

A quiet little life. A perfect little lie.

# HIDDEN ROOMS

KATE MICHAELSON



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CamCat  
Books

CamCat Publishing, LLC  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80524  
camcatpublishing.com

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Hardcover ISBN 9780744310153  
Paperback ISBN 9780744310160  
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744310191  
eBook ISBN 9780744310184  
Audiobook ISBN 9780744310214

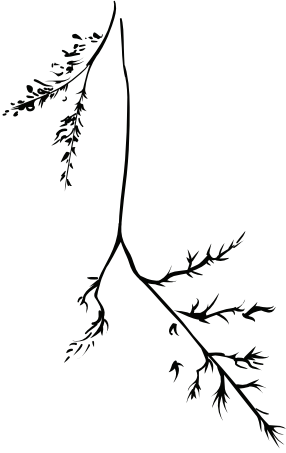
Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Book and cover design by Maryann Appel

Artwork by David Goh, George Peters, Jklr

5 3 1 2 4

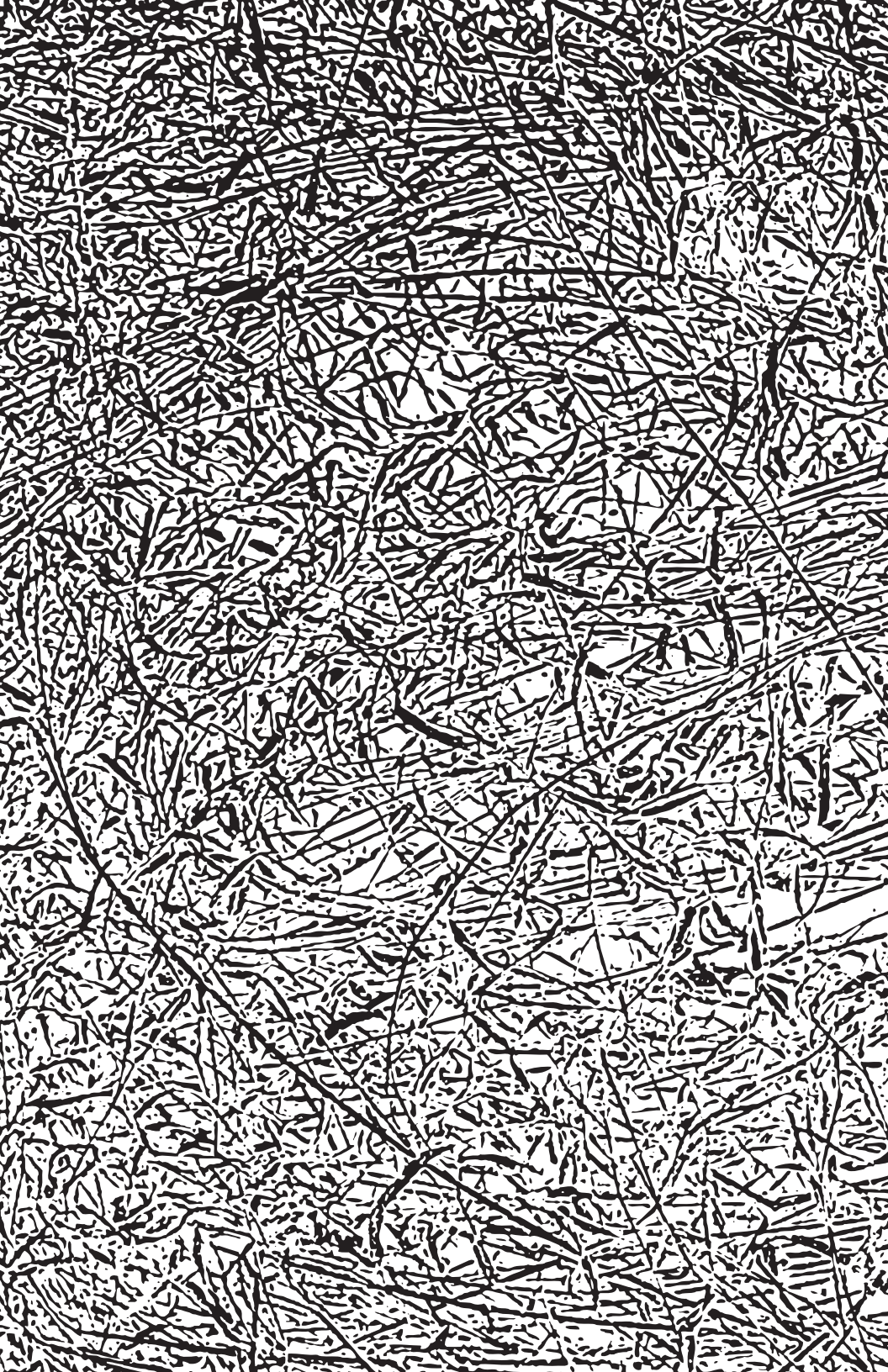




*To my parents:*

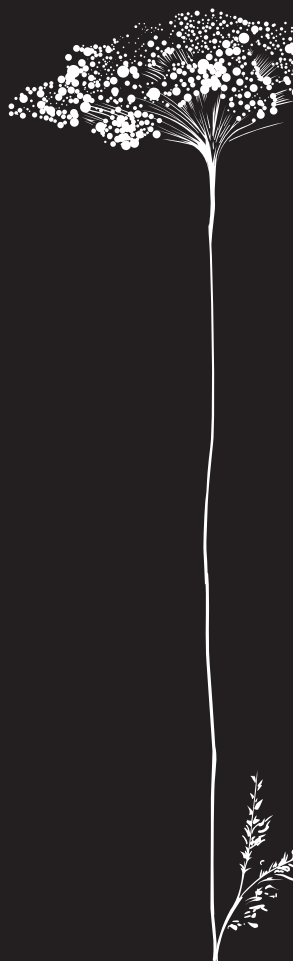
*For raising me in a place so special*

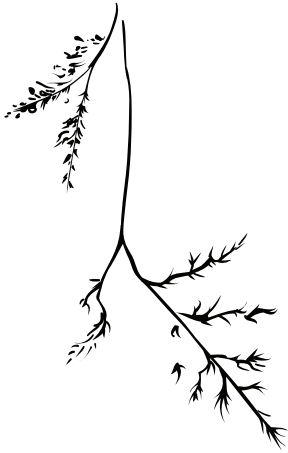
*I had to write about it.*





PART ONE





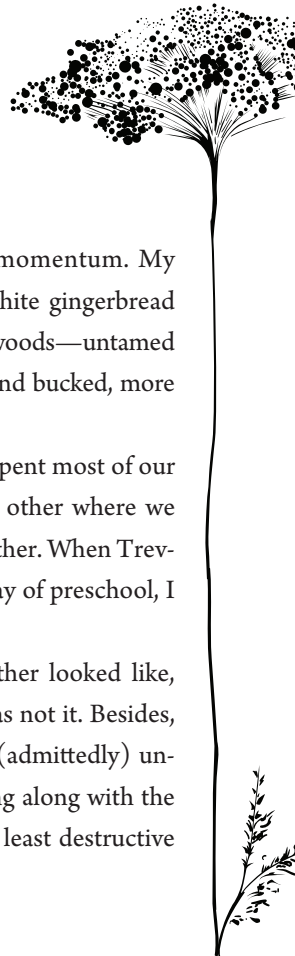
## CHAPTER ONE

*September 23, 2022*

I grew up inside a lightning bolt, in a family of pure momentum. My siblings and I were young, stupid, and fearless in our white gingerbread house, surrounded by dark earth, green shoots, and wild woods—untamed beasts running loose from morning to night. We snarled and bucked, more a pack than a family.

Born less than a year apart, my brother Ethan and I spent most of our lives scrapping after the same few things, pinching each other where we knew it would hurt the most. But we also protected each other. When Trevor Paltree shoved Ethan off the tall metal slide the first day of preschool, I kicked Trevor's little ass, and I'd do it again.

Only, now, I didn't know what protecting my brother looked like, though I felt fairly certain that kicking his fiancée's ass was not it. Besides, I couldn't even say what exactly Beth was up to, which (admittedly) undermined my argument. Putting my head down and going along with the wedding might feel cowardly, but it also seemed like the least destructive path forward.



So, that's how I found myself pulling up to Ethan and Beth's house to pick up my puce monstrosity of a bridesmaid's dress with Beth's recent words still replaying in my mind: *Riley, you know I'd never do anything to hurt Ethan*. The problem was that she also once said with a wink and a smile that what Ethan didn't know couldn't hurt him. I parked in the shade of a low-limbed oak and got out, lifting my hair off my neck to catch the breeze. The autumn sun had built throughout the afternoon into the kind of fleetingly gorgeous day that makes up for Ohio's multitude of weather sins: one last warm postscript to summer. Rain loomed in the low shelf of clouds to the north. I crossed my fingers that it would hold off until I could get home to walk Bruno. Maybe I could even get a run in if my energy held out.

