

Our
TANGLED
ROOTS

AMBER HATHAWAY



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To my fellow chronic anxiety sufferers. You are so much stronger
than the world would have you believe

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 this. For a more extensive list of content warnings, see the end of the book.

Our Tangled Roots takes place primarily inside the fictional insular religious community introduced in *Little White Flowers*, the first book in the LWF series. (While *Our Tangled Roots* could work as an entry point to the series, for the best reading experience, I recommend starting with Book One and reading in order.) Many of the same content warnings from the first two books still stand. Domestic violence and physical abuse appear here much as they do in real cults, and mental health struggles, particularly intense anxiety and panic, remain a central focus.

However, there are two issues that, while present in the first two books, are exacerbated in this one. First, the threat of sexual violence plays a larger role. (To avoid spoilers here, I have included additional details in the content warning list at the end of the book.) As we have seen too often in reality, when abusers are given unchecked power, they will readily exploit it. I do my best to write with care and center the voices of survivors and victims, but there may still be passages and scenes that are difficult to read.

The second element that has taken on a pronounced role is ableism, particularly with respect to autism. While we have seen instances of ableism in the first two books, the eugenics in the Evanstonian belief system is on full display in this one. In some real-world religious communities, disabilities like autism are treated as a punishment from God or a mark of the Devil, and I couldn't imagine the Evanstonian community as a whole feeling any differently. I'm autistic myself, and it's hard delving into that mindset. But it was an essential piece of the story, a chain reaction initiated by a bit of character backstory I introduced in Book Two that I didn't want to dial back once I realized the implications.

I finished the first draft of *Our Tangled Roots* in late 2024, before the current presidential administration here in the US came into power. At the time, I was plenty aware that there were people who cowered from the specter of autism; people who staked their children's lives on thoroughly discredited studies and dangerous home remedies to prevent or exorcise the autism from them. However, I felt like, on the whole, we were moving in the right direction. Now with the talk of autism camps from some of the highest offices in the US, I feel like this storyline has become even more relevant and essential. Autism is a natural variation in the human condition; it needs no cure. Autistic people matter, regardless of what our capabilities are or how well we are able to fuel the capitalist machine. I hope that comes through in these pages.

I have also included an extended content warning list at the end of the book. While it is not exhaustive, it does include more topics than I've covered here. If there are particular issues you find deeply upsetting or triggering, you may want to check it before you proceed. But if you are ready to begin, turn the page and venture back to Evanston. It's going to be a killer trip!

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Amber

Chapter I

Alice Drayton's pulse quickened as the vertical, black-and-white town line sign emerged from the expanse of evergreens that abutted the clearing on her right. The sign's lettering had degraded during the eleven years since she and her brother, Andy, had last driven down this road. Aluminum shined through where the paint had chipped away, but Mother Nature had yet to erase that wretched name, Evanston.

A weight settled in her gut, and she turned over her phone. The *Pokémon GO* map had been replaced by an endless stretch of virtual grass, the dreaded red bar emblazoned with the words "GPS signal not found" cutting across the top of her screen. She switched to the camera app and aimed the lens at the Lewis twins' old house, a boxy cabin situated in the clearing in front of an overgrown field. At least taking pictures for Instagram would give her brain something to keep it occupied. Her chest tightened. Using distraction was a big "no" according to Dom, the podcaster behind *Just Say No to Anxiety*. But surely he wouldn't fault her for documenting her trip.

The truck bounced over a pothole, and Andy grunted from the driver's seat. Alice waited until the image on her phone screen stabilized and then pressed the shutter button. Unease scuttled through her system as her fiancé Riley Moore's words during a recent phone call seized her mind: *It's the strangest thing. Some of*

the buildings are falling apart like you'd expect, but others look like they've been kept up. A little dusty and moth-eaten in places but not like they've been vacant for a decade.

The Lewis residence clearly fell into the former category. Large sections of russet paint had flaked off the cabin, laying bare the weathered wooden skeleton, and a section of the roof had caved in. Dingy, threadbare curtains languished against the windowpanes, as solemn and forlorn as forgotten ghosts. The front door gaped open, hanging at an angle by its rusted lower hinges. The sunlight that wormed its way inside cut through the shadows, tracing the contours of the room beyond the threshold.

