

Little White
FLOWERS

AMBER HATHAWAY



Deadly Seeds Press

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To my partner, Brian Toner. Thank you for all your support and encouragement.

Content Note

Note: This section discusses some of the heavier content addressed in this book. While I speak in general terms, if you're concerned about potential spoilers, you may wish to skip it. For a more extensive list of content warnings, see the end of the book.

Horror and dark fiction often act as a microscope upon the world. They lay bare the hatred and injustice that afflict society. Delving into the dark side of humanity can be deeply uncomfortable, and often, that's a good thing. We need to feel uncomfortable in order to grow. However, examining the darkness can also be retraumatizing for some. For this reason, I felt a content note was in order.

The majority of this book takes place inside an insular religious community, and while the religion portrayed on these pages is fictional, the abusive atmosphere mimics that of certain real-world sects. Domestic violence (both on- and off-the-page), sexual assault (off-the-page), and religious trauma all play essential roles in the story. While I write about these issues with care and center the voices of survivors and victims, my portrayals still may be difficult for some to read.

Additionally, mental health struggles are central to the story. One character experiences intense anxiety and panic attacks. Another is in recovery for substance use disorder. Several characters

AMBER HATHAWAY

are sexual assault or domestic violence survivors, and their experiences inform their reactions and internal monologues.

Your mental health matters. If you need to step away from this book or decide that it isn't for you, that's okay. And if you keep reading, I hope you find something of value between these pages and that the discomfort you experience is worth the payoff.

Amber

Preface

Macabre tales have entranced me since early childhood. I can't tell you what first piqued my interest in the unsettling, but I do know that I already adored spooky media by the time I saw Stephen King's *The Shining*, the made-for-TV miniseries adaptation, at age six. That film solidified my love of horror and unlocked a new special interest. I incorporated dialogue and other movie elements into my stories, drew posters depicting scenes from the film, and watched it enough times that I used to know it almost word-for-word.

The Shining, both the book and the miniseries adaptation, remain among my favorite pieces of media. Whether intentional or not, King's depiction of Danny's powers parallels anxiety. As the ghosts grow stronger and become harder for Danny to dismiss, Danny's visions feel like anxiety spiraling out of control. Of course, I couldn't articulate that when I was six, but as a deeply anxious child, I think I related to Danny on some level because of the similarities between our experiences. *The Shining* made me feel seen.

As an autistic woman, I rarely find myself in fiction. Autistic people are underrepresented in all forms of media, books included. While the prevalence of autism is hard to pinpoint, recent studies suggest that about one in fifty people are autistic, yet autistic folks certainly do not make up 2% of all fictional char-

acters. Moreover, when autistic people appear in fiction, these depictions often rely heavily on stereotypes and do not match the lived experiences of many in the autistic community. Autism is a spectrum, and there are so many ways to be autistic, but our fictional representation is severely limited.

When I do find myself in fiction, I often see myself in characters who are not canonically autistic but share some of my core traits, especially my social awkwardness and anxiety. Francis Doyle from *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Milo Thatch from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, Dorran Morthone from Darcy Coates’s Black Winter series, and Autumn from *Not Another Sarah Hall’s* by Haley Newlin are a few examples. You’ll notice that all but one of these characters are men. In fiction, much like in life, folks socialized as boys are allowed a measure of awkwardness that those of us socialized as girls are not. But awkward girls, women, and nonbinary folks exist too. I am one of them. So I did what many writers in my shoes have done and wrote my own representation.

I didn’t set out to write an autistic character (or multiple autistic characters). I didn’t even have the slightest idea that I was autistic when I composed the first, very rough draft of this novel more than a decade ago. I wrote a character who I related to, our main point-of-view character, Alice, and surprise, surprise, she’s autistic. Signs of her autism appeared even in the earliest drafts, but once I received my formal diagnosis, I was a little more conscious about highlighting and acknowledging her autistic traits in my revisions.

You won’t see the word “autism” anywhere on the page outside of the front and back matter though. That’s because Alice doesn’t know she’s autistic. In 2008, when I set the story, psychologists knew less about autism than they do today. At that time, autism was one of four pervasive developmental disorders that are now encompassed under the autism spectrum umbrella. Although Al-

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

ice would certainly meet the diagnostic criteria for one of these four, I didn't want to confuse you with outdated medical terminology. But more importantly, during that time many autistic people with lower support needs fell under the radar. I didn't receive my formal autism diagnosis until 2022, and plenty of folks remain undiagnosed thanks to a lack of knowledge about autism and access to testing resources, among other factors. I wanted to share the experience of what it's like to go through life undiagnosed to help those of you who have been there feel seen and help those of you who haven't to understand the challenges of being autistic without knowing that you are.

I hope, first and foremost, dear reader, that you enjoy the story, regardless of your neurotype. But I also hope that some of you are able to see yourself reflected in my characters, whether through Alice, Andy, Riley, or someone else. If I can help even one person feel seen, I will have succeeded beyond measure.

Amber Hathaway
October 24th, 2022

Prologue

The elevator jolted to a standstill, and Alice Drayton's heart jerked with it. Her older brother, Andy, squeezed her shoulder. The corners of his mouth arced upward, veering into a semblance of a smile, but his eyes' glossy sheen undermined his effort. Tears prickled the edges of her eyes, and she focused on the glowing red number six on the elevator's display screen.

The elevator dinged, and the doors lurched apart. Alice's feet carried her through the exit of their own accord. Her surroundings retained an air of haziness, as though she moved through a dream world. The thud of her and Andy's footsteps against the floor's white and gray tiles echoed in her head, supplanting the rushing thoughts which would otherwise have filled her mind.

A counter with a sliding glass window stood at the end of the lobby opposite the elevator. A woman in floral scrubs sat behind the counter, jotting notes onto a clipboard. Wide corridors extended from the right and left ends of the lobby.

Alice smoothed a section of her waist-length, mousy blond waves with her hands and strode alongside Andy down the left corridor. A thirty-something man dressed in blue scrubs and a white medical coat with thick, brown curls like Andy's moved in the opposite direction. He gave her a nod as he passed her.

The hallway shared the same tiling as the lobby. Wooden doors cut into the deathly white walls, six on either side. The air

hummed with the sounds of electronic devices, a combination of machinery and muffled voices playing from televisions.