My phone buzzed, and I knew without looking it would be Audra. She called most days and knew that just the previous night, I'd finally worked up the nerve to have a conversation with Ethan about Beth. She would want the details. I was amazed she had waited this long.

"How'd it go with Ethan?" Her melodious voice skipped along briskly. People usually went with what she said simply because they were so swept up with how she said it. As her sister, I was an exception.

"Hello to you too." I continued toward the house but slowed my pace. "I'll give you one guess how it went."

"Hello, *dearest* Riley. I guess he got mad."

"Not just mad. He guilt-tripped me. I asked him if he'd noticed anything wrong with Beth, and he acted all injured about it. He told me, 'She thinks you're her friend.'" I mimicked Ethan's self-righteous tone. The jab still stung. "I told him I think of her as a friend too, which is how I know she's hiding something." Granted, I couldn't untangle what it was. It was something I sensed more than saw—a shift in posture or flicker behind an expression. The past few weeks she'd become more self-contained than ever, which was saying something for her.

"Yeah, but can you really be friends with someone who has no personality? It's like being friends with a mannequin. I don't know how you can tell if she's hiding something when she never shares anything—"

“Look, I can’t talk about it now.” I lowered my voice as I neared the house. “I’m at their place getting my dress. I’ll call you later.”

I climbed the porch steps, the front of their house looking so Instagram-perfect that I wondered whether I’d been seeing problems that weren’t there. The afternoon light slanted across the pumpkins and yellow chrysanthemums that Beth had arranged just so. Dried bundles of corn rattled in the breeze. Beneath the pale-blue porch swing, Beth had set out a matching ceramic bowl full of kibble for Bibbs, the half-feral cat that had adopted her and Ethan.

The only thing amiss was the open door of the old-fashioned cast-iron mailbox nestled amid the pumpkins and flowers. Beth would kill the mail carrier for ruining the ambiance. I grabbed the few pieces of mail in the box and shut the little door obligingly, like a good future sister-in-law.