Her skin crawled, and she sat up straighter in her seat. Discomfort slithered about her intestines as an engine shuddered and died in the depths of her mind. Her muscles braced for momentum's effect, but the vehicle kept rolling.

She drew in a slow, deep breath. Andy's current truck was in much better shape than the junker he'd owned back then. Besides, even if his truck did fail, the cult members who tried to hang her, Andy, and Riley had abandoned Evanston more than a decade ago. They couldn't hurt her now. Unless—

A swell of heat engulfed her core. She cranked up the AC a notch, then grabbed an ice pack from the small cooler at her feet and pressed it to her chest. Her stomach remained unsteady, but the lingering panic receded as her heart rate slowed. A twinge nagged at her gut. Dom hadn't mentioned the ice pack trick, but since it wasn't a grounding technique, it must be verboten. However it was the only tool she had found that kept the panic at bay.

Andy glanced at her from the driver's seat, and the corners of his mouth veered into a frown. Although he spoke at a typical volume, her ears amplified the sound until it was nearly a yell. "You really shouldn't have come."

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Her muscles tightened. “I haven’t even complained once. I’m handling this myself. I can’t spend the rest of my life jumping at my own shadow.”

“Okay, but you’re not handling anything because your anxiety is still running the show. You need to take a break and chill. I’m not saying right now, when you’ve got less than a year left to go, but after you get your doctorate, step back from academia for a bit. Find a therapist who’s a better fit for you, focus on your writing. It really won’t be a problem covering your share of the bills for a little while. Save me from spending more money on shit I don’t need.”

As if she’d have any choice except to step away given the state of the academic job market. But Andy already covered the lion’s share of their expenses since her and Riley’s TA positions paid less combined than his salary. She couldn’t spend her whole life living off her brother’s charity. “I said I’d think about it.”

Andy’s green eyes softened behind his thick-framed glasses. “I just hate seeing you like this, and I don’t think this trip is gonna be the magical cure-all you’re looking for.”

Of course it wouldn’t be a cure-all, but it might be the missing piece, the block preventing her from getting better. If she could confront Evanston, surely she could handle anything else life threw her way. “Yeah, well, it’s too late to back out now. We’re already here.”

A break formed in the line of trees crowding the left side of the road, and the Whites’ former residence appeared in the gap. Thick curtains as glaring as the landscape after a blizzard shielded the two-story building’s interior. One window on the second floor stood ajar, a slitted eye surveilling the approaching vehicle. The house’s red trim had chipped in places, exposing ashen remnants of a previous paint job, and the pale yellow facade had dulled. Weeds encroached upon the mosaic-like stone path

leading to the front door, an occasional tuft of green sprouting between the rocks. The roses that flanked the porch had come and gone, the handful of remaining blossoms drooping toward the ground, their porcelain-colored petals shriveled and stained a deathly brown.

A new wave of discomfort hit, and she concentrated on the crunch of the tires over dirt. Even if someone had maintained the buildings like Riley suggested, it couldn't have been any of Evanston's former denizens. The police had searched for them for weeks with no success. They must have settled somewhere hundreds of miles away.

She snapped a few pictures of the house before the truck rounded a bend in the road. The photos would also double as proof that she had done the thing that scared her. The next time anxiety tried narrowing her world, she could flip through the images to remind herself of what she could accomplish when she refused to cave to fear.

Three houses emerged ahead. The Hatcher house lurked on the left, masquerading as a quaint, single-story farmhouse, while Riley's old home was situated diagonally across the road. A mixture of shops and municipal buildings rose up beyond the houses. Part of her brain expected the townsfolk to slink from nearby doors as they had all those years ago, but aside from some swaying branches, the area remained still.

Andy parked at the edge of the Hatcher house's trim lawn. He relaxed his death grip on the steering wheel, and color rushed back into his knuckles. "You'd think Riley would be waiting for us at the door. If I were him, I wouldn't wanna be here a second longer than I had to."