The corridor veered right. Fluorescent bulbs illuminated the majority of its length, but the final rectangular light fixture flickered on and off. The hallway ended in a set of double-doors, one with a red stop sign proclaiming “Medical Personnel ONLY.” Before the sign, on the right side, stood an open door. A room number was posted beside it in small, black numerals: 617.

Those three numbers broke through the dazed fog that had clouded Alice’s head since Andy received the phone call. Her gut became heavy, as though her lunch had morphed into concrete. Grammie lay beyond that door.

Andy tapped his knuckles on the door frame. His hands were the same alabaster shade as Alice’s, with fluctuating pink-red undertones.

“Who is it?” a raspy voice called.

“Your favorite grandchild,” Andy said. “And me.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re both my favorite.”

Andy gestured toward the doorway, and Alice tiptoed into the tiny room. It smelled of antiseptic with a trace of Grammie’s floral perfume. Sunny yellow walls greeted Alice, their color more taunting than soothing. An array of flowers in oversaturated shades of orange, red, and violet congregated atop a table against the wall facing her. Cards hung from the bulletin board above the table. One of them said in large, black cursive script, “Wishing you a speedy recovery.” Her heart sank. There would be no recovery, speedy or otherwise.

Ellen Drayton’s bed stood opposite the bulletin board, flanked by massive pieces of machinery. Alice’s eyes misted. The figure in the bed looked like Grammie, but she seemed too small, too fragile, as though Ellen had been swapped out for a doll, vacant-eyed with limp, unmoving limbs.

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

Instead of her signature bun, Ellen's silvery curls drooped over her shoulders. The rosy hues had faded from her porcelain complexion. An intravenous line punctured the long, blue vein showing through her wrinkled, sagging flesh.

Ellen's eyes lit up, and she held out her unencumbered arm. "There's my little girl. How are you, sweetie?"

Alice gave Ellen a hug. Ellen's arm wrapped around Alice and hung there, exerting little more force than a tinsel garland. Tears trickled down Alice's cheeks.

"I'm okay, Grammie. How are you?"

"The morphine's great."

Hints of a smile tugged at Alice's lips. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of the University of Maine sweatshirt she had nabbed from Andy and settled into the chair neighboring the bed. Andy's fingertips brushed her upper arm as he moved past her.

"And how's my handsome grandson? You look so much like your father when he was your age."

"I'm all right," Andy said.

He hugged Ellen and then stepped back beside Alice. His phone buzzed. He peeked at the screen and then turned to Alice.

"Mom's here. I'm gonna meet her at the elevator, okay?"

Alice nodded. He ducked through the doorway. The trills and beeps of the room blared in Alice's ears. Her mind scrabbled through the smattering of pleasantries it had accumulated over the years, rejecting each one. Nobody cared about the weather on a day like today.

"I can see the Hatcher in you," Ellen said. She smiled, but her eyes glistened. "Not as much as I see it in your brother, but it's there. Those eyebrows, the shape of your face. You remind me a little of myself when I was a teenager."

"Do I?"

Ellen nodded. “Oh, yes. Yes, you do.” Her smile melted. “I have a confession.”

“What is it, Grammie?”

Ellen closed her hand around her golden cross pendant. “I shouldn’t burden you with this, but I know I haven’t much longer, and I can’t go with a clean conscience unless I tell someone. Please keep in mind that I was young and powerless. I couldn’t stop it.”

Ellen’s gaze shifted heavenward. She wore the expression of a grieving stone angel. The clock above the bed *tick-tick-ticked* as the seconds slipped by.

Alice squeezed Ellen’s free hand. “It’s okay, Grammie. You can tell me.”

“I had three sisters,” Ellen said. “They were murdered, slaughtered like pigs.” Her voice cracked, and tears slipped down the sides of her face. “They wilted like flowers. Little white flowers.”

Alice’s hand locked atop her grandmother’s. She felt like she had reached that instant during a nightmare when she realized she was dreaming. This time, however, she couldn’t will herself into an alternate storyline.

Grammie must be mistaken. Otherwise, she had carried this horrible secret for more than sixty years. Mucus stung the back of Alice’s throat as she sniffed. How could Grammie have shouldered that burden alone for so long?

The *clack* of high heels against tile filtered into the room. Elizabeth Drayton raced through the entry with Andy close behind. Alice pulled away from Ellen, and Elizabeth took Alice’s place.

“Are you all right, Mom?” Elizabeth said.

“Just fine, dear,” Ellen said. She dried her eyes with the back of one hand. “Memories, that’s all.”

“Good ones, I hope.”

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

“Good ones, and bad ones too. It’s scattershot. Bits and pieces of my life popping in to say hello.”

Water streamed down Ellen’s cheeks. Elizabeth hugged her. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Elizabeth’s purse hummed. She slid it off her shoulder and fumbled for her phone. “Mark’s stuck in traffic. He’ll be here in a few.”

Ellen *tsked*. “That boy of mine is always causing me trouble.”

Alice chuckled, and Ellen cracked a smile. Ellen twisted the gold ring with a rounded emerald off the ring finger on her right hand and held it out to Alice. “This ring belonged to someone dear to my heart. I’ve been meaning to pass it on to you for years, but I couldn’t bring myself to part with it before now.”

“Thanks, Grammie.” Alice slid the ring onto her index finger. Tears leaked down her cheeks. An arm fell into place around her shoulder, and she leaned against her brother’s side.

She studied the little green stone. Age had dulled its luster, but it looked as beautiful to her then as it had when she was a child. The urge to tear it from her finger and shove it into Grammie’s hand seized her. If Grammie couldn’t pass on the ring, she couldn’t leave. It was a foolish notion, yet Alice’s fingers twitched as though readying to oblige.

Ellen closed her eyes. “I’m sorry, loves,” she said. “This morning has tuckered me out.”

Elizabeth patted her shoulder. “It’s fine, Mom. Get some rest. We’ll be here.”



Alice’s eyes flew open as a mechanical whine pierced her ears. Her muscles groaned as she straightened up in her chair at the foot

of the hospital bed. She and Andy had been camped there since Ellen drifted off. Elizabeth remained at Ellen's side, while Alice and Andy's father, Mark Drayton, alternated between standing sentry and pacing the halls.

