

Prologue

IT WAS MAY OF '97, the first time I'd heard the story — the legend, the tale, whatever we want to call it — of Dudley Road. It was my senior year of high school and I was just a seventeen-year-old kid. A dumb kid. Who thought he was invincible and fearless. Once I started hearing the specifics of the story, I realized it seemed like almost everyone I had ever met — and everyone they knew — had heard some variation of the stories. Almost everyone but my very small group of friends and I, that is.

I grew up in a small town in rural Massachusetts, one town over from where it happened. I'd only heard of it through some friends from high school who had grown up in Billerica, the town where it'd happened. Once I heard the initial telling of the story, it was almost like I'd been initiated into some unspoken of club, as if everyone else who knew about it suddenly was approved to talk to *me* about it.

The first version of the story was the one that stuck with me the most. I've heard varying tales since, with slightly different details and minute variances. But the way I'd first heard it is how I will always remember it. I'll preface what I'm telling you now with the insight that I've never — up to and including today — verified any of the facts or researched the story. But this is how I heard the story all those years ago.

The first time I was told the story was like any other day, unremarkable and ordinary. At school lunch with some of my friends, Bernadette, asked if we'd ever heard the story of Dudley

Road. Some friends nodded, some shook our heads. Bernadette then repeated a story I'm sure she'd told many times before that Tuesday afternoon.

At some point in time, an inmate at a local insane asylum escaped and fled through the woods, eventually stumbling on a nunnery on Dudley Road. The inmate broke in and spent the night savagely raping and beating the nuns. One of the nuns ended up getting pregnant from being raped. She became torn between her servitude to God and her belief in all life being good. She ended up taking her life by hanging herself on a tree directly across the street. Ever since, the area surrounding the nunnery has been haunted. People say, if you listen closely enough, you can hear the nuns scream from the woods, as if their torture is still happening.

My first thought when I heard the story was that I didn't know of any insane asylum anywhere in Billerica. As an adult and now knowing where Dudley Road is, I couldn't imagine someone escaping from the only local prison I knew of (Billerica House of Corrections) and running from there to where Dudley Road is. It's too far. Even for a crazed escaped inmate who's fleeing authorities. It didn't seem plausible to me.

But, at the same time, I didn't know everything about Billerica. Perhaps there was some insane asylum I was unfamiliar with or that had closed down since the escape. It was tough to know exactly what could be true and what wasn't. And while the internet existed back then, it was a very different thing. It wasn't full of endless information, memes, Facebook, etc. So the thought never crossed my teenage mind to go look it up. I just took what I'd heard as gospel and brought it back to my group of friends.

All these years later, I did some research into Dudley Road, as well as the nunnery. Primarily to make sure I remembered the story correctly. It was a long time ago, and the story is the least important part of what happened to me, to us. The story was just a

legend, but what happened to my friends and I over that summer was anything but.

In my research, I found were even more variations of the legend, tangents from what I'd heard, slightly different but slightly the same. And some tellings that had no similarities to what I'd heard.

Part One

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

One

IT WAS EARLY JUNE — like it is now, as I write this — and my three best friends and I had just finished our jam session, or as we liked to call it, "band practice".

"Man," Dan said. "That was great."

Dan was my best friend. We'd met in '92 through my very first girlfriend, Melissa. He and I hit it off pretty quickly and had a lot of similar interests; we liked the same movies, the same bands, and we had an enormous love of Queen. The band, not the monarch. We became best friends shortly thereafter, and I spent most of my teenage years at his house, sleeping on the floor in his room, playing in his basement, and just being a kid with him.

He was referring to the jam session we'd just had. Our band — the word band being used here in the loosest of forms — "Downfall" had just finished practicing in the basement of my mom's house, like usual.

"You know I love a good Metallica solo," Kevin said.

"You really nailed Ride the Lightning, Kev," Brian added, giving Kevin a thumbs up.

The three of them smiled.

I was mostly keeping quiet, debating whether to tell them about the story I'd heard or not. I knew Dan and Kevin were big into the supernatural, but I didn't know how Brian would react. We'd always given him a hard time about fearing everything, but I think it was due to him being close to his mother, and not an actual fear of everything on the planet.

Kevin walked past Brian, towards the stairs, and patted him on the belly. "Hungry?" he asked.

"Don't touch my stomach!" Brian yelled. He was always conscious about his weight. He wasn't fat, he was just bigger than the other three of us, who were admittedly thinner than we should have been. Dan and Kevin were both tall and lanky — Dan more so than Kevin. I was shorter than the two of them, but still thin.

The four of us, with our dark hair and dark eyes, could have been in a commercial for an Italian restaurant. I'm not sure of the other guys' heritages, but we all sure looked like we could be Italian.