"Maybe he didn't hear us pull up?"

Andy pressed on the horn, and Alice gritted her teeth.

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“For fuck’s sake.” Andy scratched his cheek. Dark scruff blanketed the lower portion of his face. “I’ll grab him. Want me to leave the AC on?”

“Nah, I’ll come with.”

Andy turned off the engine, and the buzz of insects flooded the cabin. Alice set the ice pack back in the cooler. Her phone’s rainbow glitter case sparkled in the sunlight as she lifted it from her lap. She stuffed the device into her dress’s pocket and pushed open the passenger door. The afternoon sun embraced her, and she extended her arms, savoring the warmth as it worked its way into her skin. If only heat had the same effect on her vagus nerve as cold did. Snuggling under a cozy blanket would make for a much more pleasant treatment than freezing herself.

She met Andy at the top of the dirt walkway that led to the front porch. Mom and Dad had hired cleaners and maintenance workers to rehabilitate the inherited house for the research team’s stay. Nonetheless, the building still had an emptiness about it. Trim and shingles the color of a vulture’s feather contrasted with the corpse-like pallor of the paint. Only a stump remained of the dead tree that had lorded over the side of the house, but the *scree*, *scree* of its branches scraping the glass pane lingered at the back of her mind. The weathered barn had sagged farther inward, the window frames drooping at an angle. One of the windows had shattered, leaving behind fragments of glass that stuck out like pointed teeth.

Her heart rate picked up again, and a sense of déjà vu prickled her skin. She rotated her opalescent nose stud as she glanced back. Maybe she should have stayed in the truck.

Andy tugged at the neck of his black T-shirt. The upper left chest displayed the working logo for his latest hobby project, a survival horror game: *Terrified of These Four Walls* written in blood-red letters dripped down a crumbling concrete wall. He

blew out a breath and then strode toward the house. She concentrated on the rise and fall of her chest as she matched his stride. She was just as safe outside the truck as she was in it. No more caving to anxiety.

Andy gave a quick knock and then pushed the door open. “Riley?”

Alice ran her alabastrine fingers through a section of her hip-length, wavy hair and followed Andy across the threshold. An empty bookshelf that tilted at an angle and a plum-colored couch with a neighboring pine side table provided the room’s only furnishings. Luggage was piled to one side of the door, cluttering the otherwise tidy area.

Andy’s face scrunched. “Is all this shit coming back with us?”

“I imagine so. Riley’s advisor left in a hurry, so she probably didn’t have time to pack up the equipment.”

Alice lifted the middle couch cushion. A pinprick needled her chest as she stared at the empty space where she had hidden her note. Of course the cleaners would have tossed an old sheet of paper. Did they read her entreaty begging the police to investigate or bin the note without a second glance?

“Riley?” Andy said.

Alice’s stomach twisted as the stillness rang in her ears. She dropped the cushion and started toward the hallway that led to the smaller bedroom. “I’ll take this end of the house.”

Andy headed in the opposite direction. “I’m sure he’s fine, kiddo. He must’ve stepped out for a few.”

Stepped out where? The house Riley grew up in was near enough that he should have heard the horn if he was there. Her lungs tightened. Maybe Evanston’s former residents *had* returned and kidnapped him—or worse.

Alice sped past the mud room and multi-purpose room. The smaller bedroom waited at the end of the hall. Her hand settled

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on the cool brass knob, and she swallowed. He could have dozed off. He probably needed extra rest, given all the nightmares he'd had lately.

The door swung inward, and her internal alarms flared, neurons firing all at once. A full-sized bed was positioned opposite the entrance. Its sheets had been stripped, leaving the new mattress bare. She crossed the threshold and turned around. The vanity mirror on the wooden dresser beside the door reflected her stoic expression.

As she hurried down the hall, she peeked inside the remaining two rooms. Empty. Her heart hammered in her ears, and her breaths shortened. She met Andy in the living room.