Careful not to disturb a precarious wreath of orange berries, I knocked on the screen door and tapped my foot, ready to grab my puffy dress and go. I had been a whirl of motion all day, zipping through work and crossing items off my to-do list. I worked for Wicks, an oversized candle company that sold overpriced candles. Today was my last day in the office before a trip to England to set up the IT network at our new British headquarters.

For months, I’d been fighting some kind of long-term bug my doctors couldn’t figure out, but today I felt a glimmer of my former self, twitchy with energy and moving at a clip to get everything done.

Deep down, I sensed that rather than a sudden return to health, my energy was more of a fizz of nerves, arising from the uneasy note I’d ended on with Ethan the night before. Our squabble had nagged at me throughout the day, like an ache that couldn’t settle in my joints as long as I kept moving.

I rapped on the door once more, and when no one answered, I tried the handle. Unlocked. This was not unusual in a town where nobody locked their doors, but Beth wasn’t from here. She’d moved to North Haven her senior year of high school and, thus, hadn’t lived here long enough for people to think of her as a local. But to be fair, that usually took a lifetime.

I plastered a smile on my face and stepped into the house—immaculate as usual and smelling faintly of cinnamon. I couldn't tell if the homey scent came from something baking or wafted from a candle. I liked to tease a copywriter friend from Wicks with terrible ideas for candle taglines. My brain began composing a homespun blurb about the charms of cinnamon. *Nothing welcomes 'em in like cinnamon!*

Appalling. I'd write it down later.

"Beth?" I called out. The only reply came from the ticking of the grandfather clock down the hall. I peeked into the small kitchen, where the pale-blue vintage-style fridge rattled and groaned inefficiently in the corner. My mom once described it as looking cute and sucking up energy, much like Beth. I had snorted, mostly relieved my mom had directed her acidity at someone other than me.

I poked my head into each room downstairs: each as spotless and Bethless as the last. Checking my phone, I sighed. Nothing. I replied to her last text with *At the house to get my dress. Where are you?*

It seemed fair to look in the backyard and then leave in good conscience. The moment I stepped into the small kitchen again, I noticed that the door to the backyard stood open a few inches. I pushed it wide open and descended the steps off the back porch.

Ethan and Beth lived on ten acres, and the smells of sweet, smoky autumn air and sun-warmed fields hit me as I walked into the yard. Unlike the front of the house, the back was still a work in progress, with a cracked concrete patio jutting up unevenly and half-finished projects littering the yard, but the view of the fields and, beyond that, the forest ramping up for fall, lent the mess a pastoral charm.

Laundry billowed on the clothesline, the edge of a sheet skimming the top of the soft green grass. I imagined Beth reveling in her homemaker image as she hung the laundry out to dry and taking pictures of her bedding wafting in the breeze, poised to post.

The clouds to the north had bloomed from gray into a more ominous purple while I'd been inside, and a cooler breeze had picked up. With the



serene blue on one side and clouds heavy with rain on the other, the sky seemed to be of two minds.

Something about Beth's absence struck me as wrong. For one, why would she leave clothes drying on the line with rain coming? But beyond that, her behavior had worried me lately, like the way she hid her phone with a startled expression the moment I walked into a room and then offered some flimsy explanation about wedding plans. I wasn't sure if I should be concerned for her or for Ethan, or if I was worrying over nothing. Yet, for all her odd behavior, disappearing in the middle of the day felt unlike her. If anything, she was the opposite—staying close to home and fastidious about her routine and the wedding. The hairs on my arms prickled in the breeze.

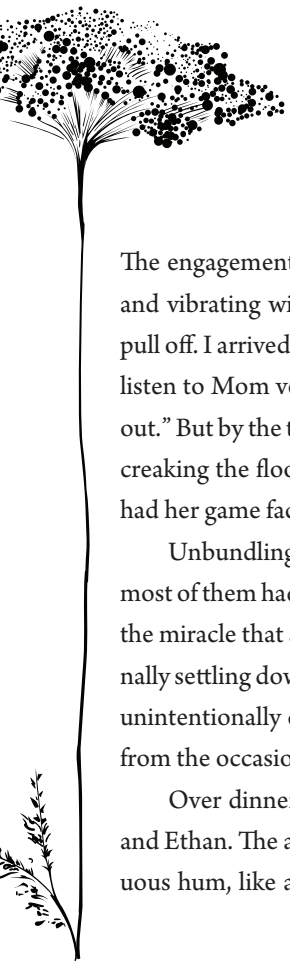
Passing the clothesline, I had just decided to text Ethan when a sheet caught a gust of wind and billowed into my face. As I struggled to grab its fluttering edges, I felt a wet stickiness. Finally grasping it, I pulled the fabric taut. A pattern of little yellow fleurs-de-lis dotted the white cotton, but it was the irregular dark red splotches that caught my attention. The marks trailed across the lower corner, where they became more saturated, coalescing into the shape of a hand. My scalp tingled, and my ears began to ring. A dozen scenarios flashed through my mind, all ending in fresh blood and a missing Beth. Cold logic told me to calm down. Stop overreacting. But some instinctual part of my brain roared, telling me that whatever Beth had been hiding—that wrongness I had sensed and then brushed off—had led to this.

I tried to slow my breath. *That doesn't seem good.* My head swam and my vision tunneled as I reached for my phone.



