfall on Lauradelle's protected shores. Then, with no other recourse or path to follow, their minds separated, and both returned their attention to the podium.

"Welcome everyone, and Happy Halloween!" a voice rang out, augmented by a series of speakers on either side of the stage. The crowd cheered, and Tabitha grunted her displeasure.

Why do you hate them so?

"Not them. Never *them*. Him," Tabitha replied, and it knew the pirate to be the target of her ire. "He's evil to the core, and it never, never, never ends, all because of him!"

What never ends? What did he do?

"You know what he's done," Tabitha replied harshly. "You'll finish waking, and you'll know, and you'll hate him, you'll hate the town, you'll just hate... as I do."

What did he do to you?

"He hurt me. He beat me, punched me, cut me...everywhere," Tabitha said. She raised an arm to display a wound, but the small entity found no

scars marring Tabitha's silken skin.

Tabitha shrugged, sensing its confusion, continuing as if the point was made. "But it wasn't the pain; I can always deal with that. It's an old friend, you know? Hell, sometimes I jab myself with a knife to know I'm still here. Still alive. It hurts sometimes, I guess. But it's nothing like what *he* put me through, forcing me to like his cruelty, beg for his knives, whips, or whatever this fucking month gives him when he's out prowling for his next victim. Do you know what's worse? The absolute fuck of it all?" Tabitha swallowed, lifting the stone so their eyes met. "The town encourages it! As if his cruelty is a testament to our free will. All that does is blanket the truth of this place, and goddammit! No souls here shall ever be redeemed. Christ, I want him dead, truly dead this time, and I want this damned town to serve me for once!" Tabitha covered its painted eyes when she balled her hand into a fist, slamming the small entity's body against her thigh in a single, frustrated thump.

I can help you.

"You can?" Tabitha asked. "How?"

The small entity projected a deep-rooted sense of resolution through her condensed soul, touching Tabitha, encapsulating all of Tabitha's emotions into a tight bubble. It felt as if it shielded both from anger, resentment, confusion and anxiety, replacing them with a single, resolute purpose: vengeance.

"They won't follow him? Won't get hurt by him?" Tabitha asked, hopefully.

We will see.

"And, what of the town? Can it go back to what it was?"

The small entity considered the question, unsure of the meaning. Tabitha understood this and let the entity rifle through what it learned and was still learning. Finally, it decided the town could return to its ordained path with some help.

Tabitha nodded. "Thank you," she said earnestly, raising the stone, both facing the unconscious man while those who mocked him lifted their

drinks in toast. Tabitha turned from the crowd, disappearing into the shadows of the night. She marched past passersby with a bump of the shoulder or a push of her hand. She did not offend and passed unnoticed.

Eventually, the streets fell silent, and buildings gave way to apartments that gave way to homes until she reached the corner of a quiet street lined with aged vehicles. Rust painted door panels, grills, and fenders. If she passed a hubcap, it lay on the cracked sidewalk or blocked a storm gutter. She walked to a chain-linked fence—a single light kissing the chipped silver paint emanating from a small window beneath a rotted roof gable a story above her head. Tabitha lifted the stone with the thirty painted stitches and kissed it, placing it face-up beneath the gate so the little entity might gaze upon the starry sky above. Tabitha smiled, thanked it, and left.

The little stone listened as Tabitha's footfalls faded into the soft breeze rustling a small pile of leaves somewhere behind her. Finally, growing tired, the little entity trapped within the oddly painted stone returned to the void to sleep. A stitch thinned and popped into a puff of smoke.

No one in the town noticed Tabitha or the stone she had carried. They couldn't or wouldn't, not when November 1st was so very near. They celebrated until the town's bell tower chimed midnight, then quickly dispersed, also disappearing into the shadows of the night. The two lanky women untied the unconscious man and left the stage. He rose, brushed himself off, then began walking eastward. He kept to the sidewalks, staggering about as if drunk, his mind focused solely on the cloud of steam spilling from his lips. One set of streetlamps highlighted a solitary path he willingly followed. He didn't question; he didn't speak. He walked until he could walk no more, then dropped to the cold, unwelcoming ground and slept.