"Didn't find him?" Andy said. She shook her head. Andy shoved a hand through his thick, brown curls. "Jesus, where the fuck is he?"

Chapter 2

A n iota of tension dissipated from Alice's muscles. "The library. He's probably cramming in every last second of research he can."

Andy frowned. "You'd think he'd have left a note."

Andy had a point. It wasn't like Riley to disappear without a word. She scanned the living room and then peered into the kitchen. No sticky notes or paper scraps on the elliptical oak table, scuffed countertop, or shiny chrome refrigerator.

Sweat leaked down her neck. She hurried across the living room and through the front door, with Andy close on her heels. Riley had been here this morning; the stripped bed and packed luggage provided clear evidence. But so much could happen in a matter of hours. He could have fallen through rotted floorboards in one of the decaying buildings. Or maybe a former resident had returned and dragged him away.

The siblings sped past the vacant dwellings. Pocks of missing paint blighted the Thompson house's storm cloud-colored exterior, while dust buildup dimmed the Moore residence's once-bright facade to a murky off-white. A rainbow of blossoms spilled past the confines of what used to be Riley's mom's garden. Weeds and knee-high grasses snaked between the vibrant flowers.

The shop, as Riley called it, stood beside Riley's childhood home. The forest-green letters on the sign that protruded from

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the beige building's roof had chipped and faded, reducing the name to "Mo re's Genera Store." Remnants of merchandise were scattered across the shelving units behind the glass storefront, and fallen boxes, canisters, and home goods littered the grimy floor. The door to the stockroom hung open. Inky black soot stained its surface and frame as well as portions of the pale-colored wall.

A pang twisted Alice's heart as she thought of Riley's limp, soot-covered form cradled in Tommy Thompson's arms. Her feet accelerated, and her arms pumped at her sides. Riley was fine. He probably had entered hyperfocus mode and lost track of time.

The ice cream parlor, a white building with scarlet trim, stood across the road from the shop. Red letters proclaiming "ice cream" overlaid the sign's flaking vanilla cone. The town hall sagged beside the general store. Deep black scorches scarred the left half of the squat building, and portions of the walls and roof on that side had collapsed. Weeds poked through the rubble. The heat of the sun on her upper chest mimicked the swelter from the flames that had risen through the windows all those years ago. Mr. Miller, Evanston's mayor, had claimed the fire was a punishment from God, but it seemed more likely that someone had set it to thwart Alice's investigation into the July 1st death toll.

The church loomed beyond the town hall on the opposite side of the road. Alice fixed her eyes on the library, a red brick structure with an elevated concrete entryway, but her gaze drifted toward that wretched parish like a compass needle seeking north. The afternoon sun added glare to the church's harsh white exterior, which was largely free of the dirt and grime that saddled the other buildings. A wooden cross hung above the glass entry doors, and a wire Holy Rose, a crucifix-like symbol with a tethered rose in place of Jesus, protruded from the bell tower. While the building's paint remained intact, the white paint on the Holy Rose flaked off in places, exposing the dull metal beneath.

She turned away. Grass tickled her calves as she rushed across the narrow depression in the overgrown lawn leading to the library's front steps. Bulky double-doors guarded the entrance, and rusted hinges squealed as Andy yanked one open. Her heart thudded against her ribcage. *Please let Riley be here.*

A trace of the cedar aroma that had once dominated the room lingered beneath the stench of mildew and decay. Cobwebs clung to the mold-speckled, high ceiling. Sunlight streamed through the towering windows, although the rows of bookcases that filled the area hampered its progress, casting long shadows about the space. Many shelves stood empty, and large gaps separated the remaining tomes. The hardwood floor had recently been swept, but a thick layer of dust shrouded the furnishings.

"Riley?" Andy called. "You in here?"

"Up here," a voice said. "I'll be down in a moment."

Relief deluged Alice's veins, and she let out a long breath. "Thank goodness."

Andy squeezed her shoulder. The duo strode over to the spiral staircase tucked in a corner of the room. The weathered steps squealed and bowed slightly beneath Alice's feet. Louder wooden groans chased after her as Andy followed. Her stomach tightened, but she continued her ascent.