The heart monitor attached to Ellen had flatlined, the soft beeps reduced to a consistent, low howl. The sound filled Alice to her core, commingling with the wail mounting in her chest. The doctor in the blue scrubs, who had poked his head in that afternoon, had said Grammie could have anywhere from hours to days before her body shut down. How could she be gone already?

"Ellen," Elizabeth said. "Ellen, open your eyes." She shook Ellen's shoulder, but Ellen didn't respond.

Andy rose from his seat beside Alice's. "Should I get someone?"

The doctor appeared in the entryway. He strode over to the electrocardiogram and glanced at its monitor, then pulled out his stethoscope and pressed it to Ellen's chest.

He looked at Elizabeth. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but she's gone."

"Shit," Andy said under his breath.

Tears cascaded down his face. The flow of water from Alice's eyes surged like the brook near their home after a rainstorm. She slid off her seat and threw her arms around him, and he pulled her into his chest. The familiar scents of artificial evergreen deodorant mixed with sweat enveloped her as the soft cotton of his T-shirt nestled her cheek.

A layer of ice formed upon her heart. The doctor spoke, although she heard only the cadence of his voice, not the words. The equipment made a racket. The world around her continued as though nothing had happened, but time had slowed, the seconds stretching out for eons.

The short, staggered gasps of Andy's breathing synchronized with her sobs. His arms vibrated against her, shaking in time with

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

the heaves of his chest. She tightened her grasp on him. A year ago, she had cried with him in a room much like this one. That time she had sustained an ember of hope, but all she felt this time was the end.

I had three sisters. The words surfaced in her mind, but they disappeared beneath the thought that twisted her heart. She met Andy's gaze and forced her voice out between sharp inhalations. "I forgot ... to say ... I love you."

Chapter I

The soft carpet muffled Alice's footfalls as she padded across the living room. The kitchen rested beyond the living room, and a narrow entrance connected the two. Her mother refilled the napkin holder at the center of the kitchen table while her father hovered nearby. He snagged a fry from his plate, and Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at him.

"I don't know if we should tell them," Mark said in a low voice.

"Tell us what?" Andy said.

He passed Alice and crossed the threshold. Alice followed on his heels.

"It's nothing exciting," Elizabeth said. "Now sit down, both of you, before your dinner gets cold."

Elizabeth and Mark settled into their chairs. Alice's gut tightened as she closed in on the table. Why act secretive if what they had discussed was no big deal?

She slipped into her seat between Elizabeth and Andy. Her stomach clamored as the French fries' salty, crisp aroma wafted from her plate. She grinned and clapped her hands.

"So what's this big secret?" Andy said.

Mark cleared his throat. "I got a call from a lawyer about your grammie's father's estate."

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

Alice's hand froze halfway to her mouth, a fry pinched between her fingers. "Grammie's father? As in, the one she refused to talk about?"

"I assume so. His name was James Hatcher."

Alice's heart skipped. Finally, a name. After hitting countless dead ends in her research, she had thought she might never learn his identity.

Andy popped a fry into his mouth. Alice gritted her teeth as his chewing overwhelmed her ears. How did he manage to crunch fries?

"Jeez, he must've been like a hundred years old," Andy said.

"No kidding," Mark said. "He passed last week. He left his farmhouse to your grammie, but since she's no longer with us, the house now belongs to your mother and me."

"Where is it?" Alice said.

"Some town up north called Evanston."

Evanston. That sounded familiar. With a name and a town, tracking down James Hatcher's marriage license should be easy, if one existed. "Can I take my dinner to my room?"

"No," Elizabeth said. "Those genealogy sites will still be there after you finish your food."

Alice dipped a fry in her cup of ranch dressing and shoved it into her mouth. The salty, greasy goodness spilled over her taste buds, but she barely chewed before she swallowed. How could Mom force her to stay put when she had waited years for this information?

"Slow down," Elizabeth said. Irritation edged her voice. "You've managed to survive the first eighteen years of your life without knowing who your great-grandfather was. You can make it another ten minutes."

A twinge pricked Alice's chest. She had never known because Grammie had severed ties with her parents over an incident she

refused to speak about. Even if Andy was right, and Grammie's claim about murdered sisters was the product of medication-induced delirium, something awful had happened to her. Would digging into Grammie's past betray her memory?

"So you're gonna sell it, right?" Andy said through a mouthful of burger.

"Nah, your mother and I were thinking about moving up there."

"You're not serious, are you?" Alice said. Her scholarship only covered tuition, not room and board, and no way would she survive in a noisy dorm.

"Of course, he's not serious," Elizabeth said. "It's way out in the boonies. Yes, we're going to sell it."

"Nice," Andy said. "Any chance you could send a few bucks my way? I did make Dean's List."

"You took three classes," Mark said. "Let's hope you put away the video games long enough to pull in half-decent grades."

Andy's shoulders slumped. Alice reached beneath the table and squeezed his hand. Why did Dad have to be such a jerk? He should be thankful he still had a son, let alone one who earned good grades.

"Mark, that was uncalled for," Elizabeth said.

"Uncalled for my ass. These kids ..."

Elizabeth shot Mark a look and then turned to her son. "Andy, I know you worked hard, but your father and I aren't made of money."

Andy stared at his plate. "I know."

"Do you?" Mark said. "You know what I did when I was your age and I wanted money? I earned it at my job. I didn't go crying to my parents."

"No, but you mooch off your wife."

Mark's jaw tightened. "Is that what you think?"

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

Andy crossed his arms and locked eyes with Mark. “I saw the FAFSA. Kind of funny how you act like you’re the king of the castle when Mom makes like twenty grand more than you.”

A vein bulged at Mark’s temple. Alice shrank back in her seat. Why did Andy have to say something he knew would set Dad off?

“Andy, it would be best if you went upstairs. Now,” Elizabeth said. “Alice, you can go too.”

Alice grabbed her plate and scampered out of the kitchen. Andy shuffled after her. “Dad’s such an asshole,” he said under his breath.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s not your fault.”

Andy stalked toward the staircase. Alice glanced into the kitchen. Mark leaned his elbow against the table and gripped his head in his hand. Elizabeth touched his shoulder, but he shrugged her off. His raised voice played through Alice’s head, reciting his spiel about how spoiled she and Andy were. However, this time he spoke at a volume barely above a whisper. “I give up.”

