

WELCOME TO WESTVILLE



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A NOVEL

RYDER JONES

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*In memory of David Allen Jones;
workman, artist, and loving father.*

*“If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss gazes back into
you”*

—FREDRICH NIETZSCHE

*“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches
towards Bethlehem to be born?”*

— FROM ‘THE SECOND COMING’

BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

**WELCOME
TO
WESTVILLE**



FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

The walls were too thin for secrets.

Millie Thompson drowned out the yelling with the sharp edge of Alanis Morissette's voice. She paced in tight circles, headphones clamped over her ears, while her parents threw words like knives—bouncing off walls, slicing through her bedroom door. Her father said he "*had it under control*," while her mother sounded very convinced he did not—whatever *it* was.

Millie knew something was wrong. She had for a while now.

The sour stench of alcohol clung to her father's breath most mornings when he dropped her off at school. "*Have a good day, Millie girl*," he'd say, and she'd pretend not to notice. Pretended not to smell the proof of late nights and bad choices.

She lowered her headphones, set the yellow Discman on the dresser, and pulled her blonde hair back into a ponytail as a tinny chorus leaked through the foam pads around her neck.

She wanted to believe it was all going to be alright—just like the song said.

But Millie could not know what was coming.

No one could have.

2

The Slate River lay placid under a dying autumn sun, a red seam splitting the surface.

Millie moved through crisp air thick with a musk of damp leaves. She skirted past the old high school through the parking lot, its broken windows gaping like dead eyes in the dusk, partly demolished and mostly forgotten, and looking more like a haunted house every day. She struck out down the riverwalk. Ahead, the Westville Showboat sat steeped in the shallows, its grand red wheel useless as a broken clock.

She crossed Main Street, cutting through the parking lot, then stepped onto the train trestle, where the river roared out of the dam, frothing and spilling over the banks in a slow, steady creep. Her grandpa's company, PRINCE Milling, loomed on the far side of the river, tall silos and fat grain bins standing like sentinels against the darkening sky. In theory, her dad would take it over one day. She shook away an encroaching churn in her gut as she thought about that, passing the looming concrete mills buildings as the tracks came back onto solid ground.

Millie banked left toward the fairgrounds and the football field. The town turned out in force as usual for the Redhawks. Millie didn't really care about football much; it was an escape just to be with her friends and not think, for a while.

The old stadium lights reminded her of six-eyed insects atop their splintered stick bodies, shining over the bleachers as dusk took hold, revealing shadows of old townies and students alike heading for food, beverage and bathrooms as little kids chased each other screaming.

She spotted Olivia leaning against the worn white and red paint of the concession building, interjecting herself into Kyle's flirtation with a couple of sophomore girls.

His pale cheeks were flushing though Millie could tell he was doing his level best to stay smooth, wiping a hand over gelled, messy brown hair. He stared

pins and needles at Olivia, as she raised an aluminum wrapped hot dog eyeing it thoughtfully under the yellow stadium light.

"I'll say this for Kyle Anderson, he really knows how to handle a wiener."

Olivia passed it off to the taller girl whose face was screwed up in a mess of confusion. Then they looked over at Kyle, and snickered.

Olivia beamed with pride as the pair walked back to the bleachers. Kyle, rosy-cheeked and glaring, tightened his concessions apron behind the counter and when his mother wasn't looking flipped a shakily rigid middle finger.

Millie snickered. "They didn't deserve you anyway."

"Mil!" Liv said, grinning. "I was just telling Kyle he's found his true calling."

"Maybe," Kyle shot back. "Or maybe I'll get a job as a busboy down at Fischer's."

"What, so you can creep on my sister?"

"Why else?"

"Dude, she's like, seventeen years older than you."

"And age is but a number."

Kyle's mom called him away, and he trudged off.

"You love riling him up, don't you?" Millie said, shaking her head.

Liv shrugged. "Easy target."

