

LIMINAL PARADOX
THE BLOOM OF SECRETS
DAMON ROBI

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The Bloom of Secrets – Liminal Paradox

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THE BLOOM OF SECRETS



Chapter 1

The Bloom of Secrets

Duskmire Avenue was a crooked street stitched into the withered heart of Moonville. Even with the Lavender Lady's curse lifted, shadows seemed to cling to the crooked houses, and the old oaks along the roadside whispered in the wind like conspirators. At the far end of the avenue stood Mr. Adam Daniels' home, a moss-draped, ivy-coated relic from another century. But what drew the eye was not the crumbling brick or the sagging porch—it was the garden.

A paradise in a town that knew little beauty. Roses of impossibly rich crimson, lilies the color of freshly bleached bones, and marigolds that seemed to glow in the twilight. Each flowerbed was a riot of colors, each bloom impossibly lush and full, and each year, without fail, Mr. Daniels took home the title of Best Garden at the Moonville Floral Competition. The rest of the neighborhood whispered and wondered, but none could match his perfection.

Beth Hargrove glared through her smudged window, her bony fingers wrapped tightly around a chipped teacup with an old floral design wrapped around. Her wrinkled lips pressed into a tight line as she watched Mr. Daniels snip at a line of irises, his thick, mottled hands surprisingly steady for a man his age. He wore his familiar straw hat, frayed at the edges, and his dark,

buttoned shirt that seemed a size too big, hanging off his thin frame like a funeral garb.

“That old son of a bitch,” she muttered, her voice a venomous hiss. “There’s no way he’s doing it fair. No way.”

Her eyes narrowed, focusing on Mr. Daniels’ garden, her gaze flitting from the marigolds to the climbing roses that draped over the wrought-iron fence. They grew with an unnatural vigor, the petals thick and lush, the colors richer than any Beth had ever managed in her tired, patchy garden, including the others that lived on Duskmire and throughout Moonville. She knew something was wrong when not one resident in this forsaken, trapped city could ever beat him.

“Grandma, you talkin’ to yourself again?” came a young voice from the hallway.

Beth turned, her gaze softening only slightly. “Knox, boy, come here.”

Knox Hargrove was newly twelve, sickly white, with all knobby knees and awkwardly lanky, and had wavy hair that stuck out in wild curls. He shuffled into the room, his face scrunched with curiosity. “What’s up?”

Beth leaned forward, a sly look crossing her wrinkled face as she fished a crisp twenty-dollar bill from her purse. “This is what’s up. You want it, boy?”

Knox’s eyes widened, his gaze locked on the money. “Yeah! What do I gotta do?”

Beth's lips curled into a thin smile. "That old bastard next door, Mr. Daniels. He's cheating. Always has been. And this year... this year, we're gonna find out how. You sneak over there, peek through his basement window, and you come tell me what you see. Simple as that."

Knox hesitated, the excitement in his eyes dampened by a twist of fear in his gut. "Grandma... that's trespassing."

"Oh, don't be such a lily-livered chicken," Beth snapped, waving the twenty enticingly with her bony fingers. "I'm not asking you to break in—just peek. That's all. And you get this."

Knox's hesitation melted, greed overtaking fear. "Okay. Okay, I'll do it."

Beth's smile widened, her fingers pressing the bill into his hand. "Good boy. Be quiet, be quick, and don't get caught."

Chapter 2

Whispers in the Dark

The evening mist settled over Duskmire Avenue like a heavy, gray curtain, thick and cold, twisting around the crooked rooftops and sagging fences. Knox's heart hammered against his ribs as he slipped out the back door, the twenty-dollar bill crumpled tightly in his pocket. His grandmother's sharp, whispered words twisted through his mind.

"Just peek. Just a quick look. See what the old bastard's hiding."

But now, standing in the mist, the cold air clawing at his face, he wasn't so sure. Mr. Daniels' house loomed before him, a shadowy, crooked figure wrapped in thick, twisting vines. The garden seemed to sway beneath the gray light, the dense, dark roses brushing against the iron fence like whispering mouths.

Knox swallowed, his breath sharp, his chest tight. He crept along the side of the house, his sneakers squelching against the wet, muddy grass. The basement window was just to the left side of the house, towards the back, a narrow, dirty pane half-hidden by thick, twisting ivy.

Knox knelt, his knees pressing into the damp soil, his fingers trembling as they brushed against the cold glass. He hesitated, the fear twisting in his gut, his heart pounding in his ears.

But then he leaned closer.

At first, he saw nothing. Just darkness. Just the pale, faint light twisting through the dusty window.

But then his eyes adjusted.

A pale, limp hand hung from a steel table, the fingers twisted, the skin gray and bloated. Knox's breath caught. His heart slammed against his chest even more. He leaned closer, his wide eyes fixed on the shadowy basement. And then he saw the tools lined against the wall—blades, saws, thick, rusted shears, their metal edges dark with stains. Thick, twisted ropes hung from the beams, their frayed edges swinging faintly in the dim light.

A figure moved. Tall, thin, his straw hat tilted low, his pale fingers brushing against the edge of the steel table. Mr. Daniels. Knox's knees trembled. His breath came in sharp, broken gasps. He should have run. Should have turned back. But he couldn't move. Couldn't look away. Mr. Daniels leaned over the table, his thin, pale fingers moving with a slow, rhythmic care. The pale, limp hand twitched. A soft, sickly sound twisted through the air—wet, thick, like the sound of roots torn from damp earth.

Knox's stomach twisted. His throat felt dry. His head spun. He lost his balance, and his hands slid on mud-stained glass. Mr. Daniels turned. His dark eyes drifted toward the window, his thin smile calm, his face shadowed beneath the brim of his hat. Those dark, empty eyes seemed to lock with Knox's.

Run.

The word twisted through Knox's mind like a scream, and his body finally obeyed. He stumbled back, his foot slipping on the wet grass, his hands clawing at the muddy ground. His heart pounded in his chest, and his breath came in sharp, desperate gasps.

But then he heard it.

The sound of the basement doors swinging open was a sharp, low creak.

"Who's there?" Mr. Daniels' voice was smooth, calm, but sharp. "Come out, now."

Knox didn't wait. He turned, his legs scrambling through the wet grass, his breath twisting in sharp, panicked gasps. The garden seemed to close around him, thick, dark flowers clawing at his sleeves, the twisting vines catching at his feet. The iron gate groaned as he shoved it open, the cold, misty air twisting against his flushed face. He didn't stop. Didn't look back. He ran, the cold mud splattering against his legs, his breath burning in his throat. He burst through the front door of his house, slamming it shut, his back pressed against the cold, damp wood. His chest heaved, his legs shook.

"Grandma!" he gasped, his voice cracking. "Grandma!"

Beth appeared from the kitchen, her wild eyes sharp and curious. "Well? What'd you see, boy? What did you see?"

“I... I saw... there was... a dead person...” Knox’s voice was a thin, broken thread. “He... he was cutting it... I saw his tools...”

“Don’t be a fool, boy! A dead body?” She rolls her eyes. “Waste of a \$20 bill if I’d say so!”

“No! I swear! I saw the hand, and there were knives with blood on them! I know what I saw!” Knox was frantic for her to believe her, “I swear, I saw a dead person!”

“You’re certain?” Beth glares down at him.

“I promise!”

Beth’s face twisted, a sharp, vicious smile spreading across her thin lips. “I knew it. I knew that son of a bitch was up to something. This fucked up, murderous town!” She pauses, thinking for a second, but her greed outweighs morality. “Thinks he’s better than me? Thinks his flowers are so perfect. I knew he was cheating! What the hell is he up to?”

“Grandma... I think he saw me...” Knox whispered, his knees trembling.

Beth’s face drained of color. “He what?”

A sharp, loud knock echoed against the door. They both jumped, and whatever color is left in their bodies drained from their soul.

Beth’s wild eyes snapped to the door, her thin fingers clawing at her apron. “No... no, not now...”

“Grandma...” Knox whispered, his chest tight, his breath sharp.

“Go to your room!” Beth hissed, shoving him toward the hallway. “Go, now!”

Knox didn’t argue. He ran, slamming his bedroom door, his breath coming in sharp, broken gasps. He pressed his ear against the door, his chest tight, his hands trembling.

The front door creaked open.

“Good evening, Mrs. Hargrove.” Mr. Daniels’ voice was calm and smooth. “I’m terribly sorry for the intrusion.”

“What... what do you want?” Beth’s voice was sharp and annoyed.

“I believe your grandson may have... wandered a bit too close to my garden. I thought I saw him outside my basement window.”

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Beth snapped. “My boy wouldn’t be sneaking around. Not him.”

“Oh, of course,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice soft. “It’s just... I’d hate for anyone to get the wrong idea. You know how rumors can spread. Such a shame.” He looks past Beth and up the stairs, where Knox listens behind his door.

“Rumors? What are you saying?” Beth’s voice was sharp, desperate.

“Nothing at all,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his thin smile almost visible in his voice as he looked back at the old woman. “Just a friendly neighborly visit. Please... do have a good night.”

“Mmmhmm.” Beth slams the door in his face. “Fucking creepy old asshole!” She whispers out loud.

Silence twisted through the house, thick and cold. Knox’s chest tightened. His fingers twisted against the door. He heard his grandmother’s frantic whispers, sharp, desperate.

“No... no, that bastard... he’s trying to scare me... trying to make me back down so I don’t give him a run for his money... but I won’t... I won’t...” She clenches her fist and stomps on the ground like a child.