Kevin loved to sit on the stairs after we'd finished jamming. I think, subconsciously, it was his way of saying he was ready to leave. Most times, I was okay with getting out of the house once we were done, but I had no motivation to get moving.

"You okay?" Dan asked.

"Huh? Oh, I'm fine," I replied with a shrug.

But I knew I wasn't okay. I was dying to tell them what I'd heard and ready to beg them to go there with me and see what we could find.

We hung around for another couple of hours that day, mostly talking about what movies we'd seen recently.

Dan told us how much he loved *Scream 2*. We had a good laugh remembering how much Jen, Dan's girlfriend, and Wendy, Jen's best friend, and my crush, were terrified of the original. "The second one is just as good," he told us.

Brian had just seen *Lost Highway* and had nothing but good things to say about it.

"Jen's been begging me to see *Titanic*," Dan said. "I'd rather die." I cracked a smile, trying to engage in the conversation.

"You gonna take her?" Kevin asked.

"I'll go see it," Brian said, half smiling.

"Of course you would, you fuck," Kevin poked.

"Hey, a good movie is a good movie! And I hear it's excellent," Brian said, standing to stretch his legs.

"I probably have no choice," Dan said. "What Jen wants, Jen gets."

We all chuckled. We knew Dan was not in control of their relationship.

"I'll go, too," I said.

"You mean if Wendy goes?" Dan asked, making a kissy face. It was no secret I had a crush on Wendy. I think everyone knew, except her.

I shook my head, trying to half-deny it. But he was right.

The faint sound of a horn came from outside.

"That's my mom," Kevin said. "Anyone want a ride home?"

"I should go," Brian said.

"Can you take me home later?" Dan asked me.

"Yeah, you can hang out."

It wasn't uncommon for Dan and me to hang out after the other guys left, just the two of us.

"Ok, see ya," Kevin said, grabbing Brian by the arm to pull him upstairs.

It was a perfect opportunity to tell Dan about Dudley Road, but I decided not to. I'm not sure why, but I thought it might make more sense to keep it to myself for a little longer. Perhaps see if I could learn anything new before sharing the stories with my friends.

Two

GRADUATION WAS JUST AROUND the corner. I looked forward to being done with high school, and Dan looked forward to his last summer before senior year.

Like a million other times before it, I gently knocked on the door to his house and walked right in, not even waiting for someone to answer. I waved to his mom, Kathy — who was like a second mother to me for most of my teenage years — and his little sister, Rachel, as I passed through the kitchen into the hallway, and then knocked on Dan's door.

I always knocked on his door, because who knows what a 15-year-old is doing in their room with the door closed. I closed my door because I liked my privacy, and Dan was no different.

"Come in," he said.

I opened the door and walked into his room, no different from any other day.

"Hey," I said. He was playing F-Zero on Super Nintendo. I always thought he was the coolest because he had a stereo and Super Nintendo in his room. No other friend of mine until then had either of those in their own room. Our video game consoles were always in the living room. I'd guess to keep my older sister, Jen, from fighting over who got to play and when.

"Hey," he said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"You ever heard of this place called Dudley Road?" I asked. I had never considered myself a subtle person. I often blurted out what was on my mind and worried about the consequences of it later.

"No, why?"

"Someone I go to school with told me about it the other day and it's been stuck in my mind since."

"Just some road?"

"Yeah, but it's more than that," I said. "It's supposedly haunted."

Dan's eyes widened as he put down the Super Nintendo controller. "Haunted? You know I love a good story. Tell me more."

Dan and I spent many nights looking for ghosts and telling haunted stories during our sleepovers in his basement. Sometimes we'd camp out in either of our backyards and listen for spooky sounds in the middle of the night. We were by no means ghost hunters of any sort, though. We were just interested in seeing what we could find out.

"That's the myth, anyway."

"How? Haunted how? And where is it?"

I had his attention.

"It's in Billerica, but I don't know where exactly."

"How is it haunted?" he asked, leaning in closer, his cheeks getting flush with excitement. I could tell he wanted me to get to the point.

"Supposedly there was an asylum nearby and someone broke out and found a nunnery on Dudley Road. He broke in and raped a bunch of nuns all night long. He got caught a couple of days later, but one nun got pregnant. She hung herself across the street because she felt so terrible about the whole thing."

"Shit," he said. "That's fucked up."

"I know. I doubt it's true," I said.

He took a second, staring at me, before responding.

"Are you fucking with me?" he asked, not breaking eye contact.

"That's the story how I heard it," I told him. "I know nothing more or less than what I just told you."

"We have to go," he said, jumping off his bed. "We have to find this place."

I grinned from ear to ear. "I was hoping you'd say that! Let's go."

We spent the rest of the day driving around Billerica trying to find Dudley Road. Hoping we'd just stumble onto it by dumb luck. We eased into Billerica from the part of town we knew where it connected to our town, Tewksbury. While we had been in Billerica plenty of times in our lives, we didn't know it as well as we knew our own town, so there was some bit of learning curve to finding our way.

