

Hallowed Deadly
SEEDS

AMBER HATHAWAY



Deadly Seeds Press

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To the educators who encouraged me, inspired me, challenged me, and helped me believe in my abilities. And to the memory of Sharon Barker, who taught me so much.

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.

Hallowed Deadly Seeds takes place primarily inside the fictional insular religious community introduced in *Little White Flowers*, the first book in the LWF series. (If you haven't read Book One yet, I recommend you read it first, as it will provide important context for this book.) As such, many of the issues Book One addresses also occur between these pages. Domestic violence and physical abuse appear here much as they do in real cults. Characters struggle with their mental health, especially in regards to anxiety, panic, past sexual trauma, and substance use disorder.

New issues that weren't present in Book One do arise here as well. In particular, in *Hallowed Deadly Seeds*, a pet is seriously injured. I know animal suffering is a point of concern for many readers (myself included), and while I've tried to handle the situation with due care, it may still be distressing to read.

I have also included an extended content warning list at the end of the book. While it's 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 have no further concerns, forge ahead to

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the next page when you are ready. Your journey awaits.

Amber

Chapter I

Alice Drayton's feet rooted to the dirt road that snaked through the heart of Evanston, Maine. She stared up at the church. Its white facade gleamed against the steely storm clouds commanding the sky. A pallid wire Holy Rose, a crucifix-like symbol with a rose in place of Jesus, jutted from the peak of the bell tower, while a wooden cross perched above the glass entry doors. Twine tethered a white rose to the cross, the blossom's dainty petals withered and tinged a sickly brown. Yellow light shone through the church's windows and doors. In another building, such lighting might have seemed warm and welcoming, but here, it manifested the harshness of an interrogation room's spotlight.

Her stomach twisted, and heat bloomed in her core, shoving away the chill of the air. She had made the trek from the Hatcher house arm-in-arm with Riley Moore, a nod to their impending matrimony, but as they neared the church, she had pulled free of his grasp. Her alabastrine fingers dove beneath the neck of her hand-me-down dress and tugged at the stiff cloth. The heavy fabric weighed on her like a leaden shroud, and the tight fit constricted her windpipe. Screeching red panic coursed through her veins.

"I can't," she said, the pitch of her voice rising as the words spilled past her lips.

Her older brother Andy's palm settled on her upper arm. A bruise marred the pale skin along his jawline. His button-down shirt's sleeve had hiked up slightly, exposing his bony wrist.

"Deep breaths, kiddo," he said.

No. Breathing couldn't erase what had happened in that awful building. She could almost feel the iciness of the basement's concrete floor seeping into her knees, the cool steel handcuff that had shackled her to Andy digging into her wrist.

"Git movin'," Will Brown said. He jabbed his meaty index finger into Andy's shoulder. The second guard, Evanston's sheriff, Arthur Danforth, hovered next to Riley, monitoring the trio from beneath his hat's wide brim.

"Please, give her a moment," Andy said. "She almost died in there a few hours ago."

"I ain't forgotten," Mr. Brown said. "Woulda been better for her if she had."

Andy's hand trembled against her, but he kept his voice steady. "I'm right here with you. We'll get through this together."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Riley said. Deep purple bruises covered one side of his face, contrasting with his porcelain complexion. He had switched the placement of his side part, drawing his long, sandy bangs over his black eye. The curtain of hair did little to conceal the remnants of the sheriff's violence.

Alice shook her head. Not unless Riley could convince the guards to let her go back to the Hatcher house. Why did she need to be at this emergency town meeting anyway? Couldn't someone relay what had happened to her and Andy after the fact?

Andy stepped onto the red brick walkway, and Alice moved with him. Urgency burdened her gut as another swell of panic overwhelmed her. There was no way out, nowhere to go but dead ahead, into the belly of the beast.

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The glimmering bronze church bell clanged, and Alice jolted. Her already tense muscles pulled tighter still like threads stretched within a millimeter of their snapping point. Her teeth ground together, and she clamped her hands over her ears. The gesture muffled the cacophony some, but the bell's shrieks reverberated through her brain.

"Quit actin' like a child," Mr. Brown said. "Ain't that loud."

"And pick up the pace," Sheriff Danforth said. "That was the five-minute warning. You ain't gonna be late on my watch."

Riley scampered up the steps and opened one of the glass double-doors. He held it for Alice. Her pulse thundered in her ears as her foot touched down upon the bottom step. What if the meeting was a ruse to get her and Andy into the church so that the townsfolk could initiate a new sacrificial tradition?

Andy guided her across the threshold. Lines of wooden tables ran along the atrium's walls. Two figures stood by one of the tables nearest the entrance. The soft babble of the young women's conversation cut out, and their heads whipped toward the Draytons. Sweat seeped into the underarms of Alice's pale blue dress as the woman in lavender looked Alice up and down. She whispered into her companion's ear, and the two giggled.

Alice's cheeks burned, and she stared at her feet. It was so unfair, being maligned for something she hadn't done, hadn't even wanted to do. All because of a lie she had concocted to save her life.

Riley extended his arm toward her. "Shall we, darling?"

Darling? Were they coming up with pet names for one another now? If he had plans for making their imposed betrothal look legitimate, it would have been nice if he clued her in beforehand.

Andy's hand fell away from her. Every fiber of her being begged her to shove back through the entry doors and flee, but she looped her arm through Riley's. Riley offered her a smile. She forced the

corners of her mouth upward, trying to match his countenance. The skin around her lips pinched and strained, fighting the gesture.