Knox’s breath came sharp, his chest tight. His heart raced as he pressed his forehead against the cold, damp wood door to relax. He didn’t sleep that night. He couldn’t stop thinking about whether his grandmother even believed him; she was too concerned about the contest, and then he knew. Knew those dark, empty eyes had seen him. And Mr. Daniels was not a man to forget.

Chapter 3

Roots of Fear

The next morning was a cold, gray smear against the crooked rooftops of Duskmire Avenue. The mist hung heavy in the air, thick and damp, twisting around the sagging houses like ghostly fingers. Knox barely slept, his dreams a mess of dark shadows, twisting vines, and cold, dead eyes watching from the darkness.

He stumbled into the kitchen, his head pounding, his stomach twisting with a dull, nauseating ache. His grandmother stood by the window, her wild, tangled hair sticking out in thick, gray strands, her sharp eyes fixed on the garden next door.

“Eat your breakfast,” Beth snapped, shoving a plate of greasy eggs and burnt toast before him. “You look like death warmed over. Can’t have you passing out in the damn streets on the way to school.”

“I’m not hungry...” Knox whispered, his voice weak, his eyes fixed on the swirling steam rising from his plate of food.

“I don’t give a damn if you’re hungry,” Beth hissed, her bony fingers clenching the edge of the table. “You’re gonna eat. And you’re gonna keep your mouth shut about last night. Understand?”

Knox's chest tightened, his fingers twisting against the edge of his plate. "But Grandma... he knows... he saw me. I know he saw me..."

Beth's lips curled into a bitter smile. "Good. Let him know we're watching too. That smug bastard thinks he's got some secret. Thinks he's too good to lose. But he's not. Not this year."

"But... what if he... what if he comes back?" Knox whispered, his voice barely a breath.

Beth's sharp gaze snapped at him. "Then he comes back. And I'll be ready. I'm not scared of that old snake. I won't let him scare me off. Not when I'm this close."

Knox forced himself to take a bite, the greasy eggs twisting against his tongue, the burnt toast crumbling between his teeth. His stomach knotted, the bitter, dry taste clinging to his mouth. "But, what about what I saw?"

"Well, you saw wrong!" Beth's eyes never left the window. "He thinks he can get away with it. Thinks nobody's watching. But I'm watching. And when I win this year, he can shove his perfect garden right up his—"

A sharp knock on the door cut her off. Knox's heart jumped, his chest tightening.

"Grandma..." he whispered.

Beth's wild eyes flicked to the door, her thin fingers twisting against her apron. "Don't you move. Just finish your breakfast."

She marched to the door, her thin frame tense, her fingers twisting against the rusted doorknob. She cracked it open, her voice sharp, forced.

“Oh... morning, Sheriff Garlow. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Sheriff Frank Garlow’s voice was a low, gravelly growl.

“Mornin’, Beth. Got a minute?”

Beth’s gaze flicked back toward the kitchen, her voice tight.

“Sure... what’s this about?”

“Got a couple of calls. Neighbor complaints. Folks sayin’ they’ve seen you and the boy... acting a bit strange. Screamin’ about... Mr. Daniels and your boy sneaking around his property.”

Beth’s face twisted, her sharp eyes burning. “Is that so? Nosy bastards.”

“Beth...” Frank’s voice was a low warning. “Look, I get it. Competitions fierce. You wanna win. But this... this obsession? It’s starting to look obsessive, and you know how this town is.”

“Obsessive?” Beth’s voice cracked, her thin lips twisting. “I’m not the one dragging bodies around. I’m not the one who’s got a basement full of—”

“Full of what?” Frank’s voice sharpened.

Beth’s lips tightened, her fingers twisting against the door. “I saw it. Knox saw it. That bastard’s hiding something. He’s cheating. He always cheats.”

“Beth,” Frank’s voice softened, almost sympathetic. “I’m telling you—let it go. Let me handle it. And it’s just a competition.”

“Oh, you’ll handle it?” Beth snapped. “Like you handle everything else in this rotten town?”

“I’ll look into it,” Frank growled. “But you gotta stay calm. And keep the boy out of it.”

Beth’s wild eyes narrowed. “Fine. Fine, Sheriff. You do your job. But if you think I’m gonna let that smug prick walk away with another win—”

“That’s enough, Beth.” Frank’s voice was sharp now. “I’ll be back. And if I hear you or the boy sneaking around his place again...”

“Yeah, yeah...” Beth muttered, slamming the door.

Knox stared at his plate, his chest tight, his breath sharp. His grandmother’s wild eyes flicked back to the window, her fingers twitching.

“He thinks he can scare me... thinks I’m stupid... but I know. He was probably the one who called the cops, that grumpy old piece of shit!” She continues to stare out her kitchen window as Knox takes the opportunity to get up from what’s left of his greasy eggs and burnt toast, grabs his backpack, and heads for the front door.

School was a blur of whispers and sharp, mocking laughter. Knox's head throbbed, his stomach twisted, and his legs felt weak. He tried to ignore the cold knot of fear in his chest, tried to disappear into the crowded halls. But the other kids didn't make it easy.

"Hey, look! It's the freak!" Brady's voice rang out, sharp and cruel. Thick, greasy-haired Brady, his stupid, twisted grin always lurking behind Knox. His pack of idiot friends followed, snickering and whispering.

"Where you going, Knox?" Brady sneered, shoving Knox against the lockers. "Gonna cry? Gonna run home to your crazy grandma?"

"Leave me alone..." Knox whispered, his voice thin, his chest tight.

"Or what?" Brady laughed, his thick fingers gripping Knox's shirt. "Gonna sic your creepy neighbor on me?" he shoves Knox against the lockers. No wonder your mom went crazy and ended up in an insane asylum! You're a fucking freak just like her!"

"Don't..." Knox whispered, his voice cracking.

"Don't?" Brady sneered, his fist slamming into Knox's shoulder, knocking him against the cold, metal lockers again.

"You're not gonna do a damn thing, freak."

Knox's breath came sharp, his chest tight, his hands shaking. He didn't fight back. Didn't argue. He just grabbed his backpack and stumbled away, his vision blurring.

But the fear didn't fade. It twisted in his chest, sharp and cold, his mind turning with the memory—the pale, limp hand, the rusted tools, the dark eyes watching him, but the thought of Brady lying on that table—his lifeless, pale, bloated body on that stainless steel table in Mr. Daniels' basement gave him peace.

When Knox got home, Beth was still at the window, her wild eyes fixed on the garden. Her fingers clawed at the curtain, her voice a low, frantic whisper.

"I see you, you bastard... I see what you're doing... You won't get away with it... You won't win this time..."

"Grandma..." Knox whispered, his voice weak. "He's not... he's not doing anything right now..."

Beth's sharp gaze snapped at him. "You don't know a damn thing. You're just a boy. Just a scared little boy."

Knox's chest tightened. He wanted to argue, wanted to scream. But his head throbbed, his stomach twisted, and he felt... tired.

"Go to your room," Beth snapped, her gaze snapping back to the window. "I need to think."

Knox didn't argue. He slipped into his room, shutting the door behind him. His bed felt cold, the rain whispered against

the window, a steady, gray drizzle twisting through the mist. He buried his face in his pillow, his breath sharp, his chest tight, and another night without dinner. But being hungry still couldn't shake the feeling of those dark eyes watching. Couldn't forget the thin, calm smile. Couldn't forget the thick, dark flowers swaying beneath the gray light. And somewhere, beyond the mist, Mr. Daniels was waiting.

Chapter 4

The Sheriff's Shadow

Sheriff Frank Garlow wasn't a man who scared easily. He'd been the law in Moonville for nearly twenty years, a town where darkness seemed to cling to the crooked streets, where shadows stretched just a little too long. He'd seen the worst of people—the fights, the screams, the blood, and knew Moonville before it was stuck in this liminal paradox. But something about Duskmire Avenue gnawed at him, twisted in his gut like a cold, sharp blade. And that something, right now, was Mr. Daniels. Frank's gaze flicked to the passenger seat, and his heart skipped a beat. From the corner of his eye, it glistened in the darkness of his patrol car, a cassette tape on the passenger seat mocking him, taunting him, its black plastic casing scarred, the words *Play Me* smeared across it in thick, dark ink. He hadn't noticed it when he got in the car. But there it was. Sitting. Listening. Waiting.

“Damn it...” Frank muttered, snatching it up. He rolled down the window, the cold air clawing at his face, and without even thinking, he hurled the tape into the darkness. It vanished into the mist, swallowed by the swirling fog.

Frank's patrol car rumbled down the narrow, mist-choked street, its pale headlights cutting a thin path through the swirling fog. The radio was off, and the engine was a low, steady growl

beneath him. His thick fingers gripped the steering wheel, his jaw clenched. The rain whispered against the windshield, a constant, cold drizzle twisting through the mist. The houses were dark, twisted shadows rising from the damp earth. The thick mist clung to the crooked rooftops and drifted through the sagging trees. But Frank's eyes were fixed on one house—the vine-choked, moss-draped home of Adam Daniels.