That was what Millie liked about Olivia—how she just *said* things. Did things without thinking. No hesitation. It got her into trouble, but there was freedom in that.

Liv's eyes flicked to the Discman in Millie's hand. "Like the album?"

Millie nodded. "Yeah. It's maybe just a little better than Amy Grant."

"Told you." Liv smirked, then dropped her voice. "So, I've been thinking..."

Millie recognized that tone. It meant trouble. "We're not ditching the game."

Liv rolled her eyes. "Come on, why not?"

"Because I told my parents this is where I'd be."

"And what if I told you we don't have to go far?"

"For what?"

"Brett Huizenga and some others invited us down by the river."

Millie's stomach tightened. "Liv, come on."

“We’ll just go for a little bit. Back before halftime. No one will know we left.”

Millie hesitated. Before she could say no, Liv grabbed her hand and tugged her away from the field, back toward the tracks.

Millie wrenched her hand free. “Why does everything have to change just because we’re in high school?”

Liv turned, brushing a wild red curl from her face. “It doesn’t have to. But if some cute boys want to hang out—”

“Brett isn’t cute. And did they even invite me, or just you?”

“I may have mentioned you’d be joining me.”

Millie offered a weak smile and followed. Already she found herself wishing time would rush ahead to next week. On Halloween there would be no other option other than what had become hard and fast tradition: Liv and her, along with Kyle and Austin, stuffing pillowcases full of strangers’ candy and then camping out in her living room watching *Hocus Pocus* for the thirty-second time while stuffing their faces. Things could just be how they used to be. Plus with friends around it usually stopped her parents from fighting—at least for a night.

They reached the river. A small group of upperclassmen, mostly guys, huddled in the dark, their laughter sharp, edged with something mean. Brett Huizenga stood in the center, as greasy as ever, like he’d washed his face with a slice of pizza.

“Who’s your friend?” Brett asked, his eyes trailing over Millie.

Liv shot her a quick, apologetic look. “This is Millie Thompson.”

“Wait—Thompson?” Brett’s head flicked toward the PRINCE Milling sign glowing through the trees. His lips curled into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “Dang. We’re in the presence of Westville royalty.” He gave an exaggerated bow and flourish.

Millie flushed. “Not exactly.”

“She’s cool,” Liv said quickly.

Brett’s smirk faded, his voice turning cold. “Yeah? ‘Cause her old man fired mine four months ago.”

Millie’s stomach twisted.

“My dad doesn’t run the company,” she muttered. It was true—technically. But her dad did run the floor and handled a lot of the employees, so he probably

had fired Brett's father.

He shoved a bottle of Jack Daniel's toward her, the cap off, its sharp scent burning her nose. It reminded her of her dad's breath some mornings.

"I'm good," she managed, through a roil of sudden nausea.

"She doesn't really—" Olivia started, but Brett pushed the bottle closer.

"What are you, a nark?"

"No," Millie said, her voice quieter. "I just don't—"

Olivia grabbed the bottle, took a hearty swig. Her face scrunched, and she wheezed out a cough then pointed to Millie. "She's allergic."

Brett stared between the two of them for a beat. "Whatever," he snorted, shrugging and headed toward the others, lighting up joints by the river. Millie swallowed hard, watching the thin wisps of smoke rise into the air, mixing with the cold dampness of the evening.

"I shouldn't be here."

Liv sighed. "Come on, Mil. Just loosen up for once."

"It's not—I just don't want to be here."

"You drag me to that youth group every Sunday, and I don't complain."

"You do, just not out loud."

"Maybe because I don't want to talk about that stuff."

"What stuff?"

"If God gave two shits about me or my dad, he wouldn't have let him suffer like that."

Millie's chest tightened. She remembered Mr. Fischer's face, gaunt and pained, lying in a downstairs bedroom, back in the springtime when warmth and beauty poured through the cracks of winter's last days.

"I'm sorry, Liv."