Chapter 2

Andy rubbed sleepy dust from his eyes as he sauntered down the stairs. The aromas of coffee and French vanilla creamer wafted through the living room. Elizabeth sat on the burgundy chenille loveseat reading the newspaper as she sipped from her “University of Maine School of Law” mug. The headline, “Satan Walks Amongst Us: An Exposé on Religious Cults in America,” emblazoned the newspaper’s front page.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you before noon,” Elizabeth said.

“Good morning to you too,” Andy said. “No Alice?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “She’s in her room sulking because your dad and I had the audacity to suggest she get out and do something with her summer. It’s not healthy being cooped up in the house all the time.”

Not this again. “She’s fine, but if it’ll make you happy, I’ll take her shopping or something.”

“She should be getting out on her own, learning to drive so she doesn’t have to rely on you all the time.”

Andy scratched beneath his T-shirt’s collar. “I don’t know what you expect me to do about that. I’m not old enough to teach her.”

Elizabeth waved her hand. “Nevermind. Why don’t you grab your breakfast and bring it out here so I can talk to you about something?”

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

Andy shuffled into the kitchen. No doubt Mom would chew him out for his remark about Dad's salary. It had been a low blow, but so was Dad's quip about video games. Making Dean's List on a part-time courseload might seem trivial compared to Alice's accomplishments, but it was a big deal for Andy. Like his counselor, Hal, said, grades and graduation year didn't matter in the scheme of things. Staying healthy enough to reach the finish line did. Andy was twenty credits closer to graduation than he had been when school started, with decent grades to boot, thanks to his ADHD meds and the time management strategies Hal had taught him. But no matter how much Andy had his shit together, he would never be an all-star superachiever like Alice. Why couldn't Dad accept that?

Andy's shoulders slumped as his hand closed around the pill cup his mother had laid out for him. Two pills, an orange hexagonal tablet and a white capsule, rested at the bottom of the container. A lump lodged in his throat. Dad had every right to resent Andy, although not because of school. Andy had fucked up big time, and nothing he did would ever make up for the pain he had caused his family.

He closed his eyes and drew in a slow, deep breath. The heaviness encumbering his chest diminished as he concentrated on the solidity of the linoleum beneath his feet. He recited one of Hal's mantras in his head: *I cannot change the past, but I can control the choices I make in the present.* His Adam's apple dipped. What about the future? How could he guarantee he would never hurt his loved ones like that again?

He took his pills, fixed his coffee, snagged a piece of leftover cake from the refrigerator, and then sank onto the couch. His appetite had vanished, but he dug into the slice. The artificial orange taste of his Suboxone tablet lingered on his tongue, souring the vanilla icing's flavor.

Elizabeth frowned. "Cake is not a breakfast food."

"It has eggs and stuff." He shoveled another forkful into his mouth. "So what's up?"

"You know that house that your father inherited? He and I need you to fix it up. Clean it out, give it a fresh coat of paint, that sort of thing."

Andy nearly spat out his cake. "Haha, that's a good one. You had me for a second."

"I'm serious."

He slid his class ring over the lowest joint on his index finger and back down again. The online Python class he had registered for started Monday and ran for six weeks. He had intended to wait to tell Mom and Dad until he finished the course and only if he earned a B or better, but this threw a wrench into his plans. He couldn't stream lectures using great-grandpa's dial-up (if the guy had internet at all). "Do I have a choice?"

"Not if you want your tuition covered for next year. But I'm sure you can talk Alice into going with you, get in some quality sibling time."

"Sweeping up dead bugs, the ultimate bonding activity."

Elizabeth's tone softened. "Look, Andy, I understand this isn't what you want for your summer. However, I think this is what's in your best interest and the best interest of our family."

Andy stared at his plate. Alice had heard Dad say he gave up. Andy already had ruined so much. He couldn't risk destroying the family.

"I'll go Tuesday after my appointment," he said.

"Speaking of your appointment, see if Dr. Anderson will write you a prescription for a two-week supply of Suboxone. You wouldn't want to have to come home in the middle of cleaning to get your prescription refilled."

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

“Two weeks? That’s a long time.” No way would Andy pass the Python course if he missed a third of the lectures. He would have to drop the class. At least that solved the payment issue.

“I doubt it’ll take you that long, especially since I imagine you’ll have Alice’s help, but better safe than sorry, right?”

“I’ll see, but Dr. Anderson’s pretty strict.” The way she metered out those pills—exactly a week’s supply, no more, having to see her every week, piss in a cup, go through the whole rigamarole just to get the damn pills—he felt like a criminal. Fourteen months of sobriety, and she still did not trust him one iota.

“Well, if not, it won’t be the end of the world.”

That was easy for Mom to say. But Andy would manage. He would find a coding class that ran later in the summer, spend a couple of weeks in the middle of nowhere cleaning up that damn house, drive however many hours to collect his meds. Whatever it took to appease Dad and keep the family together.

Elizabeth chewed the inside of her cheek. “If Alice won’t go with you, will you be able to handle your medication on your own?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

Elizabeth nodded, but her expression remained rigid. He shook his head. “Glad to see I’ve got your vote of confidence.”

She sighed. “Andy, I’m your mother. Of course, I’m going to worry about you.”

“Well, don’t. Alice will be there. She’ll handle the meds.”

Andy chucked the remainder of his cake in the trash and headed upstairs. He shoved a hand through his curls and rubbed his scalp. He couldn’t blame Mom entirely, not after what she had been through with Uncle Charlie. Plus, both of Andy’s medications could become addictive. But shouldn’t the past fourteen months count for something?

Alice's room was the first on the right side of the hallway. He peered through her open door. Her unkempt bed stood across from the entrance. Kitty, a calico plush Grammie had given her when she was little, stared up from its spot beside her pillow. Langston Hughes's poem "Hold Fast to Dreams" was stenciled above her bed in rainbow letters.

She sat at the cluttered desk tucked away in one corner of the room beside an overflowing bookshelf. Her body rocked back and forth slightly in her seat as she stared at her laptop screen. She wore her signature summer style, a black camisole and short denim cutoffs.

He tapped three times on her door frame.

"Come in."