We drove by the Billerica Mall, a shell of what it was when we were kids, now just housing K-Mart and the discount movie theater.

As we made the right at the light, we saw the Taco Bell we'd been to so many times before.

The center of town was as foreign to us as any other place we'd never been. A small gazebo. The library. A church. Some shops. The Walgreens. It felt like any other small town American town.

It had got dark that night before we stopped and asked for directions.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Lil' Peach convenient store, hit pause on the Creed CD we'd been listening to on repeat, shut the car off, and we grabbed some drinks. Then, asked if the person working knew where the road was.

As I paid, I casually slipped it in.

"Do you know where Dudley Road is?"

The man behind the counter seemed to be ten feet tall and looked down at me over his glasses. "Are you boys planning to do anything stupid there?"

"Stupid? What do you mean?" I asked. He knew what we were up to. He'd probably heard about kids going there all the time.

"You know it's haunted, right?"

"That's why we want to go there," Dan spoke up.

He continued to look down at us from over his glasses while counting back our change from the register. "I didn't tell you how to get there, if anyone asks."

I couldn't imagine anyone caring who pointed us in the right direction. "Of course."

"Good," he said, handing me the receipt. "Go out of here, make a right on Concord Road, keep going for about ten minutes. Dudley Road will be on your right. The first half is between Concord Road and Nashua Road. Cross over Nashua Road and you'll be on the part of Dudley Road you want to be on. That's the part that is haunted."

The way he'd said "haunted" wasn't sarcastic. It wasn't condescending or rude. It was matter of fact. He said it like he knew, possibly from firsthand experience, that Dudley Road was haunted.

"Thanks," I said, scooping up our Cokes and my bag of chips.

We left Lil' Peach and did our best to remember the directions he'd given us as we cruised off, blasting "My Own Prison" for the fiftieth time.

It turned out his directions were right on the money. It was almost a straight shot from the store to Dudley Road. Streets stemming from both sides of the main road we were on, jutting off into neighborhoods, presumably full of people who had no idea what we were up to.

"I wonder if he's been here before," I said as I made the right on Dudley Road from Concord Road.

"Probably. He seemed to know exactly why we wanted to come here," Dan said.

The first section of Dudley Road was unremarkable. The stretch between Concord and Nashua Roads was full of regular houses and normal yards. Everything seemed perfectly normal until we got to the very end of the road, about to cross over Nashua Road to the next section of Dudley Road.

"Look," I said, pointing to my left. "That stone wall looks like someone smashed into it."

The property on the corner of Dudley Road and Nashua Road had a stone wall wrapping its property line around the corner. It was about three feet high and looked like it was, at one time, constructed to mark the property lines. Right at the curve, next to the street sign marking Dudley Road, the stone wall had collapsed.

My brain raced. What happened to that wall? Did someone crash into it fleeing Dudley Road? Had something chased them across the street, and in a hurried panic, they crashed?

"I wonder if someone crashed into it trying to speed away from something scary that happened?" Dan asked, tapping me on the shoulder and pointing to the wall I'd just pointed out.

"Oh shit, you think?" I replied.

"It's perfect that we're here right as the sun's going down. It makes it extra spooky," Dan said.

He and I sat in silence for a few minutes, trying to grasp what we were about to do. The trees across the street seemed to stretch as far as I could see, just slightly opening up to allow Dudley Road to continue from where we were, to where we were going.

We sat at that intersection for another minute before I pulled across the street to the other side of Dudley Road. A covered bus stop was on the opposite corner, by the street sign. A small bench, big enough for two or three people, sat under a covered roof. The whole wooden structure looked like it had been there for decades. I thought of all the kids that lived nearby huddling in it during a rainstorm while waiting for their school bus. I wondered if all those kids knew what hauntings lurked right up the road from where they lived.

As we eased down the road, we passed a couple of normal looking houses on either side — nothing out of the normal with anything we'd seen so far.

That didn't last long, as we pretty quickly found the nunnery. I turned off the stereo to not draw any attention to us.

On the right side of the road stood an enormous building. It had two-story tall arches leading to the inside and looked to be made of stone or had some sort of stucco exterior. It was beige and seemed to blend into the surrounding woods.

On our immediate right, preceding the nunnery, was a 10' gate with barbed wire at the top. It ran the perimeter of the building, connecting at the near corner. The far corner of the fence followed the driveway along the right side of the building, running off into the dark woods. I couldn't see far enough back to see how long the driveway was.

As we slowly rolled down the street, I recall noticing more details about the building. A large bronze sign read "Daughters of Saint Paul" off to the left, near the brick walkway leading up to the building. To the sign's left, a statue of Mary stood, with its hands extended out, palms up. It seemed warm and welcoming.