A couple of boards toward the middle of the staircase sported clusters of blackish-brown water rot. Her eyes veered upward. Mildew blackened a platter-sized portion of the ceiling. She tested a foot on the lower damaged stair. Her internal alarms fired as it compressed, bathing her thoughts in the mental equivalent of flashing neon red. Wood was not supposed to be spongy like that.

Her gut wavered as she climbed over the questionable boards. "Watch out for those ones," she called over her shoulder.

The musty smell grew stronger with each step. Her nose wrinkled, and she fought back a sneeze. Muggy, stagnant air encum-

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bered her limbs and seeped through her cerulean-blue dress. Just a few more minutes, and she would be back in the air-conditioned cab.

Bookshelves lined with antique volumes crowded the second story. Dust blanketed most, although a few cleaner books were tucked between their neglected kin. She eyed the spine of a recently dusted volume bound in red leather: *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* by Mrs. Mercy Warren. Alice smiled. Only Riley would take the time to clean off an outdated book about the American Revolution.

Her flip-flops slapped the hardwood as she moved deeper into the room. Riley sat in his beloved armchair, an amalgamation of weathered wood and worn burgundy upholstery. His pen rushed across a page of the composition book he held in his lap. His sandy hair, which grazed the nape of his neck, was rumpled as though he had just climbed from bed, and wrinkles creased his white button-down.

A grin pulled her lips taut. "Hey."

Riley looked up and beamed. "Hello. I see you got my note."

Her face scrunched. "Note?"

"The sticky note I left on the front door? I thought it would make more sense to wait up here until closer to your arrival so I might have reception if you needed to reach me. I meant to meet you at the house, but apparently I lost track of time."

"I didn't see a note, but it wasn't hard to put two and two together." After the initial freakout, anyway. But that story could wait until later, once Evanston had yet again been relegated to a memory.

He shoved the composition book into his blue backpack and climbed to his feet. Blond stubble scattered across his cheeks and chin, the flecks of hair much longer than his every-other-day shav-

ing routine allowed. He wrapped his arms around her, and she leaned into his chest, savoring the earthy aroma of his deodorant.

"I missed you," he said.

"I missed you too."

He planted a peck on her lips and then moved to Andy, who pulled him into a hug. "Good to see you, bud," Andy said. "You ready to go?"

"Just about," Riley said. "I'd like a moment to say goodbye to my nook, if that's okay."

"Sure thing. You wanna hand me your backpack? I'm gonna start loading stuff into the truck."

Riley retrieved the backpack. He stared at something beyond Alice's shoulder for a moment and then moved past the siblings to the bookshelf. He raised a finger to his lips and stuffed the copy of *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* into his bag.

Andy smiled as he took the backpack from Riley. "What a rebel."

"I can't stand the thought of leaving it to rot," Riley said. "I'd bring the whole library with me if I could. I actually considered taking my chair, but I don't think we could get it down the stairs safely."

"Yeah, you're probably right there, unfortunately."

"Is that the only book you took?" Alice said.

Riley rubbed the back of his neck. "I may also have pilfered the Poe books."

She grinned. "I thought you didn't like horror."

"Ha." Riley glanced at his chair and then turned back to Alice. A wistful smile played on his lips. "I never did find an opportunity to bring you up here to read with you."

"You'll have plenty of time for reading when we get home," Andy said. "I'll see you in a couple."

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He headed downstairs. Riley's palms settled on Alice's waist. "You look lovely."

She beamed. "Thank you."

His eyes glinted for a moment, but the glimmer vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and the corners of his mouth wilted. She touched his upper arm. "You okay?"

He covered a yawn. "Didn't sleep well last night."

"Sorry."

"Eh, it's no big deal. I'll catch a nap when we get back. I just hope the nightmares don't follow me home."

Alice frowned and rubbed his arm. Riley's advisor shouldn't have left him alone in Evanston knowing the trauma he suffered here. "Have you heard from Dr. Gillespie?"