The woman in lavender's expression soured. She yanked on her friend's arm, and the two turned away. Their boots' low heels clicked against the hardwood floor as they marched across the atrium.

Alice's eyes gravitated toward the paintings lining the atrium's walls. There was Anglicized Jesus against his crimson backdrop. Menace edged into his heavenward gaze. A depiction of the Last Supper hung beside the Jesus portrait. Goblets filled with bloody red wine were laid out along the dinner table, and ravenous hunger consumed the apostles' features. A handful of other scenes such as Noah's Ark and Moses parting the Red Sea occupied the walls as well. The lighting and poses in each rendition was skewed in some manner that tugged at her nerves.

A doorway at the end of the atrium opposite the entrance led into the chapel. The pews brimmed with parishioners, all dressed in pseudo-Victorian garb much like what Alice, Andy, and Riley wore. Several sets of eyes focused on Alice. Their unspoken rebuke pinned her in place. However, most folks were too wrapped up in their own conversations to notice her appearance. The steady hum of their words filled the air.

Riley's older sister, Margaret Carlisle, waved from a pew toward the front of the chapel. Her gesture sent a few more glances Alice's way. Margaret's husband, Seth, and Seth's brother, Matthew, sat on one side of her while her parents, Mildred and Brenton Moore, sat on the other.

Alice's heart plummeted as Brenton's Arctic glare settled upon her. He had worn the same expression hours before when she announced her fictional pregnancy and Riley insisted he was the father. The knot in her stomach tightened. She may have escaped

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the Ceremony with her life, but would she survive the wrath of a man who had slit his own daughter's throat?

Riley slipped into an empty pew at the back of the chapel. A haze of floral perfume surrounded the woman one row ahead, the scent thick and cloying. Alice wrinkled her nose as she settled next to Riley, and Andy sat on her other side. Mr. Brown plopped down at the opposite end of the pew while the sheriff adopted a post beside the exit.

Tremors shook Alice's limbs, and unbearable heat consumed her. There was no way out. If the townsfolk decided to murder her, they would do so with ease.

Andy took her hand and twined his fingers with hers. "Breathe, kiddo," he murmured. "Nice, deep breaths."

She sank the long fingernails of her free hand into her palm. The dull pain diminished the urge to lash out at him. Breathing exercises weren't meant for situations that involved real danger. Such as being trapped in a space with dozens of murderers.

Her eyes flicked to the head of the room. Stephen Miller, Evanston's mayor, stood behind the pulpit while Reverend Jonathan Pierson spoke in his ear. Holding as still as he was, Mr. Miller looked almost frail. Wrinkles engraved his pasty skin, his hair had turned as pallid as snow, and one of his hands leaned against his obsidian cane with its golden, lion-headed handle. But his steely eyes radiated the vitality of a younger man.

A portrait in a gilded frame lorded over the altar behind Mr. Miller. Nathaniel Evans, known as Prophet Nathaniel by Evanston's denizens, glared down from his perch on high. A bloody red haze much like the background of the Jesus painting surrounded him. Thinning white hair crowned his head, and he gripped the handle of a cane identical to Mr. Miller's.

Each second that passed dragged on for ages. The disquiet scuttling about inside of Alice intensified. Mr. Miller whispered

something to the reverend. Reverend Pierson nodded and then limped away from the pulpit. Once the reverend had settled into his seat, Mr. Miller lifted his cane into the air. The voices that had filled the room evaporated.

“Good evening,” Mr. Miller said. “I know there is a lot of confusion and distress over a recent series of events that have occurred in our town. The other councilors and I thought it would be best to come together and address the issue as a community. This is why we elected to hold an emergency town meeting this afternoon.

“To begin with, let us recount the unnatural happenings that have afflicted us. On June 27th, the town hall went up in flames. Today, a thunderstorm swept in before the Service of the Roses. At the same time, Mildred Moore, who acted impetuously in a fit of grief at our town meeting last Sunday, sustained a grave injury. The storm let up briefly, only to return with a vengeance during the Lewis family’s Ceremony. Emma Lewis, who forsook our Lord’s teachings, died suddenly while the Ceremony was underway. I’m afraid there’s no mistaking it. Evil is afoot in Evanston, and the Lord is punishing us for our wicked deeds.”

A chorus of gasps escaped the crowd. Eyes darted toward the Draytons. The glares bristled the hair on the back of Alice’s neck. Her free hand’s fingers combed through her waist-length, mousy blond waves. She drew in a breath, but it was too short, too shallow to ease the scrabbling inside her brain. She and Andy would be their scapegoats. An evening jaunt to the gallows to cleanse Evanston of sin.

Mr. Miller lifted his cane, and the townsfolk quieted again. “Now, there is nothing to fret about just yet,” Mr. Miller said. “Our town has squared off against evil before and prevailed. We will do so again. As long as you are righteous in your conduct and obey our Lord’s Holy Commandments, you shall be safe.

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“However, in order to help us maintain virtuous behavior, the Council has elected to implement some rules. Anyone found violating these statutes will be punished in a suitable manner, including but not limited to public flogging, fines, and imprisonment.

“Church attendance will be mandatory. This should not need to be stipulated, but some of our brethren have missed services as of late.” His eyes moved to a pew at the back of the chapel where the remaining Lewises, Jacob and his twin teens, Josie and Jeremiah, sat. All three faces were puffy and blotchy. Whispers snaked through the audience as the congregants narrowed their eyes at the family.

