

ONE

Paradise Falls Mobile Home Park, March 1967

FOG RACED OFF THE LAKE and smothered the highway.

Arnie Voxx slowed his cruiser to a crawl and turned on the rotating light on the Ford's roof. The flashing turret made no difference. It couldn't penetrate more than a few feet beyond the hood.

Arnie shuddered at the thought of some trucker blindly barreling down Highway 31 toward him. He thought about hitting the siren, something he very much wanted to do in the two weeks he'd been on the job. But in this thick fog bank, it wouldn't help. He pulled onto what he presumed was the shoulder to figure out what to do next.

It was going to be impossible to find the trailer park in this soup. Dispatch had mentioned the park had a lighted sign on the highway, but that wasn't going to help. Arnie flicked on the driver's side searchlight and rolled down the window to swivel it around. The brilliant beam became a diffused glow within a couple of feet. Arnie decided his only option was to continue driving slowly and hope he'd see the illuminated sign.

"The manager's in the gatehouse. I've got back up on the way, but for now you're on your own," the dispatcher told him when he got the call forty-five minutes ago. Someone in the park had reported a loud argument followed by screams. That meant it was likely a domestic. As his instructor at the academy had so aptly put it, "More cops get killed on domestic calls than any other crime."

Arnie shivered from the cool, damp air drifting through the cruiser's window. He rolled it up and turned off the spotlight. His hands were shaking, but Arnie knew it wasn't from the cold.

PRIVATE First-Class Arnie Voxx wrestled frantically to keep his panic down. If he lost it now, he'd be dead.

Dammit, it was my fault.

He'd lagged behind the rest of his six-man patrol as they moved deeper into the A Său Valley. They'd been warned about the low cloud cover which could flow down the mountainside

and into the valley at the speed of a pyroclastic storm. And that's what had happened. One moment the patrol was there, in the next they'd disappeared into a cloudbank. Arnie froze, every sense attuned to the shrouded jungle surrounding him.

He raised a hand and moved it tentatively away from his face. It disappeared a few inches from his nose and a lightning bolt of adrenalin shot through his body. Instantly, he was soaked in sweat. He listened desperately for any sound that would lead him back to his patrol.

Silence.

Arnie gripped his rifle like a talisman and crouched, willing his eyes to penetrate the fog. He neither saw nor heard movement. He sensed it. Around him, beyond the curtain, the forest was alive with predators armed with guns and fangs. Arnie held his breath to control the panic that was begging him to break and run. Instead, enclosed in a hostile wilderness, he clutched his M-16 and waited alone.

SEVENTEEN months back from the jungles of Southeast Asia and that fear still permeated Arnie's thoughts day and night. He wrestled with his terror and had started to get the upper hand. But now the irrational fear flooded his soul and Arnie desperately fought to get control over it.

Arnie slowly increased pressure on the accelerator and the vehicle crawled forward swirling fog in its wake.

Relief flooded Arnie when he saw the glow of the sign marking the entrance to Paradise Falls Mobile Home Park. In retrospect, Arnie felt it might have been a mercy if he'd missed the entrance and had continued on through the fog.

When he reached the park's main gate, the manager came out of his shed and crouched down, so he was eye level with Arnie. "It's quiet now, but they sure were going at it a little while ago."

"What number?"

The manager combed thin fingers through greasy blond hair.

"One sixteen, but I'd better show you the way. You'll never find it in this shit."

Arnie reached over and opened the passenger door. The manager got in and pointed ahead.

The man was right. Arnie doubted he would've been able to find the mobile home even without the fog. It was on a lot set back from the road with no others around it.

With its faded paint and torn canvas awnings, the trailer looked neglected. No lights inside or out increased his sense of foreboding.

Arnie picked up the radio mike and called in his location.

"How soon is backup expected?" He worked hard at not sounding anxious.

Arnie had a bad feeling, and he'd learned to trust his bad feelings after eighteen months in Viet Nam.

"Tremblay figures he's a few minutes away. He says it's hard to tell in the fog."

“Tell him to look for the sign. I’ll send the manager out to meet him.” Arnie looked at the manager. “Ten-four. Out.”

The manager eyed the dark trailer with apprehension then strode back the way they’d come.

Grabbing the flashlight clipped to the dashboard, Arnie walked swiftly to the wooden porch at the side of the mobile home. The beam wavered as his hand trembled from a mixture of dread and anticipation when he saw the screen door hanging askew.