"I talked to her yesterday after our phone call. She says Jax is doing all right. They're still at the hospital but probably will be discharged soon. The baby's in the NICU, but so far things are looking good for him."

"It's pretty ironic that Dr. Gillespie moved the trip up specifically so she could be with Jax when the baby came, and then this happened."

"Yes, well, she couldn't have known her kid would go into premature labor. And while the timing wasn't ideal with it being so close to ... the anniversary, at least the research trip is now off my plate, and I can start working on my dissertation in earnest."

"Watch, you'll write it in like four months and graduate before me."

He drew her into his side. "I will not. How is the dissertation coming?"

"I've been so busy with summer semester, I haven't touched it. But now that I've submitted grades, I should be getting back to it."

A low rumble filtered into the room. Riley let go of her and crossed the floor to a window that overlooked the road. She followed him and peered out.

Her heart plummeted, and her internal temperature climbed. A mammoth black stagecoach that looked like it had been pulled from a production set during the Victorian era moved along the dirt road. A team of six midnight black horses led the carriage while a burly man with closely cropped brown hair sat at the helm, gripping the reins. His features were difficult to make out at a distance, but she knew that face: Sherwood Brown, the man who had assembled the mob to hang her and Andy for witchcraft.

Chapter 3

Alice deepened her breaths, and the noxious sensations running through her body diminished a fraction. She and Riley were probably safe in the library given that it hadn't been used in years, but Andy wasn't as protected. Even though Sherwood wouldn't recognize the truck, as soon as he spotted it, he'd know someone was at the Hatcher house.

She pulled her phone from her pocket. Empty data bars emblazoned the corner of the screen. She rose onto her tiptoes and lifted her phone toward the ceiling. Nothing.

"That won't work," Riley said.

Alice stared at him. "What do you mean it won't work? Isn't that why you're up here, so you'd have service?"

"The repeater wouldn't turn on this morning, so I left it behind. I figured I still had a better chance of getting reception up here than I would at the house, but I haven't been able to catch a signal all morning."

Her muscles tightened as frustration deluged her veins. *Riley's technological ineptitude strikes again.* Hopefully Andy would drive to safety without her and Riley, but if not, she needed to find a way to him and fast.

She inhaled slowly, concentrating on the rise of her ribcage, and then returned her attention to Riley. "How about this? We'll slip out the back door into the woods and head toward the Hatcher

house. If Andy's truck is still there, we'll try to meet up with him. If not, we keep going until we're out of Evanston and then reassess."

"Sounds good."

She stuffed her phone into her pocket and hurried toward the staircase. Riley's footsteps chased after her. Hoofbeats thundered, and her stomach seesawed. Evanston was supposed to be deserted. A ghost town. Why did Sherwood have to choose now of all times to return?

The stairs screeched, and each footfall sent a shiver through the structure. She tightened her grip on the banister, but sweat loosened her hold. A crack split the air. She whirled around. One of the steps had cleaved apart, and Riley's leg disappeared into the chasm. His arms shot out, his fingers grazing the banister before slipping past. Her hand dove toward him, grabbing at nothingness. Fragmented wood jabbed his thigh, and he cried out.

"Riley!"

The staircase shuddered and groaned. Riley's eyes widened, regressing his face by a couple of decades. Alice's heart clambered into her throat. Fallen boards and broken bodies flashed across her mind.

The staircase stabilized. Riley winced as he eased his leg from the chasm. Alice held still, clutching the banister as dread slunk along her spine.

A breath hissed between Riley's teeth as he tested his foot on the step above the broken one. The thigh of his slacks had torn. Crimson seeped through the tawny fabric and stained the jagged edges of the broken board. Her heart constricted, and she reached for him.

He shook his head furiously. "It's not safe. Keep going."

Nausea welled in her stomach as she stepped over the water-damaged boards. This felt like the start of one of those hor-

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rible nightmares she had every few months that devolved into an endless chase, Sherwood's mob only a step behind her. Insect chatter reclaimed the air. Moisture evaporated from her mouth and throat, leaving her skin as parched as drought-stricken soil. Where was the carriage now?

