

Prologue

It's normally such a quiet street. Small, unassuming, solidly middle class. Not the sort of place one usually associates with the shocking events of that hot July night. Ask any of the residents and they will agree that none of their neighbors seemed capable of committing such a cold-blooded, heinous act.

How could this happen? they will ask when they gather together the next morning, shivering despite the intense heat, shaking their heads in collective wonder and dismay. *I'm stunned. I had no idea. I thought it was a car backfiring. Or maybe some leftover firecrackers.*

The street is what they call a cul-de-sac. From the French, the literal translation of which is “bottom of a sack,” itself derived from the Latin *culus*, meaning “bottom.” It was originally an anatomical term meaning “a vessel or tube with only one opening,” but here in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, as in the rest of North America, it has come to mean a short, dead-end street with a circle for turning around at the end.

Picture a horseshoe. Now picture five houses, virtual carbon copies of one another—modest, two-story, in delicate shades of pink, yellow, and peach, each with a double-car garage—placed at strategic intervals along that horseshoe, one at its rounded

tip, two to each side. A variety of palm trees fill in the spaces between the houses, and the street has no sidewalks, only a raised curb separating the paved road from the small front lawns. The lawns, in turn, are dissected by short, flower-lined walkways ending with two steps before each front door.

The street is officially, and for no discernable reason, named Carlyle Terrace, and is situated just off Hood Road, a not overly busy thoroughfare that runs east and west between the Florida Turnpike and Military Trail, about a ten-minute drive to the ocean, and a stone's throw from any number of private, gated, golfing communities that populate the area.

On the surface, the people who live on this street seem average, even boring: a recently separated single mother and her two children; a doctor and his dentist wife with their two sons; another married couple and their three offspring; a widowed grandmother; a young couple married barely a year. They have the usual array of problems—money concerns, difficult teenagers, petty jealousies, the everyday conflicts of married life. No one would claim it's all been candlelight and soft music. There has been the occasional raised voice, an argument spilling out of an open window, an unexpected altercation, even the odd slamming door.

Rumors abound—this one might be having an affair, that one might have a drinking problem, that one thinks she's too good for the rest of us. Neighbors talk, after all.

Especially when you give them something to talk about.

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Sean Grant, one of the residents of Carlyle Terrace, is fond of quoting, referencing an ancient radio show that his parents used to listen to when they were children. *The Shadow knows*, he'll answer in the next breath, finishing the quote with an ominous lowering of his voice.

There are lots of shadows on this tree-filled cul-de-sac, this horseshoe-shaped dead end that leads exactly nowhere. And shadows make excellent places for secrets—to hide, to grow, to

flourish. Until some grow too big, too powerful to contain, and they explode, like a deadly grenade tossed from a careless hand, forever shattering the quiet façade so meticulously presented to the outside world, spraying bone and blood and illusions as far as the eye can see, beyond where the mind can grasp.

So indeed, one might be forgiven for initially assuming the shots that rang out in the middle of that hot July night came from leftover Independence Day firecrackers or a car backfiring somewhere along the main road, and not from a gun held mere inches from its target's head.

I can't believe it. How could this happen? the neighbors will mutter repeatedly. This is normally such a peaceful neighborhood. Such a quiet street.