The garden loomed in the darkness, a tangled riot of thick, twisting flowers—roses as dark as dried blood, lilies pale as bone, thick marigolds that seemed to burn in the faint, gray light. They swayed in the mist, dense, dark petals brushing against the iron fence. Frank's jaw tightened. His pulse thudded in his ears. He knew he should be home, feet kicked up, sipping a cheap beer. He knew he should let it go, so he listened to the part of his brain that said Beth Hargrove was just a crazy old woman and this was another Moonville ghost story. But he couldn't. Couldn't shake the intrusive thought— *Knox sneaking around, probably to snoop for his narcissistic grandmother. His terrified eyes seeing something. Something that frightened him enough not to run to the door, or enough to be afraid of his grandmother if he had run, to tell me what he had seen.*

Frank stepped out of the patrol car, his boots crunching against the wet gravel, his breath twisting in sharp, cold puffs against the misty air. His hand brushed against his revolver's cold, heavy grip, but he didn't draw it. Not yet. The street was

silent. No lights shone from the crooked houses. No voices whispered from the fog—just the cold, damp darkness and the twisting, swaying flowers. Frank’s sharp eyes swept across the garden, the thick, dark blooms shifting beneath the mist. The iron gate loomed before him, a twisted, rusted shadow, the vines curling around the bars.

And then he saw it.

A pale, faint light was twisting through the narrow basement window beneath the back porch. Frank’s chest tightened. His breath came faster. His thick fingers brushed against the cold, wet iron of the gate. He leaned forward, his boots sinking into the damp mud. The basement window was half-covered with thick, twisting ivy, the dirty glass streaked with rain and mud stains. Frank’s jaw tightened. He leaned closer, his thick fingers brushing the vines aside. At first, he saw nothing except a small handprint and a smudge on the outside of the glass. “Knox was here”, he whispers through the darkness. But there was nothing else—just darkness. Just the pale, faint glow twisting through the dirty window.

But then his eyes adjusted. A pale, limp hand hung from the edge of a steel table, the skin gray and bloated, the fingers twisted, lifeless. Rusted tools lined the wall—saws, blades, thick shears, dark with stains.

And then he saw him.

Mr. Daniels came out from the shadows of the basement and stood over the table, his thin, pale fingers moving with a slow, careful rhythm. His face was hidden beneath the shadow of his straw hat, but his movements were calm and precise as he stared at the body underneath the tarp. He then, without looking, pulls the chain on the lights above the table, which illuminates the room.

Frank's heart pounded. His jaw tightened. His body instinctively moved away from the window, his back against the side of the house. His thick fingers clenched around the cold steel of his holstered gun as he peeks slightly beyond the wall and into the basement window.

Mr. Daniels' pale fingers brushed against the limp hand, twisting the wrist, his head tilting slightly as though inspecting it. His other hand reached for a rusted saw, his thin fingers twisting around the stained handle.

Frank's breath was trapped in his lungs. His chest tightened. He should have run. Should have left. Should have called for backup, but what good would that have done? Only he and his partner are left. So, he didn't move. He waited and watched despite his thoughts. And then, a sharp, mechanical ring shattered the silence. The sound of an old rotary phone—loud, shrill, echoing through the damp air.

Mr. Daniels straightened, his thin, pale fingers stilling. He paused, his head tilting slightly, listening. The phone rang again.

With a calm, measured grace, Mr. Daniels wiped his hands on a stained cloth, laid the rusty saw aside, and stepped toward the narrow wooden stairs at the far end of the basement. His thin, shadowed figure disappeared up the steps, the door swinging shut behind him.

Frank didn't wait. His thick fingers clawed at the basement window, the dirty glass twisting beneath his grip. He needed to see. Needed proof. Needed to know what the hell was going on. But the window wouldn't budge. Frank's jaw tightened. He slipped around the back of the house, his thick boots squelching against the wet mud. The basement doors loomed before him, the dense, rusted padlock hanging from the latch. He didn't have time for patience. He grabbed his heavy flashlight from his belt, the thick, metal shaft glinting in the pale light. His thick fingers gripped it tightly. He swung it down, the metal slamming against the padlock with a sharp, metallic crack.

Nothing.

Frank's jaw tightened. He swung repeatedly, the metal twisting, the rusted lock groaning. And then it snapped, the twisted metal clattering against the wet, muddy ground. Frank's breath came sharp, his chest tight. He gripped the cold, rusted handle, his thick fingers twisting against the damp metal. The door groaned, swinging outward, a pale, sickly light bending through the darkness, beaming at the Sheriff like an alien gravitational ray pulling him to go forward.

He stepped inside.

The air was thick, damp, the sweet, sickly scent of flowers twisting against his throat. Pale light flickered against the cold, wet stone walls. Shelves lined with jars, thick, twisted roots clawing at the glass inside them, and then some with pale, bloated bulbs twisting in murky liquid. He slowly crept forward as he shined his light towards the far corner of the basement, where another set of shelves was lined against the wall. His light reflected dozens of flowers growing out of human skulls. Their twisted blooms feeding on the brains of whomever they belonged to, their roots and stems penetrating through the eye sockets, the mouth, and cracks in the top of the skulls, flesh still hanging from most of their white bony identities. Frank's heart began to pound in his ears, sweat starting to bead on his forehead.

“Oh my God...” Frank whispered, his voice a hoarse rasp.
“Jesus Christ...”

And there, at the center, stood the table.

The body lay still, pale, bloated, the thick, dark stains pooling beneath it. The face was turned away, the twisted fingers dangling over the edge. Frank's breath came faster, his chest heaving.

Rusty chains hung from the walls, thick, dark stains twisted against the rusted links. Tools lined the shelves—saws, knives,

rusted shears. Dark, dried, and flaking stains twisted within the serrated edges.

Frank's stomach twisted. His breath came sharp, his chest tight. This wasn't just a rumor. It wasn't just a crazy old woman's paranoia about cheating in a garden competition and a little boy scared out of his mind. This horror was absolute, and another to be added to the many horrors Moonville had to offer.

The sharp creak of a floorboard echoed from above.

Frank's heart skipped. His thick fingers twisted around his revolver, turning it up towards the sound, his breath sharp, his chest heaving.

Another sharp creak twisted through the darkness.

Frank spun, his flashlight's beam slicing through the basement, landing on the narrow wooden stairs leading up to the door. The door swung open, pale, yellow light twisting down the steps.

And then he heard it—the slow, steady creak of footsteps.

Frank's thick fingers adjusted and twisted around the grip of his revolver. His chest heaved, his breath coming in sharp, desperate gasps.

"Mr. Daniels!" he shouted, his voice cracking. "Stop right there! Don't you move!"

The footsteps paused.

And then, calmly, the figure stepped into the light.

Mr. Daniels stood at the top of the stairs, his pale face calm, his thin smile soft. His straw hat cast a shadow over his dark, empty eyes.

“Sheriff Garlow,” he whispered, his voice smooth, calm. “I didn’t expect you tonight. Though I suppose I should have. Curiosity seems to follow you like a shadow.”

“Don’t move!” Frank’s voice was sharp, desperate. His thick fingers tightened around the cold, heavy grip of his revolver.

“You sick bastard... I knew it. I knew you were hiding something!”

“Hiding?” Mr. Daniels whispered, his thin smile widening. “No, Sheriff. I’m not hiding anything. I’m simply... cultivating.”

Frank’s chest tightened. “Shut up! Step down here, slow. Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Mr. Daniels began descending the steps, one slow, deliberate step at a time. His pale fingers rested lightly on the banister; his dark eyes fixed on Frank.

And then, from the shadows behind Frank, something moved. A faint rustle, a subtle shift. Frank’s breath caught. He spun, his flashlight beam slicing through the darkness—too late.

A rusted iron rake slammed into his back, the sharpened prongs tearing through his ribs. Pain exploded through him, his breath twisting into a wet, choking gasp. His revolver clattered to the floor, the flashlight’s beam twisting wildly. The rake ripped from his side and slammed into his spine, tearing and ripping his

flesh from his body as another blow to his back rips through his body. He turns with what little sense he has left to face his killer. Then another stabbing and clawing blow to his chest as 14 tines puncture his body. Darkness twisted around him as his knees buckled, and he slammed to the concrete floor. His thick fingers clawed at the cold, rusted handle, blood pouring from each of the holes in his chest, soaking his shirt.

“Thank you,” Mr. Daniels whispered, calm, almost amused. “Quick work, as always.”

But the shadow in the darkness didn’t speak, it just moved effortlessly, heaving over its kill, proud and victorious as a hint of dark blue and blood splattered nursing scrubs peaks from beneath its coat.

Frank’s vision twisted. His breath came sharp, desperate, wet. But he couldn’t fight. Couldn’t speak.

“Some folks just don’t know when to say out of other business.” All the Sheriff can see are Mr. Daniel’s brown loafers stepping towards him as his blood pools and swallows the bottoms of Mr. Daniel’s cheap shoes.

His eyes go red, his body paralyzed, and cold as his mind falls asleep, and darkness swallows him.

The next morning, the thick and pale mist twisted around Duskmire Avenue. The roses swayed in the cold, damp breeze, their dense, crimson petals burning against the gray light. The

lilies twisted beneath the dew, their pale petals glistening. And beneath the largest rose bush, the soil was freshly turned. Mr. Daniels stepped from his porch, his straw hat tilted low, as he made his way to the roses, his pale fingers brushing against the thick, dark blooms. His dark eyes were calm, his thin smile soft. His brown loafer pats the loose turned soil, and with every tap he packs it down on top of whatever or whomever was just freshly planted there. He glanced toward the quiet, crooked street. The thick and pale mist curled around the iron fence, swallowing the distant houses. And somewhere, in the shadowed basement, the rusted rake stood, its prongs dark and slick with dried crimson.

Chapter 5

Echoes of Silence

Morning came slowly and gray, the thick mist clinging to Duskmire Avenue like a damp shroud. Knox's head throbbed, his stomach twisted, his legs felt weak as he stumbled through the kitchen, his breath sharp, his chest tight. His grandmother's sharp, frantic whispers twisted through the walls.