An engine roared, and her heart skipped. She leaped over the final steps and reached for Riley. "That must be Andy."

Riley slid an arm around her shoulder, and she gripped his waist. The heat of his torso seared her skin. The urge to shove him off rooted in her limbs, but she retained her grasp on him as she shuffled toward the front door. She had become the arrow in one of Zeno's paradoxes, moving ever closer to her target without reaching it. If only she could pick up the pace, but that wouldn't be possible with Riley in his current state.

Muffled cries spilled into the library. Panic flooded her system, and her breath froze in her lungs. Sherwood must have brought a whole mob with him.

A horn honked. She let go of Riley. "Wait here. I'll check things out."

She heaved open one of the double-doors, and lightheadedness washed over her as she stepped through the exit. Andy's green pickup was parked before the library steps. Muddy ruts cut through the tall grass behind it. A horde of familiar figures dressed in dingy button-down shirts and patched trousers closed in on the vehicle with Sherwood in the lead. Grim lines engraved his brow and set his lips. Hoots and hollers poured from the mob, overwhelming the air.

Andy's truck lurched backward. The crowd rushing toward it dove out of the way. Floyd Porter leaped onto the vehicle. Andy pulled forward a few yards before reversing again. Mr. Porter clung to the tailgate, his greasy, graying hair whipping about his head.

Alice's blood pulsed in her ears as Sherwood's eyes locked on her. There was no way she could make it past Sherwood with Riley in tow. They would both be caught and dragged to the gallows, if not murdered on the spot. The mob didn't know Riley was here though. If she ran for the truck, maybe Riley could hide until she was able to send help.

Sherwood mounted the library stairs. His hulking frame blocked the exit. Alice ducked beneath the railing and jumped. Grass scraped her calves, and a light shock ran through her soles. Sherwood threw himself over the banister and lunged at her. His callused fingers closed around her arm, and she yelped.

Her gut twisted as she strained against his grasp. He yanked her arm, and she staggered back a couple of steps. She drove her heel into his groin. Pain jarred her foot. Sherwood groaned and doubled over.

She spun around. Riley had appeared at the top of the steps. He stared at her, anguish warping his soft features. Her chest tightened. Why hadn't he stayed put?

Brenton Moore stalked toward the stairs, his icy eyes fixed on Riley. Patches of gray had infiltrated his blond locks, and frown lines engraved his face. He had the same narrow-shouldered build as his son, although he carried a little more weight than Riley.

"Look out!" Alice shouted.

Riley staggered back as his father marched up the steps. Alice curved around Sherwood and jogged toward her partner. A gunshot pierced the air. Her feet rooted to the bottom step, and her eyes lurched past her shoulder. Sheriff Arthur Danforth stepped up beside Andy's truck, pistol raised. He glared at the frozen figures scattered across the lawn from beneath his wide-brimmed hat.

"All right, that's enough," the sheriff said. The ringing in Alice's ears dampened the sound of his voice. He aimed his gun

through the windshield at Andy. "Get out of the truck. The rest of you, hold still. We're doing what Mr. Miller says, whether you like it or not. I ain't afraid to put a bullet through your head if I need to."

The driver-side door clicked, and Andy stepped out. He lifted his hands above his head. The sheriff looked to the stairs and motioned with the gun. "Riley, Alice, get over here."

Riley slunk down the stairs. Brenton's glower shifted from his son to Alice, and the pressure in Alice's temples increased. She looped a shaking arm around Riley's waist, and Riley slung his arm over her shoulder. Dozens of eyes drilled into the duo as they inched toward the road. Taunts poured forth from some of the men.

"Whore!" Oscar Fisher called. His pudgy frame had filled out further than when Alice last saw him, and only fringes of his hair remained. A figure hidden behind the truck echoed him.

Nausea rushed her stomach. It was like the day they were abducted from the Hatcher house all over again. They were outnumbered to the point where they couldn't possibly slip past the whole crowd. But there had to be some way out. She couldn't die here.

"Witches!" Sherwood shouted. "Oughta string you up for what you done."