## CHAPTER TWO

*Eight Months Earlier—February 20, 2022*



The engagement party Mom held for Ethan and Beth was elegant, hearty, and vibrating with unexpressed anger in a way that only my family could pull off. I arrived early to mash the potatoes, frost the cake, set the table, and listen to Mom vent about how Beth “couldn’t lift a dainty finger to help us out.” But by the time our aunts, uncles, and friends poured in the front door, creaking the floors of our family’s hundred-year-old Gothic Revival, Mom had her game face on, all cheek kisses and hugs.

Unbundling their thick coats, people blew on their hands and—since most of them had been married and had kids before twenty—laughed about the miracle that at the ripe old age of twenty-seven, Ethan and Beth were finally settling down. Beth’s only guest, her father, arrived a half hour late, and unintentionally caused more laughter when he blamed traffic, which, aside from the occasional slow-moving tractor, everyone knew was nonexistent.

Over dinner, I sat at the end of the long dining-room table with Beth and Ethan. The adults’ laughter and kids’ high voices merged in one continuous hum, like a chorus of giddy birds. Cutlery clinked against china, and

the scents of roast chicken and rosemary filled the room. Amid the buzz, I picked at my food. I'd felt awful since the previous day, when I'd run a ten-mile race outside of Cleveland. I'd broken a record, but not in a good way, recording my slowest time since junior high, when I'd begun running cross-country. I attributed it to the flu I'd had a few weeks earlier. My head throbbed like my skull had been filled to the brim. I'd zoned out and was staring at my green beans, when Ethan's words caught my attention.

"You didn't know our great-great grandfather was an axe murderer?" Ethan was looking at Beth, his jaw dropped, like he was sure he must have mentioned this juicy tidbit at one point or another. Beth forked a green bean and regarded him with a blank look.

Ethan pivoted to me for backup. "Tell her, Riley."

I blinked and focused on Beth, her shining auburn hair and cinnamon-brown eyes. "It's true," I told her. Wondering if she would find the story as darkly amusing as we did, I scanned her face: unreadable other than a little crease between her delicate brows. "Don't worry. Aside from that, he was a great guy. And it was just the one time."

Ethan grinned and she cracked a smile. "Oh, well, if it was just the once . . ." From down the table, a loud burst of laughter erupted from my sister Audra and her friend Polly as they teased my brother-in-law, Marco, about his new winter beard.

Beth side-eyed the commotion and then tilted her head at Ethan. "Are you joking?"

"No, Riley found it in an old newspaper." Ethan pushed his empty plate away and leaned his elbows on the scarred oak table. "Should I have mentioned this before I proposed? I thought it might dampen the mood." He smiled his wide, dimpled grin. His face flushed beneath his tan, and he looked so dopily happy that I wanted to slap him and hug him in equal measures.

"Yeah," I recalled the headline I'd found. "'Harald Svenson of North Haven killed his wealthy neighbor with an axe.' Dad only told me about it after I asked." I paused, remembering how he had avoided my eyes as he

explained. I'd discovered the story when I'd completed a genealogy project for school. Tracing my mom's side had been easy. Her father, the town mayor, had brought over reams of paper with a calligraphy family tree listing generations of educated abolitionists who came from the northeast to the Firelands of northern Ohio. Pictures from the early 1900s showed them dressed in white and lounging on smooth lawns in front of charming homes.

When it came time to look at my dad's side, I found next to nothing. In the one old picture I dug up online, a family of eight crowded together on a rickety porch with grim expressions, looking like they wanted to kill each other. As it turned out, they only killed outside the family.

My siblings and I always joked about our unsavory family history. To our minds, time plus tragedy equaled comedy. My dad—one generation closer to the event—hadn't found it so funny. Almost four months had passed since his death, and the same wave of anguish and fondness still smacked me in the chest when I thought of him.

I cleared my throat. "The guy he killed, something Aldridge, hired him and his kids to clear some fields. Then, I guess one day Harald brought his little girl along and caught this guy messing with her and *whack*—" I made a slashing motion across my neck. "That's why people don't mess with the Svensons. Or if they do, they only do it once."

Beth ignored my feeble joke and leaned forward. "The Aldridges that owned our place?" Ethan had purchased the Aldridge estate at auction a few months ago after it had fallen into bankruptcy. He and Beth were in the process of resuscitating it from decades of neglect.

"Same family." Ethan squeezed Beth's hand. "But hardly anyone knows the story anymore, except for our family." He shrugged. "And now you."

"And now you also know why Ethan is such a brute," I added. "It's in his blood."

Beth laughed, just a sigh and crook of her mouth. Ethan turned sharply toward me. "Well, we can't all be as refined as you, Riley." His tone was light, but annoyance flared off of him.

I tensed, realizing I'd hit a sore spot. Growing up, he and I had teased as easily as we had breathed—our jabs a form of affection that didn't require us to actually *say* the mushy things that would have made us roll our eyes. But as adults—living very different lives in different states until recently—we'd lost the easiness, with Ethan extra sensitive to anything resembling snobbery.

I was considering what words might mend the damage when Audra interrupted, ringing her fork against her wineglass with such vigor that I tensed, waiting for it to shatter.

"Toast, toast! Riiiiieeey," she drew out my name for a full breath. "Let's hear from you." Her nose was pink from a cold, but she looked as radiant as ever in a deep-red wrap dress with her honey-colored hair and bright-blue eyes. I looked shabby by comparison in my worn jeans and a gray sweater, but there had never been any point in trying to compete with Audra when it came to looks.