Mr. Miller continued, “Exceptions will, of course, be made for illness, but there will be fines for each unexcused absence. Additionally, unmarried women are not to associate with unrelated men unless under the supervision of a chaperone. Again, this has long been the expectation, but due to some recent incidents, the Council thought it best to codify this practice into law.” Mr. Miller’s gaze lingered on Josie, who swiped at her eyes with a dingy handkerchief. “Any woman caught engaging in lewd acts will be flogged.”

Alice shrank down in her seat as heads turned in her direction. Nausea swept through her stomach. She had feigned pregnancy to avoid being executed during her and Andy’s Ceremony, and now she was stuck with that lie. The Council couldn’t hold her to a rule retroactively, could they?

“Why don’t you start with them two harlots, Josie and the Drayton girl?” a man seated in a pew toward the middle of the chapel said.

Voices murmured agreement. The neural equivalent of neon red warning lights flashed in Alice’s mind, and her tremors intensified. Andy dropped her hand and clutched her to his side.

Riley leaned toward her. “It won’t come to that.”

How could he be sure? From the sounds of it, the majority of the town thought whipping her was a fine idea.

Mr. Miller lifted his cane, and, after a moment, the voices died down. “Whether or not to implement such a punishment in these two instances is a matter for the Council to decide,” Mr. Miller said. “Along those lines, all major decisions will be made by the Council instead of by public vote since some of our neighbors have abused their power during town meetings. We do hope to restore voting privileges to eligible citizens in the future, but for now, this seems like the safest course of action.”

Grumbles drifted from the pews. “Can’t you just bar the women from town meetings?” a voice said. “They’re the ones who’ve been causing trouble. No point in punishing all of us for the sins of a few.”

“As I said, privileges will be restored in good time. However, the women are not alone in their disobedience. Weak-hearted men with voting power are a far greater danger to the integrity of our community, and too many of you have grown soft, have lost your way.”

Mr. Miller’s voice rang through the chapel, each word spoken with the fervor of a televangelist. His unencumbered hand moved in grand, sweeping gestures. A hush fell over the congregation once more, and all eyes riveted to him.

“Now, I understand if this particular change seems unnecessarily restrictive, but we are in a moment of crisis. Most of you are too young to remember what it was like the last time we lost our way. Why, I myself was but a boy. But I assure you, we have not seen the last of God’s wrath, and what comes next will try us all. The sooner we make amends for our sinful ways and bring an end to our punishment, the better.”

“Why don’t we hang the Draytons and be done with it?” said a broad-shouldered man who sat toward the back of the chapel.

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He looked a bit like Mr. Brown, with the same closely cropped, medium-brown hair, although Mr. Brown's thinned away to a bald patch along the top and was flecked with gray. The younger man continued, "None of this happened before they showed up."

Dozens of eyes closed in on the Draytons. Voices rushed past one another, vying to be heard. Alice's stomach dropped. Fiery panic swelled inside of her, overwhelming her senses, and Andy's grip on her tightened. She and Andy had fought so hard to stay alive. How could it end like this?

"No," Riley called out. "It's not their fault."

The broad-shouldered man glared at Riley. "You can hang with them too, traitor."

The sheriff's boots thudded against the floor. He moved to the end of the aisle, positioning himself between the Draytons' and Lewises' pews. He crossed his thick arms over his chest and stared down the parishioners who turned his way. Dr. Gabriel White rose from his seat at the front of the room and joined Mr. Miller near the pulpit. Reverend Pierson, assisted by his grandson, Abe, flanked Mr. Miller's other side.

Mr. Miller banged his cane against the floor twice before the din dwindled. "While Sherwood is right that our woes began after the Draytons arrived, if we examine our situation honestly, it's plain that the roots of our troubles took hold long before. We have grown complacent, and as our discretion waned, the hallowed seeds we have planted turned deadly."

The last threads of conversation died as the audience once more gave Mr. Miller their undivided attention. Alice relaxed into Andy's side a little. With how quickly Mr. Miller regained control, it almost seemed as though he had cast a spell over everyone.

"The Draytons didn't throw their hands up during the town meeting in defiance of our Lord's wishes," Mr. Miller said. "They haven't held you back from attending church or raised spirits

to your lips or caused you to neglect your duties.” As he spoke, Mr. Miller’s eyes landed on particular congregants: the Lewises, Riley’s uncle, Richard Jones, and others Alice didn’t recognize. The chastened lowered their heads.

Mr. Miller’s gaze settled on Riley. “Perhaps Riley has some room to argue that he was led astray, but even he has admitted that he too is to blame. If the Draytons are part of the issue, the Lord will take care of them, but it is not our place to cast judgment on His behalf. To give in to your baser instincts and assume the role of the vigilante would be to admit that you have so little faith in our Savior, you no longer trust that He will do what is right.”

Silence settled over the room. Many congregants took interest in their sleeves and shoes, shying away from Mr. Miller’s piercing gaze.

Mr. Miller turned first to Dr. White and then to Reverend Pierson. “Gentlemen, was there anything else the Council might add?”

“No, you’ve expressed the Council’s position well,” Dr. White said.

“I concur,” Reverend Pierson said. “But perhaps I might add a word of comfort for my parishioners.”

“Yes, I think that would be fitting,” Mr. Miller said.