He stepped over the mound of clothes spilling into her doorway. The plush emerald carpet cushioned his soles as he crossed the floor. A scattered collection of media hung above her desk. Most had a spooky bent, like the clipping of a short horror story she had published in their high school's creative writing magazine and the moonlit cemetery scene he had painted for her. But she had also included a print-out of the lyrics to Evanescence's "Imaginary," a silhouette of a cat filled in with a quote about being kind to animals, a passage from Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, and a postcard image of Alice in Wonderland tumbling down the rabbit hole. Her graduation tassel had joined the assemblage, the gold '08 glinting against the crimson and white strands.

"I don't get it," she said.

"Still hung up on the census record?"

"Mhmm."

He crouched beside her. The laptop's display featured the same census record she had shown him last night, from Evanston, Maine. The surname had faded almost to a point of illegibility, but Alice insisted it said "Hatcher." The household consisted of

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

three members: James, his wife Rebecca, and a daughter, Louise. Which, granted, was weird, since Louise was Alice's middle name, at Grammie's insistence.

"James Hatcher is Grammie's father," Alice said. "He has to be. So why isn't Grammie in his household?"

"I may have a solution to your genealogy woes. Mom and Dad decided to send me to clean out the house Dad inherited. If you come with, I'll take you to the town hall and any cemeteries you wanna check out."

Alice's face scrunched. "Why are they making you do it?"

"Because I don't have a full ride to college, I guess. Mom said they won't pay my semester bill unless I go."

"That's not fair. What about your Python class?"

"I'm sure I can find one that runs later in the summer."

"You should tell Mom. She would want you to put school first."

"And give Dad more ammo when I fail? I don't think so."

Besides, even if Mom changed her mind, Dad wouldn't, which would only deepen the rift between them. But Alice didn't need to know that. She had enough worries without adding the state of Mom and Dad's marriage to the mix.

"You won't fail. You're much smarter than you give yourself credit for."

"I told Mom I'd go. You can come with me or not. It's up to you."

Alice bit the inside of her lip. Her eyes migrated to her emerald ring. "Remember when I asked Grammie where she grew up for the family tree I was working on? She wouldn't tell me the town's name, but she said it was a wretched place that soured the souls of good men. What if—whatever happened then—what if it's still going on?"

Why did Grammie have to tell Alice that weird thing about murdered sisters? She must have left her hometown because she

experienced some form of abuse, like Dad said. Which was terrible, but a far cry from whatever horror-fueled conspiracy Alice was envisioning.

“Kid, that was sixty years ago. But if it’s gonna freak you out too much, you don’t have to come.”

“No, I’m not going to leave you to do this alone. It wouldn’t be fair. Plus, you’re right about the genealogy opportunities. If her family lived in Evanston for several generations, we might find a wealth of information.” Alice rifled through the jumble of papers and notebooks on her desk. “Let me make sure my genealogical researcher ID is still valid. I might need that to access more recent vital records.”

Andy smiled. How anyone could enjoy flipping through old records was beyond him. “Since you’re not getting anywhere with this genealogy stuff, why don’t we head over to the library so you can pick up some books for the trip?”

“Mom told you about our fight?” He nodded. “Let me find my ID real quick before I forget, and then we’ll go.”

“All right. I’ll be in my room.”

He headed down the hall. A knot had formed in his stomach. He couldn’t let Alice’s anxiety get to him. Whoever hurt Grammie was probably dead by now, and even if they weren’t, they would have no reason to target Andy or Alice. Still, the knot persisted.

Chapter 3

Alice took a swig from her jumbo-sized cup. She grimaced as the warm diet cola spilled over her tongue. So much for the “specially engineered insulating material” keeping her drink cold. She set her soda in the cup holder and leaned toward the window. A long, wavy strand of hair pinched between the door and its frame fluttered about in the opening, the latest in a long line of victims of her inattention. Air as hot as the truck’s cabin circulated through the window.

“I can’t believe the air conditioning broke like that,” she said.

“I can,” Andy said. “This truck’s a piece of shit.”

She squeezed her fingers into the pocket of her denim shorts and pulled out her flip phone. The top right corner of the screen displayed four empty bars. “I’m glad I sent Mom a text at the convenience store. The reception here is terrible.”

“What’d you expect? We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

A break in the otherwise seamless line of trees appeared on either side of the road. She glanced at the copy of *The Maine Atlas and Gazetteer* resting in her lap and pointed to the left. “Turn that way up ahead.”

“I can’t see where you’re pointing when I’m driving. My side or your side?”

“Your side.”

“You sure that’s the turn?”

“No. I haven’t seen a street sign in miles.”

He turned onto the dirt path. Sporadic tufts of plant life poked up through the road’s rock-strewn surface. The truck tossed her helter-skelter as it rattled over potholes and bumps, and she latched onto the door.

The width of the path tapered. Tree branches spilled into the roadway, and one scraped the vehicle. Andy slowed the truck to a crawl.

“This can’t be the right turn,” he said. “My truck isn’t very big, and it’s getting hit. This road can’t be used all that much.”

Her lips pinched together as she studied the map. “Let’s keep going a little farther. I don’t think we’ve reached where the town’s supposed to be yet.”

He shook his head but inched the truck down the road. She gazed through the window at the endless evergreen forest. Had they taken a wrong turn?

The cab’s walls shrank around her as the temperature climbed. She reached underneath her seat and grabbed the box of cassettes. Most of the tapes were Andy’s hard rock, but she had a few in there as well.

“Not feeling so hot?” he said. She shook her head. “Sorry.”

She popped *Millennium* by the Backstreet Boys into the player, fast-forwarded to the second song, and leaned back in her seat. The introductory notes of “I Want It That Way” wafted from the speakers. She closed her eyes and breathed in, timing her air intake with the rhythm. Andy’s soft baritone blended with Brian Littrell’s voice. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. Nothing said “I love you” like Andy singing along with a band he had mocked incessantly growing up. The chorus arrived, and she abandoned her breathing exercises and joined in.

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

The stench of manure infiltrated the truck's cabin. Her nose wrinkled. "Please tell me we won't have to live near this for two weeks. I don't think I can take it."

"Yeah, same."

A field emerged on the side of the road to her right, and before it, near the roadway, stood a boxy cabin. The peeling russet paint revealed glimpses of the house's graying wooden skeleton. A barn towered beside it, the structure a patchwork of scarlet and sun-bleached boards.