"Look at him... smug bastard... thinks he's won... thinks I'll just give up..."

Beth Hargrove stood at the window, her wild, tangled hair spilling down her bony shoulders, her sharp eyes fixed on the garden next door. The thick, dark roses swayed beneath the pale mist, their crimson petals brushing against the iron fence.

"Grandma... please..." Knox whispered, his voice thin, his fingers gripping the table's edge. "I don't feel good..."

"Eat your breakfast," Beth snapped, her voice sharp, her thin fingers twisting at the curtains. "You're always whining. Always complaining. Eat, or you'll get sicker."

Knox stared at the plate—cold, greasy eggs and dry, burnt toast. His stomach twisted. The smell clawed at his throat.

"I... I can't..." he whispered, pushing the plate away.

Beth's wild eyes snapped to him, her thin lips twisting. "Fine. Starve, for all I care. But I'm telling you, boy, you need to toughen up. I won't have a weak little coward for a grandson."

Knox's chest tightened. He stared at the table, his hands trembling. He didn't dare speak. Didn't dare argue. He was too tired. Too sick.

Beth's sharp, whispered muttering twisted back toward the window. "He's out there. Always out there. Always watching. Thinks he's clever... thinks he's safe..."

Knox's gaze drifted toward the window, his heart skipping. Mr. Daniels stood in his garden, his straw hat tilted low, his pale fingers brushing against the thick, dark blooms. His dark eyes seemed to wander, calm and empty, but his movements were slow and deliberate.

Knox's breath came faster. He turned away, his hands gripping his backpack, his legs unsteady. "I... I'm going to school..."

"Go on, then," Beth snapped, her gaze never leaving the garden. "Don't think you're escaping me. I know what's going on...Cheater!"

Knox didn't argue. Didn't speak. He slipped out the door, his legs weak, his chest tight. The cold, misty air twisted against his face, the wet gravel crunching beneath his shoes.

School was a fog of sharp whispers and cruel laughter. Knox's head throbbed, his stomach twisted, his chest tightened. He tried to disappear and shrink into the crowded hallways, but the other kids didn't make it easy.

"Hey, freak!" Brady's voice twisted through the hall, sharp and mocking. His thick, greasy hair hung in clumps over his sneering face, his heavy boots stomping against the tiled floor. "Where you runnin', huh? You gonna cry again?"

"Just leave me alone..." Knox whispered, his voice thin, his chest tight.

"Or what?" Brady sneered, his thick fingers shoving Knox against the lockers. "Gonna get your crazy grandma to hex me? Or maybe your creepy neighbor? What's his name? Mr. Daniels?"

Knox's heart skipped. "Stop..."

"Or maybe I should just talk to him myself," Brady grinned, his voice a low, cruel whisper. "Bet he'd love to meet me. Bet he'd love to show me all those stupid flowers of his..."

"Leave him alone, Brady."

Knox's heart jumped. Toby stood a few feet away, his thick glasses slipping down his nose, his backpack hanging awkwardly from his shoulder. "You're being a jerk."

“Oh, Rope Boy’s got a friend,” Brady laughed, his pack of idiot friends snickering behind him. “Pathetic. Two losers. Probably little faggots for each other.”

Toby didn’t back down. “Better to be scared than stupid.”

Brady’s grin twisted. “You got a mouth on you, four-eyes. Maybe I’ll shut it for you.”

But the bell rang, the crowded hallway shifting, the other kids scattering. Brady scowled, his thick fingers shoving Knox one last time. “Whatever. You two fags aren’t worth it.”

He stomped off, his pack of idiots trailing behind him, their sharp laughter twisting through the halls.

“You, okay?” Toby whispered, his voice tight.

“Yeah... thanks...” Knox muttered, his voice weak.

“Your grandma still... You know... staring at his house all day?” Toby asked.

Knox’s chest tightened. “Yeah...”

“She’s... she’s kinda losing it, man.”

“I know.”

Toby’s face softened. “Look, just... try to stay away from all that. It’s not good for you.”

Knox didn’t answer. He just walked, his chest tight, his head throbbing. But Toby’s words twisted in his mind.

It’s not good for you.

He knew, but it’s harder than anyone knew when facing it in person.

“Want me to walk home with you?” Toby was concerned.

“No...No, it’s okay. I’ll be okay.”

“Okay, well, if you change your mind, let me know, and...and maybe...we can like hang out or something.

“Yeah, I’d like that. I’ll let you know, okay.”

The mist was thicker when Knox walked home, the cold drizzle stinging against his face, the wet gravel slick beneath his feet. His chest felt tight, his head throbbed, and his legs felt unsteady.

But then he saw it.

The patrol car. Sheriff Garlow’s old, rusty police cruiser was parked crooked at the end of the street, its engine silent, the headlights dark. The door hung open slightly, the driver’s seat empty.

Knox’s heart skipped. His breath came faster. “Sheriff?” he whispered, his voice a thin, desperate whisper.

No answer.

Knox’s chest tightened. He stumbled forward, his wet shoes squelching against the mud. He peered through the mist, his wide eyes locked on the empty car.

“Sheriff Garlow?”

Nothing. Just the cold, damp mist twisting around the empty street. Just the dark, silent car, its door hanging open. Knox’s

breath came sharp, his chest heaving. He turned, his gaze twisting toward the garden.

And then he saw him.

Mr. Daniels stood at the edge of his garden, his pale fingers brushing against the thick, dark roses. His dark eyes were calm, his thin smile soft. He raised a pale, gloved hand, waving slowly.

Knox's breath caught in his throat. His legs shook. He turned, running, his feet slapping against the wet gravel, his breath sharp, desperate. He didn't stop until he burst through the front door, his chest heaving, his face pale.

"Grandma!" he gasped, his voice cracking. "The Sheriff's... his car is... but he's gone..."

Beth didn't turn from the window. "Good. Useless bastard never did a damn thing anyway. Probably just drunk somewhere, sleeping it off."

Knox's chest tightened. "But... but what if... what if he..."

"Shut up, Knox!" Beth snapped, her wild eyes never leaving the garden. "Don't you get it? This is it. He's making his move. He's trying to scare us. Tryin' to make me give up. But I won't. I won't!"

Knox's breath twisted in his throat. His legs felt weak. He stumbled back, his chest tight, his hands shaking.

But all he could see was that dark, silent car... and Mr. Daniels' calm, empty smile.

Chapter 6

The Whispered Warnings

Duskmire Avenue was quiet. Too quiet. The thick and pale mist twisted through the crooked street, clinging to the sagging rooftops and withered trees. The houses stood like dark, twisted shadows, their cracked windows staring blankly into the fog.

Knox felt immediately that something was wrong. His head throbbed, his chest was tight, and his legs were weak as he trudged home from school. Brady had been his usual cruel self, shoving him into lockers, calling him a freak. The other kids whispered and laughed, but none seemed real, especially with what was going on at home. Knox sluggishly made his way home from school. The half-mile journey was torture in his head, piecing the puzzle pieces together, when he noticed another piece was missing. The Sheriff's car was missing. It was gone. Scared, he picked up his pace and, like turning off a light in a dark room, he hurried inside his house for safety, watching his back only to be greeted by his grandmother's obsession; it had grown like the thick, dark roses twisting along the iron fence of Mr. Daniels' Garden. Each morning, she stood at the window, her wild, tangled hair spilling down her shoulders, her sharp eyes fixed on the garden next door. Her fingers clawed at the curtain; her lips twisted in a bitter sneer.

“Look at him... smug bastard... always smiling... always winning...” she hissed, her voice a sharp, venomous whisper. “Thinks he’s got everyone fooled... but not me... not this time...”

Knox watched her, his chest tight, his stomach twisting. She hadn’t spoken about the Sheriff since their argument two days ago, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. Sheriff Garlow was always around—grumbling, stomping, that old patrol car rumbling down the street.

But now... nothing.

The patrol car was gone, and he hadn’t been by in days. No gruff, gravelly voice muttering about loitering kids or barking dogs. No heavy boots crunching against the wet gravel. Just silence.

“Grandma... the Sheriff’s car is gone! What if something happened to him?” Knox whispered, his voice thin.

Beth’s wild eyes snapped at him. “Nothing happened to him. He ran. That’s what cowards do. Saw something he didn’t like, and now he’s hiding. Useless bastard.”

“But... what if Mr. Daniels...”

“Of course it’s Mr. Daniels!” Beth snapped, her voice sharp and bitter. “You think I don’t know? You think I don’t see what he’s doing? He’s trying to scare us, trying to make me give up. But I won’t. I won’t let that smug son of a bitch win again.”

Knox's chest tightened. "But... what if he did something to the Sheriff?"

Beth's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "Good. The Sheriff was useless. Didn't help me. Didn't stop that cheating bastard. If he's gone, it's no loss."

Knox's breath twisted, his hands shaking. His head throbbed, his vision blurring. He didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to picture that cold, calm smile. Those thick, swaying flowers. Those dark, empty eyes. But he couldn't shake it. Couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching. That something was wrong. He hated everything right now, and his grandma was making it worse. He was lost.

Chapter 7

Echoes of the Missing

The morning mist clung to Duskmire Avenue, thick and pale, curling around the crooked houses like ghostly fingers. The sun was a dull, watery gray behind the clouds, but it was still slowly creating Spring. Beth Hargrove stood at her window, her wild, tangled hair spilling down her bony shoulders, like always, her sharp eyes fixed on the garden next door. Her thin fingers twisted against the curtain; her lips pressed into a thin line.