"Daughters of Saint Paul," Dan read aloud as he noticed the sign. "It says something else underneath it, but I can't read it."

"Me either, but this has to be the place, right?"

"What's the difference between a nunnery and a convent?" Dan asked.

I didn't know. I waited for him to look to his left and shook my head.

We kept driving down the road, finding nothing else remarkable once we'd passed the building that we were convinced was the right place.

A white farmhouse stood at what seemed like the end of the road. I could see a number of Christmas trees growing in the yard.

"Weird place to grow Christmas trees," I said.

"Yeah, how bizarre," Dan agreed.

"Looks like this is the end of the road," I said, pulling up to the front of the house. In hindsight, the people who lived there

probably saw thousands of cars pulling up out front of their place and turning around.

As I eased the car to an almost stop, Dan shouted, "Wait! Look!" and pointed to his right.

The road continued to our right. There was a very sharp turn, probably greater than 90° to our right. But he was right, the road kept going.

I turned the wheel, pointed us in that direction, and hit the gas.

That part of Dudley Road was, in my memory, much creepier than the nunnery we'd just discovered. It's also where we'd come to spend a lot of our time and nights in the coming months — but I'll get more to that soon.

As the road turned to our right, the pavement disappeared, turning to a completely gravel road. The trees that lined the paved portion of the road seemed to come together over the car's roof, forming a tunnel and blocking out the night sky. The road narrowed almost immediately, where it was barely wide enough for my car, let alone someone driving in the other direction.

Branches scraped the doors as we drove through the now pitch-black night. No streetlights overhead, no houses lined the road anymore, not a sign of any type of life, even wild life, anywhere near us.

I truly felt the absolute silence around us.

As Dan and I crept along this darkened portion of Dudley Road, ever so slowly, in my white 1989 Mitsubishi Galant, I felt a sense of eeriness about me. Was I feeling that way because of some supernatural forces or was I feeling that way because I had heard the legend and wanted to believe it was true? I'd always been into exploring dark and supposedly haunted places, ever since I was a child walking around in our basement in the pitch-black. But this felt like something different.

"It's fucking creepy out here," Dan said, peering off into the dark woods out the passenger side.

I didn't say anything back to him, but in my mind. I agreed with him. It was so creepy and just purely void of any ounce of light at that point.

We bounced over the potholes and uneven surfaces at a snail's pace. The branches continuing to scratch the car's doors had somehow lowered overhead. They were closing in on us from all directions. I remember wondering how we'd back out of the road, should we not be able to get out, if we continued on.

As we kept driving, it felt like the opening kept getting smaller and smaller, and I wondered if it'd eventually come to a dead end of pure brush that we couldn't pass.

I have a vivid memory of Dan and I both putting our windows up simultaneously. It was about that time where the branches along the road would have poked their way into the car. We didn't coordinate. Instead, it felt like something had told us to put the windows up. Something compelled us to do it.

We drove for maybe ten minutes when we came to a clearing on our right. It looked like a small parking lot, though not paved. The dirt space looked like a natural clearing in the woods, directly connected to the road. I guessed it could fit five or six cars.

"Should I turn around?" I asked Dan, genuinely not knowing if we should keep going or not.

"I guess," he seemed disappointed. "We should probably head back. It's almost ten and the girls will be out of work soon."

We had always referred to Wendy and Jen as "the girls". It seemed more of an "our girlfriends" descriptor, but only Dan and Jen were dating. Wendy was just my crush at that point. Jen and Wendy were best friends and had known each other since childhood. The girls and I had all worked together, which is how I'd met Wendy, and then Jen, once she started working with us. She and Dan started dating a few months later.

"You're right," I said, confirming the time on the radio. "We should head over there to pick them up."

We pulled into the clearing to turn around, pausing for a moment to stare straight into the woods. I don't know why, though. Maybe we hoped for some sign that we should (or shouldn't) be there. Maybe we hoped for something scary. Maybe we were looking for some supernatural thing to shoo us away. But we sat there for just a few minutes in silence, only illuminated by the lights from the dashboard in the car. I looked out into the woods, thoughtless.

Waiting. Hoping. Excited.

I'm not sure what had me so excited. I think, given the situation, most teenage boys might put on the same brave face as I had. But not many of them would be excited, not many of them would want — even welcome — of something to happen in that situation.

Billerica to Burlington wasn't a long drive. I knew the general direction we had to go, so it wasn't a worry of being late to pick them up that drove us from the clearing that night. But something did.

As we drove past the building on our way out, just before I'd reached to turn the radio back on, I felt a sense of panic. Just for a brief moment. Just a quick flash of panic — that type of panic you feel as an adult when you think you've lost your phone or car keys. It washed over me and then was immediately gone.