Reverend Pierson pushed his spectacles up higher on his nose. He leaned against his wooden cane and peered into the crowd. “I know this is a confusing time, and you may be feeling scared or angry. The Lord works in mysterious ways, and His choices may not always make sense to us in the moment, for our wisdom is limited. But as long as you conduct yourself with righteousness, you have nothing to fear, for His love for His faithful servants knows no bounds.”

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“What an excellent message to end on,” Mr. Miller said. “If there are no further words from the Council, this meeting is adjourned.”

Voices flooded the air, some hushed, others loud. The words spilled together, making it impossible for Alice to pick up more than a phrase here or there. “Their fault,” from a gruff voice. “Poor Emma,” from a boisterous alto. Figures rose from the pews, although few headed toward the exit.

“Let’s get you outta here before anyone gets any funny ideas,” Mr. Brown said.

He stood, and the Draytons and Riley did as well. Andy gripped Alice to his side while Riley followed the two a step behind.

“Sinners!” called a voice, and Alice turned her head. A birdlike woman glared daggers at the Draytons. “The Lord will cast His judgment upon you yet.”

“Gladys, a word, please,” Mr. Miller said. His lips turned up in a facsimile of a smile, but his eyes retained a hard edge.

The woman’s features rounded out like a frightened child’s. She lowered her head and shuffled toward the front of the chapel. Her neighbors’ whispers followed in her wake.

The sheriff marched into the atrium. The trio stuck close behind him, and Mr. Brown brought up the rear. Alice’s tremors had subsided, but her muscles remained stiff and tight while uneasiness perturbed her gut. Mr. Miller might have the townsfolk under control for now, but if enough of them banded together, they could easily overpower him and his allies. Unless she and Andy found some way to escape Evanston soon, they were done for.

Chapter 2

Abby Pierson sat at the front of the chapel while her husband, Abe, inspected the pews. It had taken ages for the last of the congregants to clear out after the town meeting, but the church was now blessedly still, aside from the soft tap of Abe's footfalls as he walked between the rows.

Late afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating minuscule specks of dust suspended in the air. The canopy of storm clouds had finally broken, and patches of blue sky peeked out between the lingering clusters of gray. She chewed her lower lip. The tempest might be over for now, but did the Lord have more punishments in store for Evanston, as Mr. Miller claimed?

"Recognize this?" Abe said.

Abby swiveled in her seat. Abe held up a rag doll with long, brown strands of yarn for hair and oversized black button eyes. The doll's pale face and pink dress carried a patina of dirt.

"Dolly," Abby said. "She's Isabella Green's."

"We'll see the Greens at the funeral tomorrow, I'm sure. We can return it to Isabella then."

Noah Lewis's smiling countenance flitted across Abby's mind, and her heart clenched. She fumbled for her handkerchief. Abe set the doll down on the pulpit and settled in next to Abby. He wound his arm around her.

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“I know it’s hard, Abs. But remember, he’s with the Lord now.”

Abby nodded, but her tears continued to flow, and the ache in her chest persisted. Abe was right, of course, but it was hard to feel Noah’s passing as anything but a profound loss. How could she not grieve for the boy who had brightened the dismal basement Sunday school classroom with his hand-picked wildflower bouquets? Who sat front and center, swinging his legs and beaming up at her as he waited for the lesson to begin? Though her separation from her dear pupil was but temporary, the lifetime standing between their reunion felt like an eternity. If only Heaven wasn’t so far away.

“I wish I could have done more for him,” Abby said.

Abe stroked her forearm with his thumb. “You did what you could, and that was plenty. You were such a comfort to him during the Service of the Roses.”

Abby’s throat tightened. Noah had looked utterly terrified that morning when Abe presented him with his white rose. Had his mother been there, perhaps Noah would have turned to her instead, but he had sought Abby for reassurance.

A cough sounded from the atrium. Abby dried her face on her handkerchief. “Your grandfather is waiting.”

“He’ll understand, but I’m not about to abandon you while you’re in the throes of grief.”

“I’ll be fine. You’ll only be gone a few minutes anyway.”

“There’s no need for you to suffer alone, even if only for a few minutes.”

She forced a smile. “I’m feeling better already. Now please, go on. I’ll be right as rain when you return.”

Abe squeezed Abby’s shoulder. “All right, if you insist. But don’t worry about cleaning. Mother can handle that for a few months.”

“It’s just a little sweeping. Remember, Dr. White said it was important for me to get in some light exercise when I’m feeling up to it.”

Abe blushed, and Abby raised a hand to her mouth to hide her smile. She hadn’t been thinking of the “exercise” they had engaged in the night before, but it was clear where Abe’s mind had gone.

Abe tugged at his collar and averted his gaze. “Well, uh, I suppose I can’t argue with you on that. Dr. White is the expert.”

Abby chuckled. Abe frowned at her, which only intensified her laughter. He wore the same expression he had four years before when she kissed him in the chapel. He tried to look stern, but the emotion couldn’t find purchase on his soft features. It was as though he grasped for an outrage he thought ought to be there and came up empty-handed.

“Abraham Pierson, this is a holy place,” she said in a low voice, paraphrasing the words he had used on her after withdrawing from that fateful kiss.

The corners of his mouth twitched upward, and then the smile broke through, dissolving his serious facade. He gave her a peck on the lips. “I’ll walk grandfather home, and then I’ll come back and bring you to the Moores’ house.”

“Shall I heat you some dinner before I go over?”

“I think I should be able to manage on my own for one night. I haven’t burned the house down yet.”