Knox was at school. Or at least she assumed he was. He barely spoke to her anymore, his face pale, his eyes dark and hollow. He had been sickly, his appetite gone, his voice thin and weak. But Beth didn't have time to worry about that. Not now. Not with everything that was happening. Her gaze drifted to Mr. Daniels' garden, the thick, lush blooms swaying beneath the cold breeze—roses as dark as dried blood, lilies pale as bone, thick marigolds glowing like tiny suns. They twisted and shifted, their thick petals brushing against the iron fence, drinking in the damp, misty air.

How? How did he do it? How did his flowers bloom so thick, so perfect, while mine wilted and struggled? She constantly thought to herself.

The answer was there. She knew it. The flowers and the soil were so thick and dark that there had to be something more. And

she needed it. She craved that soil and her garden to thrive. But she needed to be careful. Mr. Daniels was watching, always watching, always smiling.

A sharp knock rattled the front door, echoing through the quiet house.

Beth's heart skipped. Her thin fingers clutched at the curtain, her sharp gaze twisting toward the door—another knock, more brutal this time.

She stepped back, her chest tight, her breath coming faster. She didn't like visitors. Didn't trust them. Not anymore.

But the knocking didn't stop.

Beth pulled her shawl around her thin shoulders with a sharp, bitter sigh, her fingers trembling. She opened the door, her voice thin with a forced calm. "Yes?"

A tall, broad-shouldered man stood on the porch, his weathered face pale beneath his wide-brimmed hat. His thick, grizzled mustache twisted above his frown, his sharp, tired eyes fixed on her.

"Beth Hargrove?" he muttered, his voice rough.

"Yes... What... what do you want?" Beth snapped, her sharp eyes narrowing.

"Deputy Frank Garlow's partner, Officer Garret Michaels," the man grunted, his voice thick with suspicion. "You know Frank?"

“Sheriff Garlow?” Beth whispered, her chest tightening. “Of course, I know him. Everyone does. Why?”

“He’s missing,” Officer Michaels muttered, his sharp gaze never leaving her. “Hasn’t been seen in days. His patrol car is gone. No sign of him.”

Beth’s breath caught. “Gone?”

“That’s right. And I’ve been asking around. Folks say you were one of the last people to talk to him. You know anything about where he might’ve gone?”

Beth’s fingers tightened around the doorframe. “No... I... I just... I spoke to him a few days ago. He... he was asking about Mr. Daniels. But that’s all.”

“Mr. Daniels, huh?” Michaels’s voice tightened, his sharp eyes glinting. “The gardener next door?”

Beth’s chest heaved. “Yes. That’s right. He... he’s always lurking. Always watching. I told the Sheriff... I told him something wasn’t right...”

“And now the Sheriff’s gone,” Michaels muttered, his gaze darkening. “That’s mighty strange, don’t you think?”

Beth’s breath twisted, her chest tight. “You think... You think he did something?” Beth puts her Academy Award-winning acting.

“I don’t know,” Michaels muttered, his voice low. “But I’m gonna find out. And if you hear anything... You let me know.”

Beth's sharp gaze snapped to the garden, the thick, swaying flowers twisting beneath the mist. "Of course... of course I will."

Michaels's sharp eyes followed her gaze, his jaw tightening. "You keep yourself safe, ma'am. And keep an eye on that neighbor of yours."

He turned, his heavy boots tapping hard on her wooden porch, his dark coat twisting in the cold breeze. Beth stood frozen in the doorway, her breath sharp, her chest heaving. The Sheriff was gone. Vanished. And now they were looking for him. Her gaze drifted to the garden. The thick, dark roses swayed beneath the pale mist. The iron gate loomed, rusted and twisted, the dark soil beneath the blooms slick and damp.

She craved that soil. She needed it now more than ever to make her garden bloom. She needed to win. But now, eyes were watching. The Sheriff's partner, that cold, suspicious stare. But she wouldn't let it stop her.

That night, the mist clung to Duskmire Avenue like a thick, suffocating shroud. She made sure Knox was asleep, peeking in his room as the door creaked slightly open, her bony, thin hand wrapped around the door, and in her other hand a garden trowel. A disgusted face smears across her, and her grip tightens around the trowel as she stares at Knox sleeping. A clock downstairs chimes at midnight, and Beth's heart races, snapping her into a wild breath as her thin fingers loosen around the handle of the

small garden trowel as she quietly closes the bedroom door. She makes her way down the stairs slowly, each step creaking beneath her slippers, and then steps out the back door, the damp earth twisting beneath her thin shoes. Her breath came in sharp, shallow gasps. She looks around at her pitiful garden, overtaken by the sheer size of her neighbor's.

Mr. Daniel's garden loomed ahead, the thick, dark flowers swaying beneath the mist, their petals brushing against the iron fence. His house was dark. Mr. Daniels was nowhere to be seen, presumably asleep.

Just a little. Just enough to help. Just enough to win. Her voice repeats like a broken record as she makes her way out of her yard and to the gate of her neighbor's.

She slipped through the gate, careful not to make a sound, and in a trance, went to a gorgeous plot of perfectly purple Jasmine that already had the late-night dew on their tiny petals. She carefully braces herself and kneels on her arthritic knees, the pain soothed by the damp, soft grass. She closes her eyes and gulps the beautifully fragrant floral air from the Jasmine and instantly becomes more jealous than she was. Her trembling fingers sink the trowel into the thick, dark soil. The damp earth twisted against the blade, rich and heavy. Her chest tightened. Her breath came faster. The smell was intoxicating, and she then clawed at the dirt with her hands. The soil filling under her nails

and staining the palms of her hands as she cups a large amount, bringing it to her nose like a cocaine addict.

Suddenly, a pale, soft glow twisted through the mist. A flashlight's beam swept across the street and the garden towards Beth.

Beth's heart leapt, and the soil dropped from her hands. Her soiled fingers reached and clutched the trowel tight, her breath sharp, desperate. She fell to the ground, pressing herself against the thick, dark blooms, the petals brushing against her face, her eyes rolling backward as she took another heaping breath of the soil.

The flashlight twisted, swaying through the mist. Footsteps echoed against the damp gravel. But they didn't stop. Didn't come closer. The beam faded, swallowed by the swirling fog.

Beth's chest heaved. Her fingers clenched tighter around the trowel, her knuckles white. But she didn't leave. She dug, her trembling hands clawing at the thick, dark soil, filling the small burlap sack she had brought. And then she ran, her feet slapping against the wet grass, her breath sharp and desperate. She burst through the back door, her chest heaving, her face pale. She had it. The rich, dark soil. The secret to his garden. The secret to winning. She clutched the bag of dirt to her chest, smiling as a faint whiff from the bag made her roll her eyes to the back of her head, as what it did to her, she hadn't felt in a long, long, time.

The next morning, Beth awoke to a sharp knock at the door. Her heart jumped. Had he seen her? Had someone caught her? But as she opened the door, her breath caught between who was standing in front of her and the invigorating smell of the soil.

Mr. Daniels stood on the porch, his straw hat tilted low, his thin smile calm. A wheelbarrow stood beside him, piled high with thick, dark soil.

“Good morning, Beth,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth. “I brought you a gift. Thought you could use a little help with your garden.”

Beth’s breath twisted, her fingers gripping the doorframe. “I... I couldn’t...” the smell like a drug altering her sensibility.

“Nonsense,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his thin smile never wavering. “Every garden deserves a little love.”

Her gaze drifted to the wheelbarrow, the thick, rich soil piled high, dark, and damp. Her chest tightened. Her hands trembled.

“Thank you... Thank you so much...” Beth whispered, her voice weak.

Mr. Daniels’ dark eyes glinted beneath his straw hat. “A garden is only as strong as the soil that feeds it.”

“How can I repay you? This is so nice of you.”

“Oh, no repayment at all, Beth? Just a neighbor helping a neighbor. I’ll bring this around the back for you.”

“You’re too kind.” She knew what he was feeding her, and her suspicions knew what she was feeding her garden.

But she didn't care.

Chapter 8

The Sheriff's Last Ride

The mist clung thick around the outskirts of Moonville, twisting through the twisted, gnarled trees like ghostly fingers. The narrow road snaked through the dark woods, its cracked, uneven pavement slick with rain. Officer Garret Michaels's patrol car rumbled along the desolate stretch, the headlights slicing through the mist and the engine a steady growl. His thick, weathered hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, his jaw clenched, his sharp, tired eyes fixed on the twisting road. His radio crackled faintly, but the static was thick, the signal weak this far out of town. He thought Frank had to be out here, the last place he thought of looking. It always creeped him out coming this far out of town and almost to the barrier, but Frank was gone, and this might have been where he went on one of his patrols as he always did. Frank would always call in, always complained about the damn mist on the drive into these woods, and always bitched about this town. Garrett was Frank's phone-a-friend when he went out there because it's nice to make sure someone knows you're out here, just in case something won't let you leave. But there had been nothing. No calls. No reports. No grumbling voice on the radio.

Just silence, and Garrett was alone.

“Damn it, Frank...” Garret muttered, his voice a rough whisper. “Where the hell are you?”

The road twisted through the dark, tangled trees, their thick branches clawing at the pale sky. The mist clung to the crooked trunks, swirling around the wet leaves. Garret’s headlights swept over the dense, twisted underbrush, the cold gray light twisting through the darkness.

And then he saw it.

Frank’s patrol car.

His breath caught. The old, rusted cruiser sat crooked at the edge of the woods, the front bumper smashed against a thick, twisted tree. The windshield was cracked, streaked with dark stains. The driver’s door hung open, twisted on its hinges.