The sheriff shifted his gun to Sherwood. "Don't you even think of taking matters into your own hands."

Alice's gut sank as Andy charged. He rammed into the sheriff's side. The sheriff grunted, and the gun tumbled from his hand. Shouts poured from the crowd as men lurched into motion.

Andy dove for the gun. Heat peaked in Alice's chest as the sheriff shoved Andy aside. She let go of Riley and tore her eyes from her brother. Blood raged in her ears as she focused on the gun.

A click sounded, and warm metal pressed between her shoulder blades. Her muscles stiffened.

“Don’t move, or I’ll blow you to Kingdom Come,” Brenton said.

The sheriff snatched up his gun. Figures converged on Andy, blocking him from view. Fists and feet shot forward, and words and cheers bled together in a chaos of sound. Andy’s cry shattered Alice’s heart, but the press of Brenton’s weapon against her skin held her in place. One of the men surrounding Andy removed a pistol from his side holster. Alice’s insides blazed, and her tremors intensified. “Stop!”

A gunshot boomed. Voices cut out, and heads whipped to the road. Mr. Miller stood at the edge of the library’s lawn, a smoking pistol clenched in one hand. His somber black three-piece suit looked like it had been pulled from a Victorian funeral director’s wardrobe. An array of wrinkles crisscrossed his sagging, papery skin, and bone-white hair covered his head. He leaned heavily against the gilded, lion-headed handle of his cane.

His narrowed eyes swept from the mob crowded around Andy to the stairs. “What do you three think you’re doing, invading our sacred town on this holy day?”

“What are *we* doing here?” Andy said. The men had dragged him to his feet, and Mr. Porter pinned his arms behind his back. “What the Hell are *you* doing here? You all have been missing for more than a decade, and then you randomly show up the one time we come back?”

“I agree that our reunion cannot be mere coincidence,” Mr. Miller said. “Perhaps the Lord has decided it’s time you rejoin the fold.”

“Or the Lord brought ’em back so we can finally do away with ’em,” Sherwood said.

OUR TANGLED ROOTS

Members of the assemblage whooped and cheered. Alice shook her head. A frenzied red haze screeched through her brain. Anything but the gallows.

"No," she called out. "Mr. Miller's right. We're meant to be here." Hopefully courting Mr. Miller's favor would be enough to spare them the noose.

Andy shot her a questioning look. Mr. Porter glowered at her. "That's the Devil talking."

"Enough, Floyd," Mr. Miller said. He studied Alice. "Are you prepared to repent for your sins and renew your covenant with the Lord?"

Alice swallowed. She nodded slowly. At least agreeing would buy them some time. Maybe Andy could get the repeater up and running, but even if not, Mom and Dad knew they were in Evanston and expected to hear from Alice tonight. When no call came, surely they would contact the police.

"As am I," Riley said.

Mr. Miller turned to Andy. Andy looked down. "Yeah, sure."

A small smile curled the edges of Mr. Miller's mouth. "Very well. Andrew, you are to drive to the end of Evanston and leave your truck there. Abe and Junior will accompany you. You will turn over your key to Abe once you are done. Matthew, see to it that Riley receives the medical attention he needs. Seth, you'll go with Alice and Riley, keep an eye on them."

Seth Carlisle emerged from the crowd. He stood nearly at eye level with Alice. Wavy chestnut hair poked out from beneath his top hat. His black three-piece suit clung to his midsection, and his face had filled out, the added weight smoothing its contours. Matthew appeared beside his older brother, a black leather medical satchel in hand. He was taller and thinner than Seth, but he had the same hair and similar facial features. His nose still skewed at an angle from when Andy broke it.

Matthew winked at Alice, and Alice's skin prickled. She let go of Riley and stepped back. Matthew might be a creep, but he was better equipped to help Riley than she was.

Junior and Abe joined Andy at the truck. Redness discolored the left side of Andy's jaw. His Adam's apple bobbed as he met Alice's gaze, and another wave of nausea rocked her stomach. Agreeing to rejoin Evanston had seemed like the only choice. But would it be enough to save them?