Before the building, a vertical, white-and-black town line sign clustered amongst the trees. The paint had chipped in places, but the letters remained mostly intact. She squinted at the text. "I think that says 'Evanston.'"

He grinned. "Would you look at that? Maybe you aren't such a bad navigator after all."

As the truck crept toward the house, an earthy fetor overwhelmed the air. Alice rolled up her window, and Andy closed his, but their actions did little to quell the noxious odor. A white cow with black spots lay in the street, swishing her tail. Her massive body brought the road to a dead end.

The truck lurched to a halt. "What the fuck?" Andy said. "How are we supposed to get through?"

He pressed the horn. Alice winced and clapped her hands over her ears. So much for fair warning. The cow glared at the truck, but she didn't budge.

He sighed. "This is fucking ridiculous. We can't wait here all day."

Alice squeezed his hand. He leaned back in his seat and stared at the roof. "This trip sucks."

"Mhmm."

Grimy, off-white curtains covering one of the small house's windows fluttered, and a little face pressed against the window-

pane. The front door banged open. Two dark-haired teenagers in long-sleeved garments hurried outside. They looked like they had stepped from the pages of a Victorian novel.

The girl wore a cinnamon-colored, high-collared, floor-length dress that overwhelmed her petite frame. An array of patches in various colors traipsed across the heavy fabric. A wooden cross hung from a cord around her neck. Her hair was pulled atop her head in a bun, but several long tendrils cascaded past her shoulders.

The boy's thick curls mirrored Andy's, but he was broader-shouldered and more muscular than Andy's willowy build. He wore a yellowing button-down shirt with patches at the elbows and brown trousers. His skin was the color of red clay, much darker than the girl's light tan complexion.

The boy strode toward the cow. "C'mere, Gertie."

Andy slid out of the cabin. Alice waited until he had reached the passenger side, then stepped out next to him. The boy kept his head down as he walked, but the girl stared at the Draytons. Her fingers fidgeted with the cross, which carried an engraving of a rose with a winding stem.

Alice twirled Grammie's ring and leaned closer to Andy. She stared at her feet. Why was interacting with people so difficult? Sometimes it felt like everyone else had acquired a manual telling them what to say and when, and no one had bothered to share a copy with her.

"You folks lost?" the girl said.

"Not lost, exactly, but we could use better directions," Andy said. "We're looking for James Hatcher's house. Our dad inherited it."

"Oh, Mr. Hatcher's place is right around the bend." The girl pointed toward the road. "As soon as you come around the corner, it'll be on your left."

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

“Thanks.”

The cow’s bell clanged as the boy tugged on her collar. “C’mon, Gertie, get a move on, or I’ll tell Ma ta make you into dinner.”

The girl giggled. The boy swiveled his head and scowled at her. “You wanna try movin’ er?”

The girl turned back to Alice and Andy. “Are you two going to be living in Mr. Hatcher’s house?”

“No, our parents want us to clean it up so they can sell it,” Andy said.

“Oh, okay. I’m Josie Lewis, by the way.” She pointed toward the boy. “He’s my twin, Jeremiah.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Andy Drayton, and this is my little sis, Alice.”

The cow rose to her feet. “Good girl,” Jeremiah said. He looked at Andy. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

Jeremiah’s piercing brown eyes shifted to Alice, although they didn’t quite meet her gaze. “And you’re the little sis.” She nodded. He frowned, and his bushy eyebrows pinched toward one another. His focus pivoted to Andy. “How long you plan on bein’ here?”

“Not long. A few days.”

“Good. You folks’ll be all right.”

Jeremiah adjusted his grasp on the cow’s collar and led her across the lawn. Alice glanced at Andy, and he shrugged.

“Sorry about him,” Josie said in a low voice. “He don’t, er, he doesn’t know how to talk to people.”

“It’s okay,” Andy said.

“Well, I best get back to my chores. You folks take care.”

“You too.”

Alice climbed into the truck. Her stomach tightened as her eyes followed Jeremiah across the field. Andy's estimate of a few days was optimistic at best.

Andy turned the key in the ignition. "It's Gotta be You" rushed from the speakers. He bobbed his head to the music. "All right, kiddo, let's get this road on the show."

She fastened her seatbelt, and the truck crept forward. Andy didn't seem concerned by Jeremiah's weird remark, which meant her anxiety had probably blown it out of proportion. If only she could be normal and not freak out over every little thing.

Chapter 4

The truck inched along a quarter of a mile before the next house came into view, a pale yellow, two-story Victorian with red trim. The brightness exuded pretense, like a brush of vibrant lipstick on a corpse's mouth applied to mask death's bloodless veneer. Rosebushes flanked the wraparound porch, blossoms drooping toward the ground as the first flush of decay stained their pale petals.

Past the end of the manicured lawn, the road curved. Alice's heart skipped. Another moment, and she would reach the house Grammie had grown up in.

Three single-story homes appeared, two on the left and one on the right. A cluster of non-residential buildings extended beyond the houses, although distance obscured the lettering on the corresponding signs. Two middle-aged women in dresses cut similarly to Josie's stood by the closest shop, their mouths agape.

Alice's skin prickled, and she focused on her temporary dwelling. The house was bone white with shingles and trim the color of moonlit shadows. A tree loomed over one side of the house, its barren branches splayed like dozens of arms frozen in an endless reach. A weathered crimson barn stood apart from the house, the sagging window frames two drooping, soulless eyes. An overgrowth of weeds had commandeered the field behind the residence and encroached upon the tidy lawn.

Andy slowed the truck to a stop. “Welcome to paradise.”

He exited the cab. She stole a final glance through the window and then joined him at the edge of the lawn. Her fingers combed a section of her hair as she stared up at the structure, and a shiver traced her spine. This was where it had happened. Abuse, murder, whatever transpired all those years ago. It was a statistical reality—abuse most often occurred inside the home—but there was something deeper too, as though the trauma lingered still, its malignancy poisoning the air.

A narrow dirt walkway snaked across the lawn to the pallid front porch. Andy started down the path, and she followed close on his heels. Her stomach wavered as excitement melded with anxiety. Until last week, she had written off Grammie’s family history as a mystery she would never solve. She couldn’t let some nebulous notion that a bad thing had happened once upon a time psych her out when the answers she had spent years searching for now hovered within her reach.