Glancing around, I stood and picked up my water glass. The progeny of Harald the axe murderer was gathered around the dining-room table. Oddly, with all the axe-murdering blood mingling in the room, it was my mom, with her fancy non-murdering ancestors, who looked ready to kill, brandishing a cake knife in her white-knuckle grip.

I held out my glass. "To the future of two of my favorite people in the world, Beth and Ethan. I know you will be happy together. Now that you're making it official, we shall henceforth call you *Bethan*."

Everyone clapped politely, and Audra echoed, "To Bethan! It's so much more efficient."

"Awww." Ethan grinned as I sat back down. "We're two of your favorite people?"

I clinked glasses with him and returned his smile. "Don't get too excited. I don't know that many people." I winked, and he laughed, his irritation from a moment ago forgotten and our easy connection restored. He was like that, flashing from amiable to prickly and back again with the speed of a thought. In some ways, he still reminded me of the Ethan he'd once been,

the enthusiastic kid who never grew out of asking a million questions. But the problem was that he'd never grown out of his tantrums either.

Glasses clinked in chorus around the table. My mom acknowledged us with an eye roll and then turned toward her masterpiece: a heart-shaped layer cake she'd made for the occasion. Her smile stiffened as she passed a slice to Beth. Since my dad's death, she'd not only lost her partner of forty years but also inherited a farm she had zero interest in running. She'd been forced to rely on Ethan to manage the business—and here he was, her favorite—moving on to start his life with Beth. Behind her barbs and complaints, I sensed her terror that the life she'd built had been upended, and she'd been given no say in the matter.

I got up to grab the pot of coffee from the kitchen, my knees, which had been stiff and swollen for the past week, protesting along the way. From the doorway of the kitchen, I paused to savor the scene around the table. The dining room glowed with crystal, candles, and silver, sparkling against the blue-black dusk at the windows. Beth and Ethan held hands and stole quick glances to smile at each other, both apple-cheeked and beautiful. Audra approached Beth and grasped her arm to congratulate her. Whether to avoid the germs or just to reclaim a little personal space, Beth widened her eyes and leaned back from her. My niece Sophie peppered Ethan with questions about wedding colors, whether she would be a flower girl or a bridesmaid, and did he know that junior bridesmaids were a thing too, and that she was definitely old enough for that? Ethan nodded along gamely, his cheeks dimpling, and asked what colors she would choose when she got married one day.

As I approached the table with the carafe of coffee, I caught my three-year-old nephew Franky grinding a handful of frosting into the side of his head. "Franky, no." I set the carafe down and wiped his fingers with a napkin as he scrunched his fine eyebrows at me.

Aside from Mom, the only one who did not take part in the swirl of sugar-charged elation was Doug, Beth's father, who leaned back in his chair with one foot resting on his knee. He had the artfully raked-back hair and

bronzed look of someone who had always just returned from sailing. Between sips of coffee, he scanned the room, the real-estate developer in him pausing on the elaborate crown molding and wainscoting with a distant look like he might be calculating what this place could go for in the right market. Doug and Beth had relocated to North Haven from Austin her senior year—according to the rumor mill, on the heels of a scandal, but the gossips struggled to settle on what *kind* of scandal, and the rumors had fizzled.

Suddenly, as if he'd sensed my gaze, Doug turned to me, his dark eyes locking with mine. Caught off guard, I floundered around for a topic of conversation. "So, tell me about work—" I thought about the last time I'd seen him. "Oh, the townhome project. How's that coming along?" The second the words left my mouth, I regretted it. Roughly half the town objected to Doug's plans to develop the strip of scenic wilderness along the Vermillion River, which wound through North Haven.

Doug flashed a wry, white smile. "Slowly. Nearly the entire parcel I'm looking at is part of the Carlton Castle Trust, and the association hasn't been too keen on the idea of townhomes going in so close to their historic site." Doug chuckled, as if cultural preservation were a quaint idea. "But I asked them, what good is a historic site, if there's no one around to appreciate it?"

I didn't say it, but plenty of people living in North Haven—including his own daughter, who stared at her father with her lips pursed—already appreciated the wooded grounds and the grand mansion that had been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Across the table, Audra's husband, Marco, picked up on our conversation. "I know a lot of people who would love a little townhome along the river."

Doug cleared his throat. "Well, the price point I'm looking at might be a little steep for most people in this area. The hope is to attract some fresh blood."

Audra narrowed her eyes at Doug and said dryly, "Ah, I get it. You're going to tap into all those millennials who want to work remotely and enjoy our untouched wilderness and Dollar Stores?"



Ethan huffed a laugh. “Didn’t you lose your vote when you moved away from North Haven?” Audra flushed and my stomach tightened.

Doug managed to keep the smile on his face. “Well, you may not share my vision, Audra, but I see something special here. Something . . .” He searched for the word. “Untapped. Just one or two new businesses could change the image of this place and draw people in. Not to mention, help out the people who live here already.” He glanced at Ethan, who returned his smile.

Audra smirked, but beside her, her best friend Polly, a sheriff’s deputy, nodded, probably welcoming the idea of something in town to keep people entertained and give kids something to do other than drugs.

Audra and Polly both drew in their breath like they were about to speak—and probably on opposite sides.

“Anyone want more coffee?” I interjected and reached for the carafe. “Coffee?”

Marco held out his mug. “I’ll take a little more. Talking of new businesses, has anyone tried the new diner on Route 13? I heard it’s good.”

