

**Prologue from**  
**PRESSURE by Jeff Strand**

For a while, the bullets were the only things keeping me alive.

It was a sack of one hundred and fourteen of them, each with a date scratched onto the casing. The first date was nearly four months ago, a Thursday. I'd spent that entire morning in the bathtub, tears streaming down my face, the barrel of a revolver in my mouth, garbage bags taped to the wall so the landlord wouldn't have to repaint. I wasn't sure that I really wanted to commit suicide, yet I couldn't force myself to pry the gun barrel from between my teeth.

Finally I did pull the gun away and removed the bullet. Then I scratched 12/25 onto the casing with a pocketknife, as a reminder that I hadn't killed myself that day.

I was in the bathtub even longer on Friday, but I still didn't shoot myself. This time I wanted to. Desperately. I was biting down so hard on the barrel that when my front tooth cracked I thought for a second that the gun had fired. I'm not sure what ultimately kept me from pulling the trigger—probably cowardice—but in the end I had a second unused bullet and another date.

This became a daily ritual. Sometimes it got really, really bad. There were times, usually late at night, when the only thing keeping me from killing myself was the sight of the bag of bullets, the knowledge that I'd survived each of those days, so why couldn't I survive just one more?

Other times I'd casually put the gun to my head for half a second and then plop down on the couch and watch some TV.

As the sack of bullets grew heavier, it became easier not to want to pull the trigger. My life became less about escape and more about the realization that I couldn't hide away forever. I didn't need to. I'd made it through one hundred and fourteen days.

On the hundred and fifteenth day, I decided that I probably had better things to spend my money on than bullets I wasn't shooting. That freakishly cold evening I dropped the revolver in the sack, tied it tight, and walked six miles to the Winston Bridge. As I tried to ignore the happy father walking on the other side, his daughter perched up on his shoulders, I prepared to fling the sack into the pond below and begin a new era of my life.

Then I thought, no, bad idea. The last thing I needed was for the sack to wash up on shore and some kids to find it. I'd just have to begin this new era of my life without a symbolic act.

I looked at the father again, burst into tears, and walked to the nearest bar, where I got so drunk that I knocked myself unconscious when I fell off the barstool. I woke up outside with blood in my eyes and the change missing from my pockets.

I'm sure I would have shot myself right then and there, except that the bastards had also taken the sack with my gun and bullets.

I just lay on the ground, shivering, unable to see anything beyond my breath misting in the air, trying to remember if there had ever been happy times.

There had been. In fact, there'd been wonderful times.

But that's not where the story begins.

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