“Jesus...” Garret whispered, his chest tightening.

He pulled his patrol car to a stop, his boots crunching against the wet gravel as he stepped out, his flashlight’s beam slicing through the mist. The cold air twisted against his face, the damp earth squelching beneath his feet. The headlights of his patrol car cast a pale, sickly glow across the wreckage. The thick, gnarled tree loomed over the twisted cruiser, its thick branches clawing at the sky. The hood was crumpled, the engine compartment crushed against the twisted trunk.

But it wasn’t just a crash.

The driver’s door was slick with thick, dark stains—blood, smeared and dried. The twisted metal was scored with deep,

jagged slashes, like something had clawed through it. The thick, muddy ground was torn and gouged, thick claw marks twisting through the wet leaves.

Garret's flashlight beam twisted across the shattered windshield, the thick, dark stains streaking across the glass. His stomach knotted, his chest tight.

"Frank?" he whispered, his voice a rough, desperate rasp. "Frank, you out here?"

Nothing. Just the whisper of the mist, the wet leaves twisting in the cold breeze. Garret's flashlight swept through the darkness, the pale beam twisting across the mud, the claw marks deep and sharp, slicing through the wet earth.

And then he saw it.

Frank's hat lay crumpled in the mud, soaked and torn, the thick brim twisted. Beside it, a dark, bloodied sleeve twisted beneath the underbrush, dense, pale fingers tangled in the wet leaves.

"Frank..." Garret whispered, his breath twisting in his chest. He stumbled forward, his thick fingers clawing at the muddy leaves, pulling them aside.

A severed arm. Pale, slick with blood, the thick fingers curled into a claw, the Sheriff's ring twisted around the bloated finger. Garret's stomach twisted. His flashlight's beam shook, his breath coming sharp, desperate.

“God... damn it...” he whispered, his chest heaving. He swept the flashlight’s beam across the underbrush, his thick, weathered fingers clawing at his revolver. The claw marks twisted through the mud, deep, jagged ruts, as though something had slashed and dragged its way across the forest floor. The twisted branches above were shredded, and thick leaves were scattered across the muddy ground. And then the trees seemed to whisper. The mist twisted, thick and cold, swirling around him.

A low, wet growl echoed through the darkness.

Garret’s heart leapt. His flashlight’s beam twisted, slicing through the mist. “Frank?” he gasped, his voice a sharp, desperate whisper.

But it wasn’t Frank.

The mist twisted, thickening, curling around the thick, gnarled trees. The wet leaves whispered, the twisted branches swayed. And then, just beyond the pale beam of his flashlight, something moved. A shadow. Tall, thin, twisted. Pale, jagged claws curling around the thick, gnarled trunks. A faint, sickly glow twisted beneath the mist, pale, empty eyes staring back at him.

Garret’s chest tightened. His thick fingers twisted around the grip of his revolver, his breath sharp, desperate.

“Show yourself!” he snarled, his voice cracking. “Who’s there?”

But the mist twisted, shifting, the pale eyes disappearing. The whispering leaves grew louder, twisting around him, clawing at his face. Garret stumbled back, his boots slipping against the wet mud. His flashlight's beam twisted, shaking wildly, slicing through the darkness.

Another sharp growl twisted through the mist. And then another. And another. Low, wet, hungry.

Garret turned, his legs moving before his mind could catch up. His breath twisted in sharp, desperate gasps, his boots slapping against the wet ground as he stumbled back to his patrol car.

The engine roared to life, his headlights beaming through the mist, the darkness twisting around the trees. But as he sped away, the pale, twisted shadows seemed to shift just beyond the light. The pale, empty eyes stared, the sharp, wet growls twisting through the mist. And somewhere behind him, Sheriff Frank Garlow's twisted, bloodied patrol car sat crooked against the tree, claw marks twisting through the metal, blood soaking the wet earth.

And in the darkness, something watched.

Back in Moonville, Beth Hargrove's garden had begun to change. The roses were thicker, darker, their crimson petals lush and slick with dew. The lilies bloomed pale and perfect, their thick, waxy petals twisting toward the gray sky. The marigolds

burned like tiny suns, their thick stems twisting through the dark, rich soil.

Her hands shook as she brushed against the thick, dark leaves, her breath sharp, her chest tight. It was working. The soil... the soil Mr. Daniels had given her, the soil she had stolen... it was working and had only been three days. Her garden was thriving. Strong. Beautiful. And she finally had a chance to win. But beneath the thick, dark blooms, something else twisted. A quiet, shameful hunger. The hunger to beat Mr. Daniels. To make her garden the best. To take that blue ribbon. To show everyone in this corrupted town that she isn't some crazy old witch who talks to her flowers.

A sharp knock rattled the door. Beth's chest tightened, her breath coming faster.

She opened it to find Officer Garret Michaels, his face pale, his sharp eyes fixed on her. Mud streaked his boots, his thick hands trembling.

"Mrs. Hargrove," he muttered, his voice rough. "We need to talk."

Beth's breath caught. "What... what about?"

"I found Sheriff Garlow's car," Michaels whispered, his voice tight. "Or what's left of it. Clawed apart. Blood everywhere. And... and something else was out there."

Beth's blood ran cold. Her chest tightened. "I... I don't understand..."

"You're gonna make me understand," Michaels snapped, his voice a low, rough growl. "You and Daniels. I know you know something. And I'm gonna find out what."

Beth's breath twisted, her chest heaving. "You... you need to leave..." She starts to close her door, but the officer pushes against the door to stop her.

"I know you're hiding something, Beth." Officer Garrett flustered with a crazed look in his eyes.

"Look, before you go around accusing people, remember where you live, Officer, or should I now say Sheriff. There is shit in this town that no one can explain. Don't you dare come back here with your macho man act because you're in that uniform. This entire town knows you're a pansy who has a bigger gun on his belt than in his pants. Grow some balls, Sheriff! And get the fuck off my porch!" Beth slammed her door shut with everything she had. "I hope something tears him apart next, asshole!"

Beth stood frozen in the doorway, her breath sharp, her chest heaving. She could hear the Officer slamming his car door, angrily stomping on the gas to his patrol car, and zooming away.

Chapter 9

Seeds of Doubt

The mist hung heavy over Moonville, a pale, suffocating shroud twisting through the crooked streets, clinging to the sagging rooftops and twisted trees. The cool Spring air clawed at the damp earth, the thick, dark flowers swaying beneath the pale, gray light. Duskmire Avenue was quiet, the houses looming like dark, crooked shadows.

But inside Beth Hargrove's home, the quiet was sharp and suffocating.

Knox sat at the kitchen table, his head throbbing, his chest tight. His breakfast sat untouched, the thick, greasy eggs cold and congealed on the plate, the bitter tea growing cold in the cup. His stomach twisted, his skin pale and clammy. He had barely slept. The shadows seemed to twist around his room at night, whispering in the darkness. The garden twisted in his dreams—thick, dark roses blooming from the walls, pale, empty eyes staring from the flowers.

"Eat, boy," Beth snapped, her wild eyes fixed on the window, her thin fingers twisting against the edge of the curtain. "Can't have you wasting away. You think you're too good for food now?"

"I... I'm just not hungry," Knox whispered, his voice weak.

“You’re never hungry,” Beth muttered, her sharp eyes twisting to him. “Always whining. Always weak. Maybe if you weren’t so useless, you wouldn’t feel so sick all the time.”

Knox’s chest tightened. He stared at the table, his fingers trembling. He didn’t want to argue. Didn’t have the strength. His head spun, his stomach twisting.

But Beth’s attention was already back at the window, her sharp gaze fixed on the garden next door. The thick, dark blooms swayed beneath the mist, their thick petals twisting in the cool breeze. Mr. Daniels stood among them, his straw hat tilted low, his pale fingers brushing against the thick, dark leaves. His calm, thin smile never wavered.

“Look at him... smug bastard... always watching... always smiling...” Beth whispered, her voice a sharp, bitter hiss. “Thinks he’s won...by trying to help me...thinks he’s got everyone fooled.”

Knox’s chest tightened. He wanted to run. Wanted to hide. But his legs felt weak, his head throbbed. “Grandma...” he whispered, his voice thin. “Maybe... maybe we should just leave it alone...”

Beth’s sharp eyes snapped to him. “Leave it alone? You want me to just give up? Let him win again? Let that cheating snake take the prize?”

“No... but...” Knox’s breath twisted, his chest tight. “I... I don’t think it’s safe...”

“Nothing’s safe in this town, boy,” Beth snarled, her wild eyes sharp. “But I’m not backing down. Not this time. My garden’s blooming. It’s thriving. Stronger than ever.”

Knox’s eyes drifted to the window. She was right. Her garden had changed. The pale, struggling blooms had thickened, the roses dark and lush, the marigolds burning like tiny suns. But the scent... it was different. Thicker. Sweet, but with something sour beneath it. Something that twisted in his stomach. His head throbbed. His skin felt cold and clammy. He didn’t feel well. Hadn’t felt well in days.

“Eat your damn breakfast,” Beth snapped, her fingers clawing at the curtain. “You’re no good to me sick.”

Knox’s fingers tightened around the spoon, but he didn’t eat. His chest tightened, his breath sharp. He stared at the table, his vision blurring.

But then, a sharp knock rattled the front door.

Beth’s gaze snapped to the hallway, her fingers trembling. “Who the hell is that now?”

Knox’s chest tightened. His heart pounded. Beth stormed to the door, her thin fingers clawing at the handle, yanking it open. “What do you want?”