Besides, Andy shouldn’t have to tackle the house alone. Mom and Dad were essentially punishing him for his ADHD, since he hadn’t had the tools or accommodations to excel academically until recently. Her chest constricted as her eyes gravitated to his left shoulder. Plus she had agreed to handle his meds. While he probably could manage them on his own, from what she had read, social isolation contributed significantly to relapse rates. Spending a week in a weird town in the middle of nowhere was a small price to pay if her support made it easier for Andy to continue his recovery journey.

“Hold it right there.”

Alice’s heart hurtled into her throat. She whirled around. The two women she had glimpsed near the store toed the lawn’s perimeter. One hunched her shoulders, trying to take up as little space as possible. She hung back by Andy’s truck, but her

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

companion, a stout woman in a silken, steel-colored dress, strode toward the siblings. The woman's graying black hair was pinned atop her head in a bun so tight it lifted her forehead, and a gilded cross pendant swung about her bosom.

"What do you kids think you're doing?" The woman pointed a pasty finger at Andy, her fingertip hovering inches from his chest. At this close proximity, the details of her necklace resolved. The charm resembled a crucifix, except a tethered rose replaced Jesus.

A dozen figures in floor-length dresses or white button-downs and slacks had emerged from the nearby buildings. They edged toward the farmhouse. Three huddled together in the roadway alongside the diffident woman, whispering amongst themselves as they stared the Draytons down with narrowed eyes. The hiss of their voices raked at Alice's eardrums.

She shifted closer to Andy. The press of his hand as it enfolded hers eased her lungs, allowing her breaths to deepen, to slow.

"I'm Andy Drayton, and this is my sister, Alice. Our dad inherited James Hatcher's house. The girl down the road—Josie, I think—told us it was right around the bend."

The woman's face softened. "Of course. Where are my manners? I'm Melinda White. My husband, Gabe, and I live right down the road. The yellow house." She gestured toward the bend in the dirt road.

"Uh, it's nice to meet you," Andy said.

"Likewise, dear."

Mrs. White smiled, but her too-wide grin didn't reach her eyes. She might wear the guise of a grandmother, but she offered none of the warmth Alice had cherished in her own.

A woman with two young children drifted to the front of the small group assembled before the lawn. The kids gawked at the Draytons as though they were curios in a *Ripley's Believe It or Not*

exhibit. The little girl started to speak, but the woman shushed her.

A teenage boy stood apart from the other onlookers, fidgeting with an object in his pocket. He was about average height and slim, with dusty blond hair that hung in his eyes and grazed his collar. As tidy as the rest of his appearance was, the long hair should have clashed, but it worked for him. He smiled at Alice. Although he held her gaze for only a second before he looked away, the gesture buoyed her heart. At least she had found one friendly face amongst the mob of people.

Mrs. White's voice drew Alice's attention away from the boy. "Are you kids moving in here?"

"No, our parents sent us to clean up the place so they can sell it," Andy said.

The corners of Mrs. White's mouth lost their exaggerated peaks as her face relaxed. "What a shame. Oh, but there are plenty of families who could use this house. The Lewises, for one. You say you met Josie on your way in? Surely you must have noticed the unsightly shack she lives in."

Andy toyed with his class ring. "The sale's not something we have any control over, but I'll let our parents know there are people here who'd be interested."

"Would you? We would be grateful. Say, what are you kids doing for dinner?"

"We haven't thought that far ahead."

"Come on down to my house at six o'clock, and I'll fix you something to eat. How does that sound?"

Alice's muscles recoiled. The chewing, the small talk, being interrogated over her dietary choices—the whole ordeal would be a nightmare. She tugged on Andy's hand, but he remained focused on Mrs. White.

"Sounds great," he said.

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

“Okay, we’ll see you this evening then.” Mrs. White’s gaze swept across Alice’s figure. “A word of advice, dear. It would behoove you to cover up. Us ladies must maintain our modesty, so we don’t tempt men to sin.”

A man in the crowd snickered. Heat flared in Alice’s veins as her gaze fell to her feet. Had she the shelter of her computer’s screen, she would have challenged Mrs. White’s perspective with careful, deliberate sentences. However, in person, the words she scrambled for evaded her. Her vocal cords, finicky at best around hordes of strangers, had gone offline entirely. How could her body betray her, rendering her silent when every fiber of her ached to speak? Her eyes rushed to Andy, but he refused to look in her direction.

“Good luck settling in,” Mrs. White said.

“Thanks,” Andy said.

Mrs. White waved goodbye and rejoined her companion. She spoke in a low voice as she guided the timid woman toward the shops. The remaining figures dispersed, stealing final glances at the siblings before they wandered after Mrs. White.

The boy hung back. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he looked at Alice. The intensity of his gaze prickled her skin, but she kept her eyes trained on his. His lips parted as though he was preparing to speak, but he closed his mouth and forced a smile. He held up a hand, and she mirrored the gesture. Then he jogged toward the shops. The urge to chase after him and ask what he meant to say tugged at her, but her feet remained rooted to the walkway.

“That was wild,” Andy said. “With the way they stared, you’d think we were from another planet.”

“It was creepy.” All those eyes drilling into her, the brazen glares. If the townspeople wanted her to feel unwelcome, they had succeeded.

“Yeah, it kind of was.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “Sorry for not standing up for you. I didn’t know what to say.”

She hugged her arms. Finding the words in the moment was no easy feat, but it would have been nice if he had said something, anything, no matter how imperfect.

“As for dinner, I wasn’t gonna turn down a meal Mrs. White was nice enough to offer us, especially since, like, half the town was standing there. It’s not like I wanna go either, but sometimes we’ve gotta deal.”

“You could have at least told her I’m a vegetarian.”

“Shit. It slipped my mind.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Maybe we can head into town, see if we can find her. I’ll offer to bring some mac and cheese.”

Alice shook her head. Given how suspicious and judgmental the townsfolk had acted thus far, avoiding them seemed like the best course of action. “No, it’s fine. I imagine there will be potatoes or something.”

“I really am sorry. I wish I’d remembered. You can speak up too though.”

Andy’s words sliced at the scar tissue encompassing her heart. “You know it’s not that simple.”