The conversation turned to whether the diner served homemade or store-bought pies and my stomach unclenched. I mouthed my thanks to Marco, who gave me a conspiratorial wink.

As I circulated with the coffee, Beth excused herself from the table and Ethan moved his chair next to Marco, where the two began discussing what to do with Liam, a long-time employee who never seemed to make it to work on time or show up where he was supposed to be. Ethan leaned toward Marco and said in a low voice, “Called in sick again this morning. Probably has an infected hangnail.”

With Dad gone, Marco and Ethan were left in the nebulous position of deciding who was in charge of filling his shoes, which meant managing everything from the herd and crops to staffing. When I’d gotten the punch bowl down from the office closet earlier in the evening, I’d glimpsed a pile of paperwork from the family attorney. Curiosity had drawn me toward the cover letter that rested atop the thick stack of documents.

My breath caught as I'd read.

The attorney explained that Mom could, indeed, transfer the farm into Ethan's name while she still lived and leave the monetary equivalent to Audra and me in her will. I skimmed the explanation that this was a common approach for family farms where one child was interested in taking over the business but the siblings were not. I was glad I'd set the punch bowl down, or I would likely have dropped it. Marco may not be a sibling, but he was family and had worked at the farm since he was a teenager. I shuffled through the papers, relieved to see Mom hadn't yet signed anything.

All night, I'd watched Marco and Ethan for clues that either one of them knew about the arrangement, but they seemed as warm with each other as always. Still, my hands trembled as I set the carafe back on the table. I sank into my chair and looked around. While I studied everyone around the table, no one studied me. Even Franky had gone back to his frosting. Still, I knew I'd be hearing from a few of them after dinner. I may not be the one they look at, but I have always been the one they come to with their secrets.

At least, that's what I believed at the time.



After the guests drifted off into the snowy night, Audra, Mom, and I convened in the kitchen over a sink of dishes. Mom washed, I rinsed and dried, and Audra put everything away. Mom sponged at the thickened frosting on the cake knife and turned to me.

"Well, I guess Beth got what she was after at last, didn't she?" She stated this with the long-suffering air of someone who had seen this coming and sounded the alarms to no avail.

The hot water in the sink fogged up the kitchen window, creeping up from the bottom panes. Through the steam, Beth and Ethan's taillights still receded as blurred red dots down the long, icy driveway.

"Oh, Mom." I nodded at the taillights. "So soon with this?"

Audra rolled her eyes at me as I handed her a stack of clean dishes.

“I don’t *dislike* Beth. You know that.” Mom turned the power of her pewter-blue eyes on me to sell it. I knew she loathed Beth, but I also knew she didn’t want to be the kind of woman who disapproved of her future daughter-in-law.

That caveat out of the way, she began detailing all the ways she disliked Beth. “I just don’t understand what Ethan sees . . . I mean, yes, she’s pretty—she’s very pretty—but so are a lot of girls, and those girls have personalities and *careers*.” She shook her sponge to emphasize the last point. “I don’t think Beth even wants a career. First, she quit the bank because all the time on her feet hurt her back. Then, she had to stop working at Earl’s because sitting hurt her back.” Mom scoffed, apparently finding it ridiculous that someone could possibly experience back pain in more than one position. “I guess the only thing that doesn’t hurt her back is lying flat on it.”

Audra wrinkled her nose at the insinuation.

I groaned. “She *did* break her back, for God’s sake.” Mom liked to gloss over the horrific car accident that had put Beth in the hospital for months. *That was six years ago*, she’d said when I’d mentioned it recently, as if Beth could overcome her chronic injuries if she’d just try a little. “She’s still in more pain than she lets on.”

Mom waved my comment away. “Well, the worst thing is it’s impossible to carry on a conversation with her. It’s like there’s not even a person in there, and it’s only gotten worse. I feel like somehow I know her less the more I talk to her. You know what I mean, Audra.”

Audra deposited a stack of plates in a cupboard as she answered. “Well, I may not be her closest confidante, but I don’t need to be.” She turned and winked at me. “She’s got her maid of honor, Riley, for that.”

I rewarded Audra with my most insincere smile.

“Well, of course Riley will be her maid of honor!” Mom exclaimed. “She’s Beth’s only girlfriend. You notice she didn’t have a single friend here tonight.” I took the soapy steak knife that she waved in my direction. “You spend as much time with them as anyone, Riley. What does Ethan say to you?”

I blew out a breath. All our lives, people had asked Ethan and me what the other thought, as if we were one person, not seeming to notice that we'd moved in diametrically opposite directions over the past decade. Ethan had wanted to farm since he was old enough to toddle around in Dad's shadow with his green hat falling over his ears, while I had wanted to get as far away from home as in-state tuition and work would allow. But I considered how long it had been since Ethan had come home from a concert with a split lip and skinned-up knuckles and how being with Beth seemed to calm him in a way he needed.

I could feel my mom's impatience building like a geyser, almost hear the ticking of the pressure. Finally, I shrugged. "Ethan's happy when he's with her . . . and calmer. They take care of each other."

"Well how long will that last? And how long will she be happy living here?" She gestured out the window with her sponge, *here* being middle-of-nowhere Ohio and the sprawling thousand-acre farm.