Abby giggled, and Abe grinned. He gave her another peck and then headed down the aisle. The taps of his footfalls echoed through the chapel.

She looked at the altar, where seven roses rested in the central vase. Tears stung the corners of her eyes. Each of the children who had participated in this year’s Ceremony received one during the Procession. Crimson blossoms for the chosen ones, those who

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would continue on, and white for the children offered to the Lord as Sacrifices.

She clutched her handkerchief to her face and dragged in a ragged breath. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Noah was with the Lord now. That was a blessing. But her chest ached as though a piece of her soul had been torn away. The dazed feeling insulating her from the brunt of her emotions would fade tomorrow when she saw his tiny form laid out in a diminutive casket. Then her pain would begin in earnest. If Noah's death was already this hard to bear, how could she endure losing her own children when the time came?

She placed a hand on her stomach, which had already started to expand to accommodate the Little One, as Abe had nicknamed it. Perhaps the Lord would grant her and Abe a small brood. After all, He had waited three years to answer their prayers. During that time, His denial had seemed borderline cruel, but maybe the wait was a blessing in disguise.

One of the entry doors clattered against its frame. Abby scrubbed her face with her handkerchief and then rose from the pew. The walk to Reverend Pierson's house would take no more than five minutes, and the walk back half that time, since Abe would make it alone. She had to hurry, lest she give Abe the impression that her duties were too much for her to manage in her present condition.

She absently whistled the hymn "Little White Flowers" as she made her way toward the broom closet. The clack of a cane filtered into the chapel, and the notes died on her lips. Reverend Pierson? But he had left with Abe. Besides, the taps were too loud, too deliberate. The hair on the back of her neck bristled. Mr. Miller.

She spun around. Mr. Miller strode down the aisle. His white teeth glistened as he flashed her a grin.

“Ah, Abby, I hoped I would catch you. I have some news relating to your misbehavior on Sunday, and I thought it best to deliver it in person.”

Mr. Miller had threatened to publicly flog the women who tried to cast a vote during Sunday’s town meeting to determine Riley’s fate. Maggie Carlisle had persisted in an effort to save her brother, and Abby had joined her. Abby had known the other councilors wouldn’t condone such a penalty since it would disgrace their families. However, even if Mr. Miller had managed to enforce his sentence, the public humiliation would have been a small price to pay compared to the guilt of abandoning Maggie during her time of need.

“Oh?” Abby said. Abe had already informed her of the Council’s verdict, but she couldn’t let on that Reverend Pierson had discussed Council business with Abe.

“The Council has reconsidered your punishment. We expect a public apology from you, but we won’t enforce the flogging. I had a change of heart and managed to convince the others to see things my way.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Abby forced a smile. How gullible did Mr. Miller think she was? She had defied him in front of the whole town. No way would he have backed down unless the other councilors overruled him, which was precisely what had happened, according to Abe.

Mr. Miller lingered at the end of the aisle. She twisted her hands together. She had given him her gratitude, as undeserved as it was. What more did he want from her?

“Is there something I can do for you?” she said.

“Why, now that you mention it, perhaps there is. I imagine with Mildred’s injury, you’ll be visiting the Moores frequently, won’t you?”

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“Of course. I’ll be on my way over there as soon as I finish up here.”

Mrs. Moore needed all the support she could get, especially since so many of her neighbors viewed her “accident” that morning as divine retribution. Never mind the fact that Mr. Moore had injured his wife countless times before. The other strange occurrences, those likely were acts of God, but the Lord wouldn’t wield Mr. Moore’s hands as His weapon.

“No doubt you’ll run into Riley, unless he’s off with his betrothed,” Mr. Miller said. “You know, I’m worried about that boy. He hasn’t quite been himself ever since Alice arrived. Surely you’ve noticed this.”

Abby nodded. Riley’s behavior the past week was a far cry from that of the timid boy she had grown up with. Taking Alice to the cemetery unchaperoned, engaging in lewd acts with her, fighting with the sheriff—none of that was like him.

“Alice has a certain sway over him, and I’m concerned she might compel him to do something that would put him or our blessed town in jeopardy. I need you to keep an eye on him. Make sure that he doesn’t try to leave Evanston.”

Abby shook her head. “Riley wouldn’t do that. He has made some mistakes lately, but he hasn’t lost his way to the point where he would turn his back on us.”

“Yes, I should hope not. But I need someone to keep an eye on him just in case. Can I count on you to do that?”

It was an easy enough task. Riley had no reason to run, not with his marriage to his beloved a few short days away. What trouble would it be to keep an eye on him until then?

But what if Riley did say something concerning? He might be content here, but the Draytons weren’t, and Alice did seem to have Riley under her spell. Could Abby report him to Mr.

Miller? If she agreed to Mr. Miller's proposal—in church of all places—she would have no choice but to comply.

“What would happen to Riley, were he to speak of leaving?” she said.

Mr. Miller offered her a tight smile. “That’s Council business, Abigail. Nothing to trouble your head with.”

Abby wrung her hands. The last time someone had tried to run away and failed, they had met the gallows. Would Mr. Miller sentence Riley to the same fate? If there was even the slightest chance that her words could bring about Riley’s demise, she would have no part in Mr. Miller’s scheme.

“I don’t feel comfortable acting as a spy after all the Moores have done for me,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Mr. Miller frowned. “I haven’t asked any such thing of you. But I would hope that with your service to our church, you would understand the importance of shielding our town from the prying eyes of nonbelievers.”