Her friend shook her head, sniffing. "You don't get it. You have a perfect life. Perfect family."

Millie felt a barb of pain in her chest. "You don't know that."

Olivia wiped her face and took another swig. "Look, just stay and hang out this once. If we hate it, we'll never do it again."

Millie shook her head. "I'm going back."

"Seriously?"

“Yeah. Seriously.”

3

Millie walked back alone under a sky bruising into violet, the last embers of daylight smoldering behind bloated gray clouds. The air smelled of damp concrete and something stale from the river, and every sound was sharper—the crunch of her shoes on gravel, the low murmur of the football game behind her, a metallic shunt as a piece of automated mill machinery kicked on nearby.

Something red flickered at the edge of her vision, jagged motion. Her heart lurched.

She stiffened; her breath catching in her throat. Her eyes tracked up past the towering concrete silos, to the culprits.

The crimson neon PRINCE sign glowed through the night haze. Same as always. The light hummed faintly, its reflection wobbling in the visible shard of the Slate river’s dark surface far off to her right.

Millie let out a slow breath, unclenching her fists. Stupid. The same sign she’d seen every night of her life.

So why had it startled her like that?

She stopped, pulling off her headphones. Listened.

The wind pushed a brittle leaf across the tracks. Somewhere far off a dog barked, and the mill’s ventilation sighed.

A horn honked, Millie’s stomach dropping like a lead ball and heart leaping at once.

The white Methodist Church minibus idled just ahead, and the driver’s side window rolled down. A grinning, heavyset face with a gray-white beard. Howard Meyers, one of her youth group leaders and a bus driver for the school system.

He wheezed out a laugh. “Whew, that got you good.”

“Hey, Mr. Meyers,” Millie said, offering an obligatory smile. She took off the

other ear of her headphones.

“What kind of mischief are you getting into tonight, young lady?” he asked.

Millie would usually joke back with him. His sense of humor lacked any sort of nuance, but she couldn’t help playing along. Olivia, on the other hand, had never been amused when she’d come along with Millie to the small youth group. The thought of her friend soured Millie.

She forced a casual tone. “Just headed home.” Then added, “Game’s pretty much over anyway,” to cut off any further questioning.

Mr. Meyers nodded. “Them Hawks are gettin’ after ’em this year, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, though she hadn’t been paying attention, just assumed.

“Well, I’ll see ya Sunday night then.”

“Yeah.”

“I can give you a lift,” he offered. “Been shuttlin’ folks back and forth from the school lot.”

“That’s okay,” Millie said quickly. She didn’t feel like talking, not even to someone as kind and familiar as Mr. Meyers.

He studied her for a second and nodded. “All right. Just straight home, though, you hear?”

Millie gave him a small salute. “Got it.”

He chuckled and rolled up the window, the minibus lumbering forward, red taillights swallowing into the dark.

Millie turned back toward the tracks, slipping her headphones on.

But she didn’t press play at first.

She just listened to the night for a while.

4

Millie walked clear past her street and wanted to keep going as she came to the end of the album.

Right now, the most jagged pill to swallow would have been going home.

Not yet.

She passed rows of two-story houses, until the street emptied out into Elmwood Cemetery. She kept to the concrete path that hugged a black chain link fence, through which she could see the factory down near the river, cars bathed in strange radioactive yellow given off by cyclopean parking lot lights. Slowly, the fragile comfort of knowing she was surrounded by warm bodies within nearby homes bled out, replaced with creeping loneliness.

To her right, gravestones stood solemn and cold, some smooth and polished, others jagged with time, the moonlight tracing their names in silver. Further along the middle path, she'd find her grandparents' graves, which they visited every year.

A deep cold night had settled fast, like it had been waiting underground, biding its time until the sun gave up the luminous ghost of day. Millie breathed warm air into her hands, watching the vapor curl upward. The final track's hypnotic chant looped in her ears, a refrain telling her it was time to 'wake up' and 'get out of here'.