"She likes it here." I looked out the kitchen window where only the tops of the bare, waving branches showed through the steam, black against the navy sky. Our area offered little beyond history and trees, especially this time of year, when everything iced over. "She loves the old houses . . . the woods. She's doing just as much as Ethan to restore their place and working with Mr. Perry to get the Castle in shape for their wedding. Then she wants to manage it as an event venue once it's up and running." The more I defended Beth, the more my head throbbed. But I saw her laying the foundation for a life here and trying to find a way to balance what she wanted with what Ethan needed.

Mom tried a different tack. "Well, how many 'breaks' have they taken over the years?" Suds splattered the backsplash as she made air quotes. "You don't get to take breaks once you're married."

"It's not like it was constant bliss with you and Dad," Audra shot in. "You wanted to kill each other half the time."

"Of course we wanted to kill each other. We were together for almost forty years. But we *didn't*, and that's a sign of a strong marriage." She glanced

at me to make sure I was soaking up her valuable life lessons. Her voice had been rising with each breath. “What happens once the house is fixed up? She has no ties here. She’ll want to sell it for the profits and move. Then what? Cleveland, Chicago, or back to Austin? Did you hear her dropping hints about how great Ethan would be in finance? She gave him cuff links for Christmas! What farmer wears cuff links?”

“A fancy one?” I ventured.

Audra snorted, but Mom slammed a plate onto the counter with a crack. Shards of white porcelain skidded across the dark granite. We all jumped, Mom included. Then she snapped.

“It isn’t a joke, Riley! You, Audra, and the kids are in Wicksburg. You’re traveling half the time, and Ethan has one foot out the door.” She didn’t mention Dad’s absence, but we felt it in the empty living room. She leaned over the sink, head down and her eyes clamped shut.

Audra had frozen with a handful of silverware in her hand, her mouth hanging open. I had seen Mom shed tears only a few times in my life; her drama was usually more combative than vulnerable. The whole last month that Dad had lain in the hospital, she’d only cried when the nurses removed the ventilator.

She didn’t cry now, but turned to me, her eyes still closed and a heavy slump to her shoulders.

My throat tightened, and I felt the familiar tangle of emotions flood my chest. Looking at my mom, I saw the woman who used to give us kids the silent treatment for days, letting us creep around, wondering what we’d done wrong and how to fix it. She was the woman who told me the summer I turned twelve and stopped eating that I was “starting to look better” but should still be careful to suck in my tummy when I wore my bathing suit. But she was also the woman who, on other days, got up at five to pack our lunches and slip sparkly stickers or little notes inside telling us that we meant the world to her.

I put my hand on her arm and whispered, “I’m sorry, Mom.” As was often the case, I wasn’t sure why I apologized; I only knew these were the

magic words to ease us through the moment. She turned and put her arms around me, her warm, wet hands soaking my sweater.

“No one else is going anywhere,” I murmured into her shoulder. Audra stayed quiet across the room.

Mom rested her chin on my shoulder, and her breath slowed near my ear. After a minute, Audra blew her nose and Mom straightened up without another word on the subject and squeezed my hand. She wiggled her shoulders, as if working the unpleasantness out of her system, and gave me an appraising look.

“All that travel is wearing you down, Riley. You look pale, even for you.” She brushed my cheek with the backs of her fingers.

With that, we went back to cleaning up. Audra palmed the jagged pieces of the plate with a paper towel and dropped them in the trash. In the quiet of the kitchen, we could hear joyful cries from Marco and Audra’s kids playing outside in the snow and the tinkling crash of icicles falling from the eaves.



“Wow, Riley.” Audra turned to look at me as soon as she slammed the car door. “Do you regret moving back yet?”

I’d caught a ride back to Wicksburg with Audra, Marco, and their kids after dinner. I glanced at Sophie next to me in the backseat to make sure she couldn’t hear me through her headphones. She drew shapes with her pinkie finger on the frosty window, showing no interest in what the adults had to say. Worn out from playing in the snow, Franky slumped in his car seat. I hoped he would sleep through his mother’s dissection of his grandma’s pathology.

“Do you remember how she gave me bus tickets for my graduation?” Audra continued. “It used to be that she couldn’t wait to get rid of us, and now she acts like she needs us all within half a mile of her forever. Did you know that when you’re working overseas, she looks up the leading cause of

death wherever you are? It's ischemic heart disease in Wales, by the way. I didn't need to know that, but I do now. You'd better not mention the possibility of moving to Bath or I'll have to hear about the crime rate there next."

"Well, I wouldn't go anywhere until after the wedding." I allowed myself to think about the prospect of relocating to England, the promotion, and then put the idea away, like a treat for later. "Mom just has a lot on her mind, managing the farm without Dad, and wants to keep us together." It had become a force of habit to explain what passed for Mom's logic to Audra.