“I certainly do, but, as I said, Riley wouldn’t betray us. I’m confident that I shan’t hear a word from him on the matter.”

Mr. Miller’s scowl deepened. “Very well. I suppose I’ll see you at the banquet tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

A thin smile curled his lips. “Perhaps this year you ought to leave the blueberry cake to the others. This plumper figure of yours is not becoming on you. As the minister’s wife, you of all people should see the virtue in restraint.”

Abby clenched her jaw. What a nasty thing to say. He didn’t know she was expecting, but that was no excuse.

Mr. Miller walked away, his cane clacking against the floor as he went. Abby’s shoulders slumped. She had done as her conscience demanded, but Mr. Miller would hold her choice against her. What price would she pay for her refusal?

Chapter 3

Alice peeled back the edge of one of the yellowed curtains cloaking the window above the sink in the Hatcher house's kitchen. The steady *clip-clop clip-clop* of hooves drifted through the windowpane as a pair of horses with midnight black hair drew an obsidian carriage along the dirt road that ran in front of the farmhouse. A watery, acidic sensation overtook Alice's stomach. Was that the Evanston equivalent of a hearse? The carriage looked like a set piece from a Barbara Steele film. A squat man in a dark three-piece suit and matching top hat sat at the helm of the boxy, windowless vehicle. The Holy Rose adorned the carriage's sleek wooden side, its gilded paint glittering in the early evening sunlight. A set of double-doors cut into the carriage's back.

Alice's gut roiled. It *was* a hearse, sent to collect the boys she had stood alongside that morning, the other white rose recipients. They were dead now, all three of them. *Murdered*. Like she was supposed to be.

Sheriff Danforth shifted, and Alice's muscles tensed. He stood with his back to the house, an elbow propped against the front porch's railing. Pipe smoke curled around his head. She had glimpsed Mr. Brown on the back porch earlier when she peeked inside the mudroom, a hand-rolled cigarette pinched between his lips. With guards monitoring both main exits, slipping out of the house unnoticed would be nigh impossible.

If only Mom and Dad hadn't sent Andy up here to clean out the house they inherited. Then Alice would be at home, tucked away in her fortress of words. She still would have her anxieties, but at least fretting about whether Mom and Dad would make it home safely from Canada was a far cry from fearing the real possibility of imminent death.

But maybe Mom and Dad would settle Nancy's affairs sooner than they expected and come looking for their children. Or maybe they would ask Uncle Charlie—

Andy's raised voice sliced the air. Distance muffled his words, although "fucking" came through clearly. The sheriff swiveled toward the house.

Alice dropped the curtain. She scampered from the kitchen and veered left, her glass of water forgotten on the sideboard. The living room had been painted the same sallow color as the rest of the house. A barren bookshelf that had brimmed with literary classics when she first arrived in Evanston leaned against the wall to her right while a couch with worn wooden legs and plum-colored upholstery was situated opposite the front door. A bulky black woodstove stood near a broken window boarded over with wooden planks. The window had splintered when someone hurled a rock with a warning note through the glass.

The hem of Alice's blanket-turned-shawl dragged behind her as she rushed toward the hallway. Her heart's thuds muffled the ticks of the clock mounted on the wall to her left.

Riley's raised voice surged from the hall. "Yes, but we need to exercise caution."

Alice's hip struck the couch, and she yelped. "Alice?" Andy and Riley said, the two voices slightly out of sync.

She shifted the ends of her blanket cape to her left hand and rubbed the sore spot with her right. "Just running into things."

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She strode into the hallway that led to the larger of the house's two bedrooms. Her skin prickled as her eyes landed on the door to the room where her great-grandfather had died. Even before she knew its morbid past, she had dubbed it the "creepy" bedroom because it had housed half-a-dozen taxidermy animals. Their neighbor, Betty Thompson, had removed the macabre contents while helping the siblings clean. Nonetheless, death's specter still clung to it.

The dome fixture overhead swathed the corridor and its occupants in yellow light. Andy sat toward the middle of the hall with his back pressed against one of the walls. He had changed into his navy blue University of Maine sweatshirt and a pair of jeans. Riley sat across from him, still clad in his white button-down shirt and brown trousers, although he had shed the matching suit jacket, vest, and red bow tie.

"You okay, kiddo?" Andy said.

"No, but not because I banged my hip," she said. "I heard you two all the way from the kitchen. I think the sheriff might have heard you as well."

The unblemished portion of Riley's face blanched. "How much did you hear?"

She sank down beside Riley. Goosebumps pebbled the skin her short denim cutoffs exposed, and she drew the blanket over her legs. "I only caught a word here or there until I got closer, but I could tell who was speaking."

"We're fine then," Andy said. He turned to Riley. "You heard them at the meeting. They want to hang me and Alice."

"I know," Riley said. "But we need a plan if we're to have any hope of escaping. Sneaking out a window some night if it seems like the guards aren't paying attention isn't a plan."

"Are we still considering leaving the windows open at night?" Alice said. "I don't like that idea." The last thing they needed

was to give the broad-shouldered man from the meeting, Sherwood, easy access to their house. Sure, it wasn't like closed windows would provide much of a deterrent, but at least if someone smashed their way in, the noise would betray the intruder's presence.

"Then give me a better idea," Andy said.

Alice's fingers smoothed the blanket's soft green fibers. Therein lay the problem. Andy's plan was doomed to fail, yet it seemed like the only possibility.