She couldn't help but agree.

An oppressive feeling crawled through her veins and settled in her chest, making it harder to breathe. She turned on the path that cut through the cemetery, looking to Harrison Street, which would lead her back home, where she suddenly wanted to be very badly.

When she turned right on the dirt part of her road—her house only a few blocks away—she was blinded by headlights. Millie flinched, throwing an arm up against the glare. She couldn't make out the kind of vehicle. Bigger than a car. A truck or large van maybe.

But it wasn't moving.

Millie slipped off her headphones, her skin prickling.

It just sat there watching her—if a vehicle could watch—which made her wonder just who was behind the wheel and why *they* were staring at her. She walked briskly along the shoulder, keeping as far as she could to the side.

She just needed to get past, and get home.

The engine coughed to life—a guttural, diesel growl.

It lurched forward, then stopped. Waiting. Watching.

Millie heard her pulse acutely in her eardrums now, and her arms shook. The engine revved again, this time with a vengeful scrape of tires on dirt as it careened toward her.

Millie ran.

She didn't think—just moved, sprinting into the dark as the vehicle roared behind her, its headlights throwing sporadic shadows over the graves and trees.

She glanced back.

It was toying with her, coming close enough to terrify, slamming the brakes, letting her think—just for a second—that she had a chance.

Her lungs burned. The road narrowed to a dead-end. The old Boy Scout cabin loomed ahead, barely lit by a single flickering blue-white streetlamp.

She veered toward it, sprinting across the grass circle in the dirt turn-around and vaulted over the rusted metal gate into the trees. Branches whipped at her face as she tore through the narrow two-track path, running blind.

Millie was yanked back like a dog on a short leash, her body twisting.

Her headphone cord had caught on something, the Discman flying off into the dark. She stumbled, her foot snagging on a root or a rock and a pop thrummed through her whole body.

She tasted dirt, felt searing, wide pain around her kneecap.

Headlights shone on her as the vehicle idled outside the tree line.

"Leave me alone!" Her voice broke when she yelled, and she barely recognized it.

The engine shut off, and so did the lights.

Quiet. Dark. She stared into the void of the windshield.

A red light bloomed on the other side, and cold dread pooled in her gut.

She worked her ankle free and despite the torture of every step got up and ran limping through the woods. She came out into the clearing, tears streaking down her cheeks now.

She forced herself forward.

She just wanted to go home.

With bleary eyes she stumbled through the trees, hands shaking violently.

She broke into a clearing, the river ahead glinting faintly between the trees under clouded moonbeams. The North Country trail was just ahead, she could take that into the woods and get out onto a different road. Her throbbing knee said otherwise.

Then she heard it: a deep, groaning creak. Like all the trees were bending under a weight that would break them. Like bones cracking under pressure.

She stopped, turned slowly, and saw it.

A glaring red circle emerged from the woods. It grew larger until it seared through the many spindles of tree trunks, shooting blades of crimson light.

Something moved inside.

A wrongly twisted figure like a shadow, pulling itself forward with deliberate jerking movements, long skeletal limbs, and jagged protrusions from its head—like antlers.

Millie's heart seized. A hissing sound grew deafening like the screech of a boiling teapot, freezing her where she stood and piercing her every pore.

She wanted to run, but she couldn't move.

So she screamed instead. And knew, somehow, no one could hear.



THE GUILTY ONES

D.C.B. Interview Transcript

Incident Report

Interview Series 3: The Westville Incursion

Lochlear: Date is December, 31st 1996 – 10:48 AM. This is Special Agent Stephen Lochlear. Please state your full name for the record.

Benson: It's Casey Benson--for the tenth time.

Lochlear: Your *full* name.

Benson: Casey. Alan. Benson.

Lochlear: I understand your frustration Mr. Benson, but this is necessary. An incursion of this scale re-quires absolute diligence. We need to know exactly how the events of these past few months unfolded.