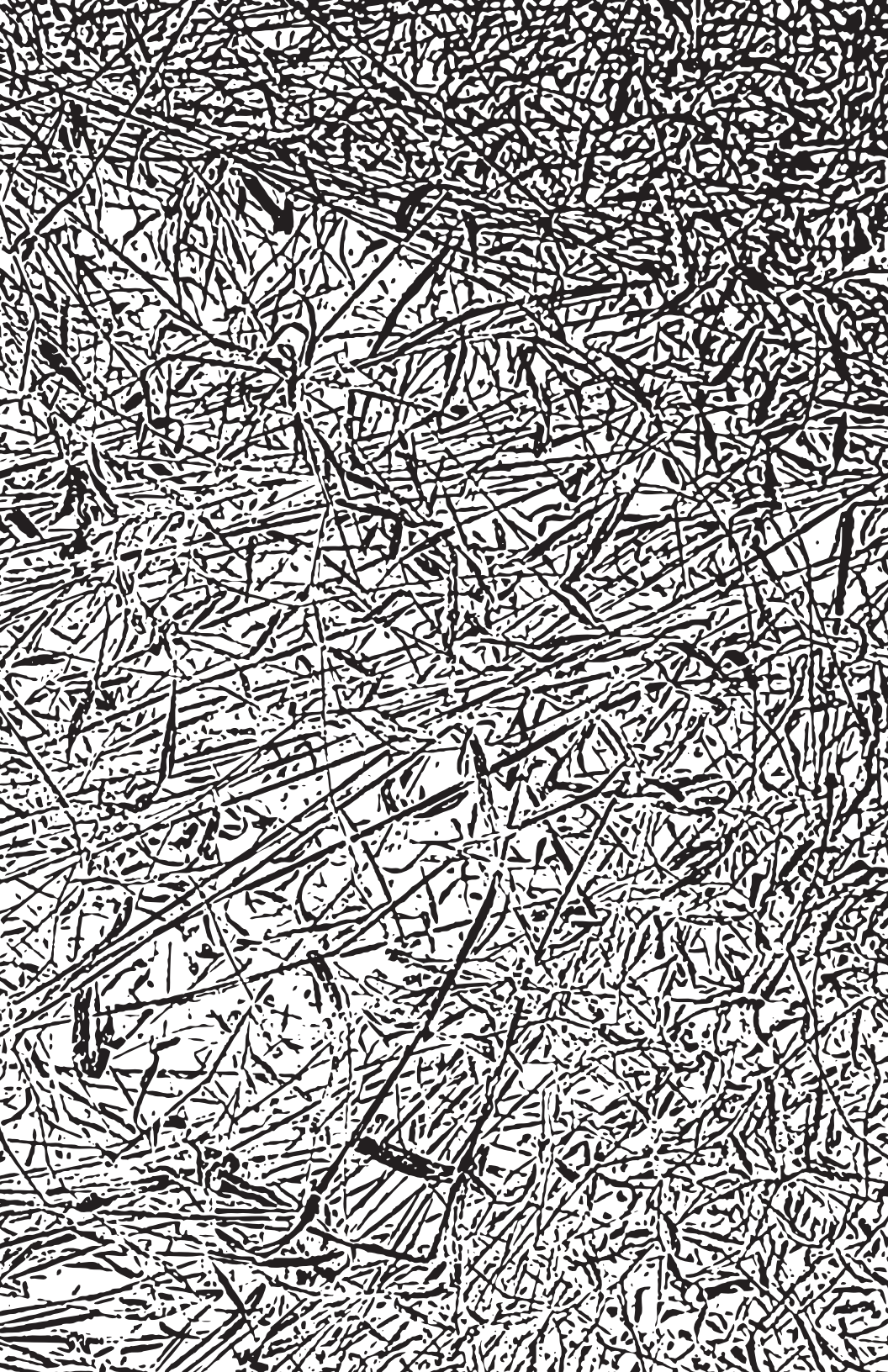
"She never used to care. I almost prefer the indifferent woman who raised us to this . . . whatever this is." Audra sighed. "I don't know how I turned out so normal."

At that, Marco laughed. Audra lightly punched his arm but then laughed too.

We all quieted, and I watched the familiar snow-covered fields and bare trees whip past outside my window, but Audra's question about whether I regretted moving home lingered. After college, I'd taken a job as a cybersecurity analyst at a financial services firm in Seattle. The first evening after work, I'd run the mossy, wooded trails of Ravenna Park and felt that I was exactly where I'd always wanted to be. I'd spent five years in Washington, but when Dad got sick, my priorities changed. Wicks offered me the position as the network team leader, and I'd given notice at my old job that same day.

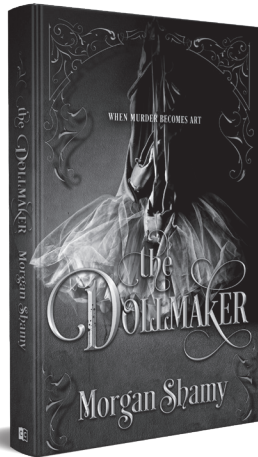
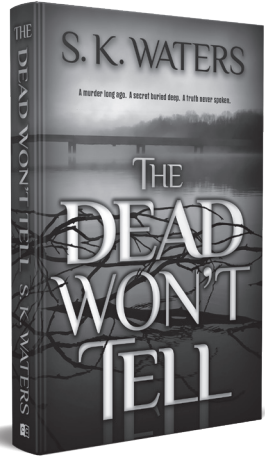
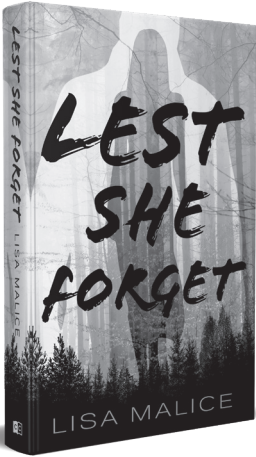
A mix of coziness and sadness settled over me as I realized I recognized every house we passed. I could picture what each place would look like and the people who lived there before we even reached it. Catching my own reflection in the dark window, I looked like Audra and Marco's overgrown child bundled into their backseat between their kids. For all my efforts to get away, I'd ended up right back where I'd always been, mending rifts between Audra and Mom and answering for Ethan.





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ISBN 978-0-7443-1016-0

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