Officer Garret Michaels stood on the porch, his pale, weathered face twisted with suspicion, his sharp eyes fixed on

her. Mud streaked his boots, his thick, gloved hands clenched at his sides.

“Mrs. Hargrove,” he muttered, his voice rough. “Mind if I come in?”

Beth’s chest tightened. “What for?”

“I need to ask you a few more questions... about Sheriff Garlow,” Michaels whispered, his sharp gaze drifting past her, sweeping across the dark, cramped hallway.

Beth’s thin lips twisted. “I told you, I don’t know anything. He came around asking about Mr. Daniels, then he left.”

“And you haven’t seen him since?” Michaels muttered, his voice low.

“No,” Beth snapped, her voice sharp. “Why? Did you find him?”

Michaels’s jaw tightened. “I found his car. Smashed against a tree out by the old logging trail. Blood. Claw marks. And... part of him.”

Beth’s chest tightened. “Claw marks?”

“That’s right,” Michaels whispered, his sharp gaze narrowing. “Something tore his car apart. Tore him apart. And you know damn well this town has a history of things that don’t stay in the dark.”

Beth’s gaze drifted to the garden, the thick, dark roses swaying beneath the mist. “I... I told you. I don’t know anything.”

“But you keep watching him, don’t you?” Michaels muttered, his voice sharp. “Your neighbor. Daniels. Always watching. Always working in that garden of his.”

Beth’s lips tightened. “I’m a gardener. I have a right to be interested.”

“Oh, I bet you’re interested,” Michaels whispered, his voice cold. “And I bet you know a hell of a lot more than you’re saying.”

Beth’s breath twisted. “You’re not going to come into my house and accuse me of—”

“I’m not accusing you... Yet,” Michaels whispered, his voice a low growl. “But I’m watching you. And I’m watching him. And one way or another, I’m gonna find out what happened to Frank.”

He turned, his heavy boots crunching against the wet gravel, his dark coat twisting in the cold breeze.

Beth slammed the door, her chest heaving, her hands trembling.

“Grandma...?” Knox whispered, his voice weak. “What did he mean? Claw marks? What... what did that?”

“Shut up, Knox!” Beth snapped, her wild eyes sharp. “It’s none of your business. It’s just that bastard Daniels. Always causing trouble. Always hiding something.”

“But... but Grandma... the Sheriff...” Knox whispered, his breath sharp. “If something got him...”

“It got him because he was weak!” Beth snarled, her fingers clawing at the curtain. “Because he didn’t know how to fight back. But we’re not weak. Our garden is thriving. Stronger than ever.”

Knox’s chest tightened. His head spun. He stumbled back, his legs weak. “But... what if...”

“Enough!” Beth snapped, her voice sharp. “Go to your room if you’re going to whine like a coward. Go. I don’t have time for this.

Knox didn’t argue. Didn’t fight. He stumbled into the dark hallway, his breath sharp, his vision blurring.

The darkness twisted around him, thick and cold. His head throbbed, his chest tight. He pressed his hands against his face, his fingers trembling. He didn’t know what was worse—the fear twisting in his gut, or the cold, empty feeling that his grandmother didn’t care.

That she never had.

Chapter 10

Roots of Desperation

The days that followed were a twisted dream for Beth Hargrove. She would step onto her porch each morning and watch in awe as her garden flourished. Once pale and wilting, her roses now stood tall and thick, their rich crimson petals glowing in the misty sunlight. Her daisies were full, their yellow centers vibrant, their petals thick and bright. Even her struggling marigolds were a blazing orange, blooms full and lush. But beneath the awe was something darker. Shame gnawed at her, a cold dread twisting beneath her chest. She knew what she had done. Knew where the soil came from. But she had won... she was finally going to win. And the whispers in her mind told her it was worth it.

Knox was the only one who didn't share in her excitement. He stayed away from the garden, his gaze fixed on the twisted blooms with a mix of fear and disgust. He barely spoke to his grandmother, slipping out of the house without a word, wandering the quiet streets of Moonville. But even in the town, the whispers seemed to follow him. Knox walked through the park, his gaze fixed on the pale, swaying trees, the gray sky pressing down like a cold shroud. The laughter of other children echoed in the distance, but he didn't join them. He didn't want to.

“Knox!” a voice called, and he turned to see Toby jogging toward him, his wild curls bouncing. “Dude, I haven’t seen you in days. Where you been?”

“Home,” Knox muttered, trying to force a smile.

“Yeah? Well, have you seen your grandma’s garden? It’s... It’s like insane. Everyone’s talking about it,” Toby said, his voice full of awe. “They say she might actually beat Mr. Daniels this year.”

Knox’s stomach twisted. “Yeah... she... she might.”

“But, dude, it’s kinda creepy,” Toby whispered, his grin fading. “My dad says Sheriff Garlow is still missing. And old Mr. Daniels... he’s been going around, giving out soil to other neighbors, too. It’s like... everyone wants his help.”

Knox’s heart skipped a beat. “Soil? He’s giving it to others?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Johnston next door said she saw him helping old Mr. Pierce, filling his flowerbeds. And now his garden is just... crazy.” Toby leaned closer, his voice a whisper. “But everyone is saying that there is something evil in the soil. Even heard that Mrs. Johnston’s cat went missing. Just... gone. And then she found something in her garden—a paw... buried in the dirt.”

Knox felt his blood run cold. “Toby... you... You gotta stay away from him. From his garden. I think he’s using people and animals for his soil and then is selling it to everyone.”

Toby's grin faded, his gaze darkening. "Yeah... I know. But my mom's talking about asking him for help, too. She says we need it for our vegetable patch, but if he's using people and animals, does that mean I'd be eating..."

Knox's chest tightened, a sick, twisting fear gnawing at him. "Toby, please. Tell your mom to stay away."

Toby's smile returned, but it was thin, forced. "I'll try. But you know parents. They don't listen."

Beth's garden became a spectacle. Neighbors stopped by, their eyes wide with awe, their voices full of envy.

"Beth, those are the most beautiful roses I've ever seen," Mrs. Carter gushed, her plump face glowing with delight. "You must tell me your secret."

Beth's thin lips stretched into a broad smile, but the joy never reached her eyes. "Oh, just... a little extra care. A little something special in the soil."

"Whatever it is, it's working. I've never seen anything like it."

More neighbors surrounded her and her garden, just admiring her work. Seeing another beautiful spectacle in Moonville, a town with so much fear and evil, is nice. "Thank you," Beth whispered, her voice thin and overwhelmed, her fingers trembling slightly. *These people wanted nothing to do with me not too long ago, and now look at them, gushing.* She couldn't

help but think to herself, and behind the pride, fear twisted like a coiled snake. Just as she had the thought of the murderous gardener, she noticed him watching her under his straw hat from his garden with a smug smirk on his face. He knew this would happen; he knew she would end up being the talk of the town, how it would fester inside of her. She knew she had crossed a line. But she couldn't turn back now.

Beth could not sleep that night; she tossed and turned in bed, her intrusive thoughts swirling like a tornado thrusting through her home and garden. In her head was a mess, dirt surrounded her frail body, her hands clawed their way through the surface holding her down, intestines wrapped around her neck, torso, and then slowly slithered their way up her dirt-stained nightgown, which started to penetrate their way inside her. The sky turned dark instantly as Beth's screams were muffled by more entrails that gagged her mouth. Lightning lit up the sky as rain started to pour, soaking her nightgown red with blood. Her heart pounded in her ears. She clawed at the soil, trying to grip onto something, anything. Her gardening shovel was nearby, as she could grip and dig slightly, the sound of dirt hitting metal was deafening. Again, she tried with a loud crack of the lightning overhead, the root-like intestines of victims grew tighter around her neck, pulling her head into the rich soil. Soil filled her eyes, and her

gasps for breath turned into the taste of gritty blood inside her mouth. Another loud crack of lightning above her.

Beth, squirming in her bed, shot straight up to a seated position, gasping for breath, clutching her throat and soothing her throbbing crotch. She thought it felt real, too real, as she tried to slow her heart, but she heard it again. That metal-digging sound is like her dream. The sharp metal shovel was being sliced through the dirt like a captain's knife, entering and slicing. She got up from her bed and wrapped herself in her robe, which was lying on a rocking chair next to the window. Placing it on, she peers through the window and sees Mr. Daniels with his wheelbarrow brimming with thick, dark soil, and he is on his hands and knees tending to her garden, adding and sprinkling more of his soil in her garden. Beth heads downstairs, fixing her tangled, bedridden hair as she makes her way outside her back door, the screen door slamming behind her.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hargrove,” Mr. Daniels called, his voice smooth as silk as he didn’t bother to look up from his task. “I thought I’d bring you a bit more of my special blend. It seems your flowers have taken to it quite nicely.”

Beth hesitated, her pulse racing. But then greed overpowered fear as she could smell the sweet scent of the fresh soil from his wheelbarrow. She needed more. She needed to win.

“Thank you, Mr. Daniels. You’re too kind and you didn’t have to.”

He smiled, his dark eyes never leaving her. “Oh, it’s my pleasure. A garden is a reflection of its gardener. And I do so love to see beauty... thrive.” He turned to her and gave her a smirk that meant more than it seemed.

Beth’s fingers gripped her robe, tightly wrapping it around her, her cheeks pink with his compliment, as she then fixed her hair to make her more presentable. “Well, let me get you something to drink. I have some sweet tea if you’d like or some coffee since it’s still early.”

“Oh, coffee would be very nice.” He continues to dig and smiles to himself.