Benson: You call diligence leaving a girl to rot while your people played spy games in my town?

Lochlear: The situation left us no better choice than to adhere to our protocols.

Benson: Don't feed me your bureaucratic bullshit.

Lochlear: Mr. Benson, please calm down. The sooner we finish, the sooner you can return home. Things can start to go back to normal.

Benson: You don't believe that. You can't honestly think we're ever going back to normal after what happened.

Lochlear: I do. Because I have to. And so do you and everyone in Westville who witnessed what happened. I think you know that.

Benson: Fine. Let's just get this over with.

Lochlear: Good. Now, from the beginning.

OCTOBER 26TH, 1996

Westville wasn't the kind of place where people went missing—until one frigid October morning, it suddenly was.

Casey Benson turned onto M-12, the dim, lifeless glow of the *Family Affair Supermarket* sign slipping from his rear view, as the neglected speed gun rolled listless in the passenger seat. A grand total of three cars had passed in the last two hours, and the temperature plunged like the speed limit coming into town, the Indian summer breaking like a brittle bone.

The weathermen hadn't warned about the coming snap, and usually, they got all hot and bothered about that sort of thing. But Casey felt the cold clawing at him now through his open window.

He twisted the radio dial away from the drone of political chatter—Dole, Clinton, Perot. China trying to influence the election. Static gave way to a story on a severe tornado outbreak overnight in South Dakota and Nebraska, and finally to the slow gallop of 'One Headlight' by The Wallflowers. Casey exhaled, eyes flicking to the pale green glow of the clock.

6:56 a.m.

The department was understaffed; taking the nightshifts was doing a number on him and his sleep. Plus, this time of year, everything was dark.

The mornings were black and nights blacker, and right now, there was only the faintest gray-yellow bruise on the horizon hinting at dawn.

The Caprice patrol car had V8s with a solid kick, and he sympathized with the poor townies he had to pull over. It was too easy for him to speed coming into town, careening over the railroad tracks at 55 instead of 30. Fog crawled over the road, rolling low as Westville stretched awake in pieces. Hardware and auto parts galore, fast food and pizza, Herb's lumber and used car dealerships. A small town starter set that Westville never broke out of.

Casey slowed at the blinking red light.

Two warring gas stations stubbornly stood at opposite corners of the town's main intersection—Shell on one side, Marathon on the other—still and quiet. The hulking grain bins of PRINCE Milling loomed overhead, skeletal steel trusses and angled downspouts crisscrossing between them. If Westville had a skyline, this was it—a row of towering concrete silos, the six-letter crimson neon declaring *PRINCE* like a beacon.

He rubbed his brow tracing rough skin on the scar there.

The dispatch radio crackled. He ignored it—he was only minutes from the station anyway.

The tires hissed on pavement as he rolled forward, past the first block of historic buildings housing the two-story antique mall, a tax office and more, and more antique and trinket shops. Between those, the five-and-dime on the corner of Water St. and the comic book shop across from it, Westville was a bustling hub of commerce.

Cold mist rose off the rushing dam as he hit the bridge, vapors snaking around the newest silo under construction, sheets of plastic draped over it like a veil. Ahead, the rolling fog cast a ghostly glow over black iron street lamps that lined the half-mile run of Main Street.

The radio squawked impatiently again, but with an odd burst of static—almost like a whisper. Casey frowned, glancing at the receiver.

Silence.

Then a harsh hiss as Gail's honking voice came through:

"Benson, you copy?"

He startled, and grabbed the radio. “Yeah, I’m here. Heading your way. Over.”

Another brief squelch.

Then— “I’ve been trying to stave her off, but Ruth Potter’s blowing up the line with another noise complaint. Want to check it out? Over.”

Casey let out a slow breath.

His stomach growled, and his eyes burned at the thought of extending his shift. He could already feel food and rest slipping away.