To be fair, she hadn’t thought to use her voice. She had become so accustomed to Andy taking the lead with strangers that sometimes she forgot she theoretically had the ability to speak. But given the way the slut-shaming incident played out, her voice probably would have abandoned her anyway.

“I know, but sometimes it feels like you’re not trying.”

She clutched her left wrist with her right hand. “I am trying.”

“Okay. You ready to go inside? I’m sweating balls out here.”

He ascended the stairs, and she followed. The unease returned, shoving away the mix of emotions that Andy’s accusation had unearthed.

It was just a house. Wood and metal. Those bad vibes were her imagination doing what it did best: reconfiguring the mundane

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

into the menacing. If every place that had seen trauma carried a memory of its past, the entire world would be uninhabitable.

He turned the knob, and the door clicked. A living room stood on the other side of the threshold. The semi-darkness of midday shadows cloistered the area, dulling the colors of the furnishings.

Andy strode through the entrance while Alice carried herself on the tips of her toes. Her flip-flops settled against the dirt-streaked, blanched woven rug that covered the portion of the wood floor nearest to the door. A musty odor hung in the air, the stench of an attic that no one had entered in years.

Andy dropped onto the end cushion of the plum-colored couch opposite the door. A splotchy noir stain marked one of the couch's arms. Swatches of the dark lacquer covering the feet had eroded, exposing the ashen innards.

Her residual unease faded. The house itself may not have changed much over the decades, but the furniture had. While certainly not new, the couch didn't look sixty-five years old. The unfinished end table beside it, which carried a Bible with a worn leather cover, still emitted a piney fragrance. At least she wouldn't be stuck wondering whether this or that object had been part of whatever happened to Grammie all those years ago.

A wooden cross hung on the wall behind the couch. Like Josie's necklace charm, the outline of a rose had been carved into the wood. Alice ran her fingers over the engraving.

"You think these people are Amish or something?" Andy said.

"Or something. I don't think the Amish have these crosses." Although the entirety of her knowledge of the Amish came from a couple of horror stories and the *X-Files* episode "Gender Bender."

"Maybe that's why Mrs. White invited us to dinner, so she can try to convert us," Andy said.

"I hope not."

Andy smirked. “What, you don’t want to spend your days bundled in one of those hideous dresses, popping out kids or whatever women are supposed to do here?”

“I’ll stick with going to school and writing novels, thank you very much.”

Or at least trying to write a novel. Staying focused on a single project seemed impossible when myriad compelling premises demanded her attention. But she had managed to write thirty pages of her current work-in-progress. Maybe this one would be *The One*.

A slanted wooden bookshelf stood on the right side of the room. Antique, cloth-bound tomes in muted hues of scarlet, jade, and navy lined the shelves. Gold and black lettering along the spines spelled out titles such as *Little Women*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Middlemarch*.

She picked up the copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, launching a torrent of dust particles. Her nose twitched. She cradled the book in one hand and lifted the cover. The publication date 1920 emblazoned the copyright page. That was just a few years before Grammie was born, which meant this would have been her childhood copy. Alice thumbed through the creased and smudged pages. Add book desecration to the list of reasons why she would never have kids.

Andy peeled off his T-shirt and mopped his face with it. “I’m not seeing an AC anywhere or even a fan.”

“We could open a window.”

She made her way toward the front of the house and scooted in behind the mammoth black woodstove while Andy headed to the window on the other side of the door. She parted the faded curtains and pushed up on the window. The heavy frame budged open a crack and then jammed. Andy joined her and hefted it open. A warm swell of air passed through the screen.

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

“Not much of an improvement,” he said. “How could this guy live without at least a fan? And no TV?”

“Maybe it’s part of their religion?”

“I don’t get that. Like, where does Jesus say you can’t have a TV?”

Alice tiptoed across the floor through the entryway dividing the living room and kitchen. The kitchen walls were the same sallow color as the living room. A hardwood elliptical table encircled by six wooden chairs stood at the side of the room to the right of the entrance.

“Looks like refrigerators aren’t taboo,” Andy said. He tapped a knuckle against the silver refrigerator.

She pointed at a window cloaked in yellowed curtains overlooking the sink. “Could you ...?”

“Yeah, I’m on it.”

A beep pierced the air. He halted and reached into his pocket.

“A text?” she said.

He shook his head. “No, I forgot to cancel the reminders I set for the Python lectures.”

“Do you have reception here?”

“No. What about you?”

She retrieved her cell and glanced at the corner of the screen. Zero bars. Her eyes swept across the scuffed wooden countertop, loping from the block of knives to the coffee percolator. She stepped into the living room and canvassed the area. No phone there either. What if there was no landline?

“There could be a phone in one of the bedrooms,” Andy said. “But even if there isn’t, we’ve managed without a phone before.”

“But how will we keep in touch with Mom and Dad? I don’t really know what we’re supposed to do other than paint the house.”

“We’ll have to drive to the convenience store, I guess. It’s not a good solution, but it is a solution.”

“But that’s nearly an hour of travel time each day.”

“Yeah, this trip keeps getting better and better, eh?”

She turned down the hallway to the left. Maybe Andy was right. If James Hatcher had experienced mobility issues toward the end of his life, a bedside phone could have been easier for him to access.

She flipped the light switch. A narrow carpet spanned the length of the hallway. Paisley designs the red-orange color of residual bloodstains splayed across the dingy rug. Two wooden doors cut through the wan walls. The first led to a linen closet.

The hair on Alice’s arms rose as she yanked open the second door. The moose head mounted to the wall above the queen-sized bed fixed its stony glare on her. A stuffed black bear carcass guarded one corner of the room, its mouth open in a sharp-toothed snarl, its claws outstretched. It looked ready to spring to life and maul anyone in its presence. Birds of prey perched about the room, some serving as macabre bookends while others had staked out space atop the bookshelves. They stared Alice down with their beady black eyes.

“Hallelujah,” Andy said. He passed her and lifted a white box fan. “I call dibs.”

She scanned the nightstand. A drinking glass sat beside another Bible, but otherwise, the surface was empty.

That tight, claustrophobic feeling crept in. Alice drew in a deep breath, and the sensation’s potency diminished. No matter what her brain said, she wasn’t trapped.