Andy crossed his arms over his chest. "How about you, Riley? What's your grand plan? So we wait, like you said. How long? Someone's gonna figure out Alice isn't pregnant soon."

"Not long," Riley said. His gaze shifted to his lap. "I haven't pieced it all together yet, but Mr. Miller will likely call off the guards once the marriage is solemnized—"

Andy threw his hands into the air. "See, Alice? He's just using this as an excuse to marry you."

"No, I'm trying to keep both of you safe. If the plan fails, you'll end up locked in the church basement again—if you're lucky."

Alice rolled her nose stud, a silver nose bone with a small black gem, between her fingers. She and Andy had been locked in the church basement on and off from Sunday morning until earlier that day when Mr. Miller called them into the chapel to announce Alice's betrothal. Those three days in the basement ranked amongst the most miserable of her life. She couldn't handle being trapped there again.

"Fuck off with this white knight bullshit," Andy said. He turned to Alice. "All the signs point to one thing: this asshole wants to make you his. Forever. He probably doesn't even plan on leaving."

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“You’re wrong,” Riley said. He laid a hand on Alice’s shoulder. “Alice, please. I know it looks bad, but I swear, my only objective is to protect you.”

Alice pulled away from Riley. She gathered her blanket in her arms and started back toward the living room.

“Kiddo, where are you going?” Andy said.

“Somewhere where you two aren’t.”

“What have *I* done? He’s the one who’s trying to make you his lawfully wedded servant.”

“Never,” Riley said. “Alice, I wouldn’t do that to you.”

She cut across the living room and started down the corridor that accessed the other end of the house. Bronze doorknobs glinted in the low light—one on her left for the mudroom, one on her right for the multipurpose room that used to hold craft supplies and sporting goods, and one dead ahead. She pushed through the final door.

A full-sized bed sat toward the center of the bedroom, its head pressed against the wall opposite the door. She curled up at the foot of the bed and drew her blanket over her limbs and torso. Her body felt depleted, as though the day’s stress had siphoned away all but a few drops of energy. Neither Andy nor Riley were willing to listen right now. She would have to devise an escape plan on her own.

A door banged shut, and then footfalls strode down the hall. Andy appeared in the doorway. “How’re you holding up, kiddo?”

She burrowed deeper into her blanket. How did he think she was doing? Obviously she was having the time of her life.

Andy sank down on the edge of the bed. He touched her shoulder. “We’re going to find a way out of here, with or without Riley.”

She shook her head. “We can’t leave him. People want him dead too.”

Not to mention, Mr. Miller had only halted Riley's execution because Riley had offered to support Alice's fictional fetus. If she left Evanston without Riley, Mr. Miller might reinstate Riley's death sentence.

"That's not your problem," Andy said. "Riley's the one who created this mess."

Alice's muscles stiffened. "That's not fair and you know it."

She had pressed Riley for information about Evanston's religious rituals and forged ahead with her investigation into the coinciding death dates in the cemetery despite his warnings. He had only shared his knowledge in an effort to keep her safe.

Andy sighed. "Kiddo, you didn't know."

"Regardless, I'm not leaving him to die. Besides, we need him. He knows way more about Evanston than we do."

Like the guards. Since Riley had grown up here, he would know which of his neighbors were most likely to slack off on the job.

"His grand plan is to sit and wait."

"If we had more time, that wouldn't be a bad idea. He's right that the guards will be most alert these first few days. They can't monitor us around the clock indefinitely. It's unsustainable."

Andy stared at her. "So you'd be okay with marrying Riley?"

"No, but if I had to choose between being locked in the basement if not murdered or marrying Riley, I'd do it. As long as it's not permanent, which as long as we make it out of here, it wouldn't be."

"But we can't wait that long."

"I know."

Andy only had three doses of Suboxone left, which meant she, Andy, and Riley had about three days to escape Evanston. Withdrawal symptoms probably wouldn't kick in for a couple of days after his last dose, but they couldn't afford to take chances. Andy

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would have one Hell of a time fleeing if he was in the throes of withdrawal, and no way would she leave him behind.

Chapter 4

Alice's eyes leaped open. Moonlight illuminated the contours of the room and little else. Andy's soft snores drifted from the opposite side of the bed. A memory of his truck hydroplaning over the flooded bridge toward the railing faded from her brain, and she let out a breath. Just a dream.

The blocky shape opposite the bed resolved into a dresser. Fragments of moonlight glimmered on the attached vanity mirror. Unease pooled in her stomach. She was in the Hatcher house's smaller bedroom, which meant she was still stranded in Evanston. At least she was out of that miserable basement room though.

Lumps and indentations in the mattress agitated her stiff muscles. She rolled onto her side and forced her eyes shut. She counted each inhalation and exhalation, cycling from one to ten again and again, but her muscles refused to unwind. Her throat grew parched and scratchy, as though she had swallowed mouthfuls of coarse, dry sand, and her thirst intensified by the second.

She sighed and tossed aside her corner of the sheet. Goosebumps dotted her extremities and pebbled the skin beneath her thin satin camisole and sleep shorts. She eased her feet onto the floor. The wooden boards chilled her soles, and a shudder rippled down her spine. She wound her arms around her midriff. Why did it have to be so cold?

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She crept to the end of the hall. Hot blood pulsed in her veins, and sweat beaded on her skin. What if someone had climbed through the window and was crouched behind the couch or huddled by the woodstove? She glanced over her shoulder toward the bedroom. Should she call for Andy?