“Not really, but I’m on my way.”

Gail’s smirk was audible.

“Copy. You’ll get your reward in heaven.”

Casey snorted, as he turned left at City Hall.

“God’s work, huh? Over.”

He passed the station, shooting it a baleful glance.

Who needed sleep anyway?

2

Ruth Potter’s place was just past Elmwood Cemetery, where Harrison gave up on pavement.

Casey had lost track of how many noise complaints dragged him here—or any officer lucky enough.

The old yellow two-story stirred up memories: his dad mowing her lawn—another side job to make ends meet—while Casey sat on the back steps, eating gas station Oreos. They always tasted like chemicals thanks to the cloud of mosquito spray Mrs. Potter insisted on dousing him with, her voice sharp as she scolded him to hold out his arms—and to let her get behind his knees, too.

He pulled in behind her Buick Century, the rusted car leaning to one side, victim of a flat tire that had probably been that way for months.

She didn't drive anymore, far as he knew. Since Bob passed, her kids carted her around.

Casey barely had time to unbuckle before the front door swung open, hinges shrieking. Ruth Potter stepped onto the sagging porch, wrapped in a floral housecoat, gray hair piled haphazardly atop her head like cotton candy gone wrong.

"About time, Officer," she barked, cutting through morning fog.

Casey grinned, shutting the patrol car door.

"You can call me Casey, you know."

She huffed, arms crossed over her narrow chest. "Well, I wish I didn't have to call you at all."

"Noise complaint?"

"Them kids were at it again," she said, eyes flashing. "Hollerin' like they got nothing better to do."

Probably didn't. High schoolers in Westville late on a Friday night meant bad decisions in the woods.

He nodded anyway, suppressing a yawn, looking toward the tree line across the road.

"By the Scout cabin?"

She lifted a quavering finger, her voice dropping to a mutter. "Saw a red light over in the woods on the hill, too."

Casey squinted toward the dark forest bordering her property. The land sloped down to the river, and beyond that, the hills of the North Country Trail. The Boy Scout cabin had been a teen haunt for as long as he could remember.

"Red, huh?"

"Yep. Flickering in and out. Better not have been fireworks." Her lips pressed into a thin line. "Them kids'll set a blaze."

Nothing changed in Westville. Same boredom, same reckless midnight activities. He and Joe Thompson had been no different, setting off a dozen road flares stolen from PRINCE Milling's rigs, just because. Joe's dad made sure he didn't leave the house for weeks.

"I'll check it out, Mrs. Potter."

She narrowed her eyes. "You do that. And call me Ruth, dammit."

“Right,” he said, smirking as he climbed back into the patrol car.

He wrote up her report, tapping his pen against the clipboard in time with the engine’s idle. His brain felt like fogged glass, the strain of consecutive night shifts making everything slower, heavier.

He thought about just heading back to the station.

But Ruth Potter would be watching from the window, making sure he did a proper loop past the cabin. She was persnickety like that.

He sighed and threw the car in reverse.

Just for show.

The dirt road dead-ended at a turnaround, the Boy Scout cabin perched on a low hill to the right. A rusted gate, padlocked but laughably easy to climb, shrouded in fog creeping up from the river.

Casey had scattered teenagers from this spot before, his headlights flashing through the woods, their laughter turning to panicked curses as they bolted. Sergeant Gordy Reynolds had once likened it to spritzing an ornery cat with a spray bottle.

Casey rolled down the window, letting the cold air rush in.

For a second—he thought he heard something.

A low groan. Maybe a dead tree shifting.

The gravel crunching under his tires drowned it out.

Nothing looked out of place.

He exhaled, turned the wheel, and pulled back toward town.

As he headed back down Harrison, a dog stood on the shoulder where the dirt met pavement. Ears pricked, eyes locked on the tree line, like it was listening to something only it could hear.

Casey glanced at the dog in his rearview, a shiver running through him as he rolled up the window.