Arnie debated whether or not to wait for Mike Tremblay, but he sensed something was very wrong. As if in confirmation, he heard a low moan from inside the trailer. Arnie unhooked his holster and removed his pistol while keeping the flashlight trained on the broken screen door. He shivered involuntarily and rapped his flashlight against the doorframe.

“Hello, sheriff’s department. Everybody okay in there?”

A whimper came from inside the trailer, like the sound an animal makes when it’s been gravely injured.

He pushed the door open and shone the light from left to right. All he could see was bright fabric and dark wood. Arnie set the flashlight down on the porch. Gripping his gun tightly, he reached around with his other hand and felt for a light switch. Finding it, he flipped the overhead light on.

Arnie stepped through the door, looked around, and froze.

A young woman lay on her back in the middle of the room staring upward blankly. Blood flowed from a clotted mess on the side of her head. She moaned again and tried to lift her head to face him, but was unable to support herself. Her head smacked down on the rug with a wet thud. It was then Arnie saw her left temple had been caved in.

The woman began to shake violently, uncontrollably flailing her arms. Arnie started toward her but stopped at the sound of tires crunching on the road outside. He prayed it was his back up as he ran to the door.

Arnie waved frantically and shouted at his fellow deputy. “Call an ambulance!”

When he turned back to the woman, she was pointing desperately toward the back of the trailer.

“It’ll be alright, ma’am,” he reassured her. “Help is on the way.”

She poked her finger insistently at the rear of the trailer and then her hand dropped. She gave a final shudder and was still. Arnie knew the woman was dead.

What had she been trying to tell him? Was her attacker still in the trailer?

Arnie raised his pistol and moved cautiously toward the back. Behind him, Tremblay stepped into the trailer with his gun drawn. The deputy quickly assessed the situation and then went to attend to the woman on the floor.

Arnie inched toward the bedroom. The front sight of his pistol quivered as he squinted down its barrel.

“Anyone in there?” Arnie said in a voice so strong it surprised him.

He hesitated in the doorway. The room was empty except for a crib against the far end. Above it, blood dripped from an eight-inch chef's knife that had been driven into the wall.

Oh, Jesus!

Arnie move slowly toward the crib with rising dread. He gasped in horror at a sight that would follow him to his grave.

A little girl of about two lay on her side, dead from multiple stab wounds. Her face in profile looked almost serene as if she hadn't been the victim of an unimaginable crime but had just gone to sleep peacefully.

Arnie slumped beside the crib, gripping its bars, sobbing uncontrollably. He was vaguely aware of a fog-muted siren in the distance.

THREE hours later in the tiny kitchen of the mobile home, Sheriff Roy Huggins handed Arnie a shot of bourbon in a Styrofoam cup.

Huggins was a big man whose face was flushed from the extra weight he carried. The twinkle in his gray eyes, gone long ago, had been replaced by a cynical weariness and his prominent nose was laced with small red lines—a map of years of heavy drinking.

Arnie's hand shook and the bourbon made his stomach roil. He ran outside and vomited in the garden next to the trailer. When he returned, Roy had refilled his cup. Arnie swirled some of the alcohol inside his mouth to kill the acid taste.

"If you're looking for reason in all this," Huggins sighed, "don't."

"But ... a child ..."

Huggins held up a hand to stop him. "It doesn't make any sense. That's all there is to it."

Arnie numbly swallowed the rest of the bourbon.

TRACES of the woman's blood and hair were on a baseball bat the county detectives found behind the sofa. The crime lab later matched a clean set of prints on the handle to her boyfriend, a lowlife named Robert Hooper. Hooper was a mean drunk and a brawler who was well known to the sheriff's department.

Speculating that Hooper was likely sleeping it off somewhere, the detectives expected to make a quick arrest. They searched the county, but never found him.

The monster had disappeared.

MONTHS later, the case was marked **INACTIVE** and filed away along with all memory of the mother and child who had been murdered. In the years that followed, the case faded into the miasma of accidental and intentional deaths that every police force experiences.

Arnie Voxx had been sheriff of Sunset County for almost twenty-five years now and in all that time he'd never given up hope that someday he would bring Robert Hooper to justice, even though the odds told him Hooper was most likely long dead. Regardless, Arnie vowed never to forget the mother and child and the vicious way in which they had died.

Their ghosts were always with him.