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# Prologue

## Fresh Blood

The night air was crisp and still, the moon hanging high in a cloudless sky, casting an eerie glow over the darkened forest below. An unnatural fog had settled in, shrouding the forest in a heavy veil of gray mist that muffled sounds and obscured vision for more than a few feet. Somewhere in the distance, a lone owl hooted, its haunting call piercing the otherwise dead silence that had settled over the area.

A young woman raced through the trees, her breath coming out in panicked white puffs that dissipated into the cold air. She stumbled over gnarled roots and low bushes, thorns and branches tearing at her clothing and cutting thin lines across her flesh. Blood trickled from the cuts, leaving small droplets on the leaves she brushed past in her frantic flight.

Terror shone in her alarmed eyes, the hazel irises barely visible in the dark. Her auburn hair was wild and tangled from her mad dash through the woods. She had no idea how long she had been running or how far she had come since the moment she first sensed the lurking presence in the shadows behind her.

She was walking home alone from a night out with friends, taking her usual shortcut through the woods near her house. It was a path she had taken a hundred times before without incident. But tonight, an instinctive chill crept over her, the feeling that unseen eyes were watching her every move. When she glimpsed a tall, imposing silhouette emerging from the trees, she turned and fled into the forest without looking back.

Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her, but she dared not stop. Every time she paused to catch her breath, she could hear subtle sounds approaching – the snap of a twig, the rustling of leaves where there was no wind. The sounds spurred her tired legs back into motion, driving her deeper into the dark, shrouded maze of trees.

Finally, just as she was about to collapse, she stumbled into a small clearing illuminated by shafts of moonlight filtering through the canopy. Gasping for breath, she spun around and peered into the surrounding forest for any sign of her pursuer. Nothing. Had she lost them in the darkness?

Before relief could set in, a heavy weight slammed into her from behind. She was thrown hard to the damp forest floor, the air forced from her lungs in a choking gasp. Dazed, she tried to scream, but a gloved hand clamped over her mouth, muffling her cries.

She struggled in blind panic, only to have her attacker roughly flip her onto her back and straddle her, their far greater size and strength pinning her down. She froze as the moonlight glinted off a long, curved knife held aloft.

A scream rose in her throat, but the attacker's hand remained clamped over her mouth, muffling any sound to a barely audible whimper. With their free hand, her attacker methodically tore open the front of her shirt, exposing the soft flesh of her torso.

She struggled violently, trying to buck and kick, but it was useless. The attacker held her down effortlessly, like an adult restraining a misbehaving child. The knife flashed and plunged down. She arched her back and let out a gurgling scream into their palm as the blade sliced along her abdomen.

The villain worked slowly, carefully, carving intricate symbols into her flesh. Blood welled from each cut, running down her sides in crimson rivulets. Her throat was raw from screaming, her strength waning as she lost more and more blood. Her weak twitches became mere tremors, like a leaf trembling in an autumn wind, as the knife continued its terrible work.

Finally, they withdrew the blade and surveyed their handiwork. The woman's torso was a gruesome tapestry of arcane runes and symbols etched in red. She whimpered, praying that her ordeal was over. Then they grabbed her ankles and dragged her limp body across the forest floor.

She clawed feebly at passing rocks and roots, leaving a smeared trail of blood as she was dragged to the center of the clearing. The woman lay limp and bleeding as her tormentor slowly surveyed the area.

After a moment, the scourge walked purposefully to four slender birch trees at the edge of the clearing. With disconcerting ease, he grabbed the trunk of the first tree and bent it toward the ground until the top almost touched the forest floor. The woman

watched through dazed eyes as they produced a coil of rope, tossing one end over a high branch before tying the other end to a wooden stake and driving it into the soft earth with a hammer.

The assailant returned to the bent tree and added a series of intricate knots along the taut length of rope. They gave an experimental tug and nodded in satisfaction as the bindings held firm. One by one, they repeated the process on the remaining three trees, encircling the clearing with bent birch trunks anchored to the ground.

Their grisly preparations complete, they turned their attention back to the woman. With ruthless efficiency, they grabbed her ankles and dragged her across the ground to the center of the trees. She whimpered, her foggy mind slowly comprehending what they had planned.

They looped ropes around her wrists and ankles and pulled them tight. She now lay splayed on her back between the four bent trees, her limbs immobilized by the ropes leading to each staked tree.

She struggled one last time, but it was useless. Her attacker stood silently over her for a moment, watching their work. Then they drew a knife from their belt. The woman's eyes filled with dawning terror as she realized her fate. She tried to scream, but could only manage a hoarse sob as the knife sliced through the rope.

The birch snapped upright with a sudden, violent force. The sudden snap echoed like a rifle shot, cutting through the silence of the forest. The woman's leg was wrenched sideways, far beyond its natural limit. There was an audible pop as her hip dislocated, the ball joint ripping from the socket.

Her mouth opened in a soundless scream as her leg continued to twist violently, bones grinding at unnatural angles beneath torn skin and shredded muscle. Crimson bloomed across the shredded fabric of her jeans as searing pain shot through her nervous system. Only then did the piercing wail tear from her throat, a primal sound of agony that sent birds fleeing from the canopy above.

But her torment was far from over. The killer waited only a few seconds for her screams to fade to whimpering gasps before he sliced through the next rope. Again, the tree recoiled with a snap, jerking her arm up and back, eliciting another stomach-churning chorus of cracks and pops as bones fractured and shifted.

Each cut rope sent a fresh wave of blinding agony through her ravaged body. A guttural, animalistic shriek tore from her raw throat, eyes bulging until the tendons in her neck were visible beneath the skin. With clinical precision, the killer maintained a pace that allowed just enough time for her screams to fade before initiating the next round of torture. Each subsequent torturous cycle took more of her breath away, reducing her deafening screams to hoarse, desperate whimpers.

By the time the last rope fell, the woman was barely conscious, her throat torn from screaming. Her limbs dangled limply in directions nature had never intended, muscles and skin torn, bones protruding at jagged angles. Her mind had retreated, unable to withstand the magnitude of the pain her nerves were transmitting.

The killer stood slowly, surveying their work with cold satisfaction. The woman's mutilated body now hung between the trees like an obscene puppet, its limbs dramatically distorted. With a slight nod, they turned and disappeared silently into the shadows between the trunks, leaving the gruesome scene behind.

An eerie silence settled over the forest as the thick fog crept back in, its misty tendrils slowly enveloping the horrific spectacle. The trees seemed to recoil from the atrocity hanging between them, their branches trembling slightly in the cold night air. As the pale mist thickened, it began to obscure the gory details – the unnatural angles of shattered bones, the ragged strips of flesh hanging like macabre streamers.

Soon the fog had engulfed the scene, muffling all sound except the mournful creaking of the ropes as they strained against the dead weight they carried. The night breeze sighed through the leaves, causing the grisly remains to sway gently, a final indignity to the broken vessel that once held a human soul.