No, she couldn't run to him every time her brain cried monster. Boards shifted beneath the balls of her feet as she crossed the living room. She froze with each creak. The crickets' cries melded with the refrigerator's hum, but the house otherwise remained silent.

She stepped into the kitchen and tiptoed toward the cupboard at the opposite end of the room. Her toe banged against an unseen object. "Ow!"

Ferocious barks rang through the air. The hair on Alice's arms and the back of her neck stood on end, and her blood iced over. A dog. A big, angry dog. And it was close.

"Cut it out, Buster," a voice said. The words were barely audible above the dog's racket.

Alice's eyes latched onto the window above the sink. The ends of the thin curtains billowed inward, and a dark form darted into view. A behemoth black dog leaped toward the opening. Its massive canines glittered in the low light.

Alice shrieked and staggered backward, which elicited more barks and growls from the dog. The beast shoved its head through the window and trained its black eyes on her. Saliva leaked from the corners of its mouth as its jaws flew open and closed. Its forepaws scabbled against the windowsill, trying to find purchase. Her lungs froze. Nothing but thin air separated her from that beast.

"Shut up that damn dog of yours, Sherwood," a second voice said.

"I'm workin' on it," Sherwood said. "Buster, stop. Heel."

The dog quieted and sank into the grass. Alice's heart thrashed in her ears as a man stepped into the window's view. It was too dark to get a good look at him, but she had recognized his voice from the meeting.

He appeared to be in his mid-twenties. Dark stubble speckled his pale jawline. Her vantage from inside the house placed her a few inches above his eye level, but he had to be about Andy's height, if not a little taller, with a thick, muscular build.

Andy barreled into the kitchen. Sweat glistened on his forehead and chest. His palm landed on her mid-back. The chill of his skin soaked through her camisole.

His eyes searched her face. "You okay, kiddo? I heard you scream."

"I, uh, I got spooked," she said.

"By the dog?"

She nodded. Lying there at the man's feet, head cocked to one side, the dog seemed docile. But moments before, it had been Cujo incarnate, sans rabies. If only Andy had seen it snarling at her. But he must have heard it, and those growls were proof that she wasn't overreacting; that she had reason to be afraid.

"Don't worry, Buster wouldn't hurt nobody. Not unless I tell him to." Sherwood flashed his teeth. "He's a good boy." Sherwood looked at the dog. "Ain't that right, Buster?"

The dog barked as if in agreement. Sherwood turned to Alice. "You like dogs?"

"Uh, they're fine," she said. "But I'm more of a cat person."

"Figures." His gaze shifted to Andy. "You probably don't like dogs neither."

"I'm not anti-dog in general, but if your dog is gonna terrorize my sister, then yeah, I'm not his biggest fan."

Sherwood reached down and scratched Buster behind the ears. Buster's enormous tongue lolled from his mouth as he leaned into

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Sherwood's hand. "Buster ain't terrorizin' no one. He jus' got a little excited. Think he likes ya. Don't ya, boy?"

Buster barked. Alice hugged her waist. That wasn't friendliness she had seen in Buster's eyes. It was ruthless cruelty, a desire to rip, to tear, to rend limb from limb. How could this man let his murder dog try to lunge through her window and then act as though the whole situation was no big deal?

"What I want to know is, what the Hell are you and your dog doing at our house in the middle of the night?" Andy said.

Sherwood gave the dog a final scratch and straightened up. "I'm doing my job. Keeping an eye out to make sure you and your sister don't sneak off. Buster's here to help. He's got real keen ears."

Of course Evanston would put someone with a vicious dog on guard duty. Alice placed a hand on her brother's forearm. "Let's go," she said in a low voice.

"Look, what I said at the meetin', it's nothing personal." Sherwood said. "But you gotta admit, it's mighty funny we didn't have no issues until you two showed up."

"Hilarious," Andy said. "I don't know what you're accusing us of, but we haven't done anything wrong."

Sherwood held up his hands. "I'm just tellin' it as I see it." His eyes flicked to Alice. "Know what else is funny? Before you came along, your beau was too busy makin' eyes at Jeremiah to give any of the ladies 'round here the time of day. Then you show up, and suddenly you're all he can talk about."

Riley and Jeremiah? They were close, or had been at one point, but she hadn't gotten the vibe that Riley pined after his friend. Then again, picking up on that type of cue wasn't her strong suit.

"What are you saying?" Andy said. "That Alice somehow tricked Riley into falling for her?"

“What I’m sayin’ is, Riley’s always been a bit peculiar, but it ain’t like him to go against the Commandments. It’s like your sis has got him under her spell.”

Alice ran her hands over her hair. Sherwood wasn’t accusing her of bewitching Riley, was he? He had to know that magic wasn’t real. Right?

Andy shook his head. “This is ridiculous. Come on, kiddo. Let’s go back to bed.”

“One thing before you go,” Sherwood said. He tapped a beefy index finger against the windowsill. “You’ll wanna close these windows. Critters’ll get in. Bats, birds, maybe somethin’ that can jump real well. But those wouldn’t be so much what I’d worry about.”

“Is that a threat?” Andy said.

“More like neighborly advice, but take it as you will.” Sherwood looked at his dog. “Come along now, Buster.”

Buster stood and followed Sherwood toward the front porch. Alice’s lungs constricted. Her breaths came short and shallow. She and Andy weren’t safe in Evanston. Not even in their own home. Would they ever be safe again?