“Coffee it is.” She smiles and rushes back inside to make fresh pot and to freshen up.

She didn’t notice Knox watching from the window above, his face pale, his fists clenched.

But he saw. He saw everything. He knew something wasn’t right.

Chapter 11

Twisted Roots and Dark Desires

That night was thick and suffocating, the mist twisting through Duskmire Avenue like ghostly fingers, clawing at the crooked houses and twisted trees. Beth Hargrove stood by the window, her wild, tangled hair spilling down her bony shoulders, her sharp eyes fixed on the garden next door. The thick, dark blooms swayed beneath the pale moonlight, their crimson petals glowing like fresh blood, their thick, twisting vines curling around the rusted iron fence. Her garden was thriving. The roses were thick, their petals lush and vibrant. The lilies stood tall, pale and perfect, their thick, waxy petals twisting toward the gray sky. The marigolds burned like tiny suns, their thick stems twisting through the dark, rich soil.

But she wasn't satisfied. Her dream from the night before still flashed in her mind, but her encounter with her neighbor was a foggy bliss of confusion. Her thin, bony fingers twisted against the curtain, her wild eyes narrowing. Mr. Daniels moved among his own thick, lush flowers, his straw hat tilted low, his thin smile calm, as he began to spray his garden with a large bottle and a long, thin spray nozzle attached that mists pale red liquid from its tip. His pale arms move effortlessly side to side, his calm, empty eyes sweep over the garden.

Why does he not seem threatened? Why is he helping me and others? Is he not afraid to lose? Now he has competition. Beth played scenarios in her head, questioning him and herself. His smile never wavered. His gaze never darkened. But Beth wasn't fooled. Beneath that calm, empty gaze was something else. Something hungry. Something watching. She was determined to understand him. Until then, she lay down to rest, fearful of having another terrifying dream, but all she could think about was Mr. Daniels.

The next morning, Beth woke up with vengeance and determination. He thought he had her cornered. Thought she was afraid of him. But he was wrong. This was her year. Her garden was thriving. Stronger than ever. And she was going to win, despite her thoughts being clouded, and she told herself last night this was his tactic, he was trying to win her so he could still win the competition.

"Knox!" she snapped, her voice sharp, echoing through the dark, cramped hallway. "Where are you?"

"I... I'm here, Grandma..." Knox's weak voice twisted from the kitchen.

"Get out here. I need you to help me with the roses."

Knox's thin frame appeared in the doorway, his pale face drawn, his dark eyes sunken. He hadn't been eating. His head throbbed, his stomach twisted. But she didn't care. Didn't notice.

“Grab the shears,” Beth snapped, yanking the door open, the cold, damp air twisting against her face. “We need to make them perfect.”

“But what about school?” Knox panted.

“School, forget about school, this is more important. I’ll write you a note saying you were sick. They’ll get over it, now come on!”

Knox’s fingers trembled as he reached for the rusted shears, his chest tight, his breath sharp. His legs felt weak, his vision blurred. He didn’t want to be out here and would rather go to school and deal with the bullies. He didn’t want to touch the flowers, but he was afraid of what his grandmother might say or do if he didn’t, so he obeyed and went outside. The thick, dark petals twisted against his fingers, their cold, wet texture sticking to his skin.

“Careful, boy!” Beth snapped, slapping his hand away.

“Don’t bruise them! They need to be perfect.”

“Sorry... Grandma...” Knox whispered, his voice thin.

Beth’s sharp gaze twisted to the garden next door. Mr. Daniels stood among the thick, dark flowers, his pale fingers brushing against the leaves. His calm, thin smile permanent. His dark eyes drifted to her, his straw hat tilted just enough to cast a shadow over his pale, wrinkled face.

But he didn’t say anything. Didn’t move.

“Keep trimming,” Beth whispered, her voice a low, sharp hiss. “I won’t let that smug bastard win again. Not this year. Not ever.”

Knox’s chest tightened. His head spun. His fingers trembled against the cold, rusted shears.

But he didn’t argue. Didn’t fight. Because he knew it was useless.

Later that night, as the mist thickened around the quiet street, Knox lay in his dark, cramped room, his chest tight, his breath sharp. His head throbbed, his stomach twisted. Cold sweat clung to his pale skin. He hadn’t eaten well in days. Couldn’t keep anything down.

And the dreams were getting worse...

Thick, twisting roots clawed at his legs, tearing at his skin, the gashes slowly seeping blood from their fresh valley as they hold him down in his bed. Thick, dark flowers blooming from his chest, their thick petals pressing against his mouth, suffocating him, as more flowers started to sprout throughout his body. Pale, empty eyes stared at him through the darkness, in his room, as his fearful eyes begged for help, and his cries were muffled whispers gagged by roses and thorns that entered his mouth, forcing it open.

Then a voice from those pale eyes hissed, “Eat, drink, eat, drink.” Just when he couldn’t breathe anymore, he woke up,

gasping for air in his bed, checking his arms and legs for the gashes.

“Grandma...” he whispered, his voice a thin, broken breath. His body sweating under his sheets, “Grandma, please...”

But she didn’t hear him. Didn’t care. He didn’t care anymore; he knew he was alone, but called out to her anyway. It made him feel better, but worse. Knox curled beneath the thin, sweat-dampened blankets, his chest heaving, his thin fingers clawing at the cold, damp sheets. And outside, the thick, dark garden twisted beneath the mist, the corpse-grown flowers swaying in the pale, gray light, which haunted him no matter if he was awake or asleep.

Beth was restless. She paced the dark kitchen, her thin fingers twisting against the curtain's edge. She had seen him watching, seen that faint, thin smile. He thought he was safe. Thought he was untouchable. But she knew better. Her garden was thriving. Stronger than ever. The rich, dark soil she had taken and was then given—soil thick and damp, heavy with secrets—was working. Her flowers were thick, lush, and perfect. And she was going to win. But it wasn’t enough, and he knew that, that’s why he was all too willing to give some up to her. She needed more. Just a little more. Just enough to make them perfect. Enough to ensure her victory.

Her gaze twisted to the window, the thick mist swirling around the iron fence. The thick, dark flowers twisted against the pale light, their thick petals brushing against the iron bars.

She needed more. Just a little more. *That spray!* she remembered. “That’s that little bastard's secret. I need that spray.”

Her breath came sharp, her chest tight as she grabbed her thin coat, placing it on. She slipped out the back door, the cold, damp air twisting against her face, the smell of rain coming, tainting her nose. Her thin shoes crunched against the wet gravel, her thin frame slipping through the iron gate. The thick, dark garden loomed ahead, the thick blooms swaying beneath the mist. The pale, twisting vines curled around the rusted bars, their thick petals glowing in the pale moonlight. Her breath came faster. Her chest tightened. She panickily scoured his garden for the sprayer he was using and found nothing. She made her way closer to his house, near the basement window, then around to the back, where she tried to open the basement doors as the large metal lock rattled on the double wooden doors with each of her pulls.

“Mother fucker locked it!” She whispered loudly, fixing her hair that annoyingly came undone over her face. “It has to be in there!” She slams the floor with her feet in frustration. Beth then frantically wanders through his garden, searching for anything

she could use to break that lock. She knows she's not making sense, but doesn't care.

Then she heard it.

A faint rustle. A sharp creak. Her wild eyes snapped up, her breath twisting in her chest. And then she saw him. A figure, tall and thin, standing among the thick, dark blooms. His straw hat tilted low, his thin smile calm, his dark eyes fixed on her.

"Stealing again, Beth?" Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice soft, almost soothing.

Beth's breath twisted in her chest. "I... I just... I just needed..." She couldn't finish her sentence in fear.

He stepped closer, his pale fingers tracing the thick, dark leaves, his thin smile calm. "Of course, you just needed a little more help. We all need a little help sometimes."

Beth's gaze drifted nervously to the thick, dark blooms twisting around his feet. "You... you won't stop me from winning?"

"Stop you?" Mr. Daniels whispered, his smile widening as he crept closer and closer to her. "Why would I do that?"

Her chest tightened, her thin hands trembling. "Because... because you know. You know I... I have to win."

His pale fingers brushed against her cheek, cold and gentle. "And you will, Beth. But there are... other ways. Better ways."

Beth's breath came faster, her gaze locked on his dark eyes. "What do you mean?"

Mr. Daniels leaned closer, his thin lips brushing against her ear. “Come with me. I’ll show you.”

Her legs felt weak, her breath sharp. But she followed him, stumbling through the thick, twisting mist, her trembling fingers clawing at the damp air. He then led her through his labyrinth of flowers, the dense, dark blooms seemed to sway, their petals twisting against her arms, their cold, wet scent sticking to her skin, until they reached his basement doors. Her mind twisted between fear and hunger—fear of him, what he knew, the darkness that seemed to swirl around him... and hunger for his soil, his secret. The secret to making her garden perfect. Mr. Daniels reaches into his front right pocket, pulling out a set of keys that slice through the quiet night. He uses a key to release the lock from its resting place. They slipped through the double wooden doors, Beth first, then Mr. Daniels, who shut them behind him. The garden outside seemed to approve, their petals and leaves shivering excitedly. Darkness swallowed them both in the basement as they made their way down the barely visible stairs, and the air seemed to become thicker and colder.

“This is the heart of my garden, Beth.”

He brings her to the center of the room. His pale fingers intertwined with her bony fingers, his thin smile never wavering.

“Beauty is about hunger, Beth,” he whispered, his voice smooth, almost hypnotic. “It’s about desire. It’s about wanting something so badly that you would do anything... give

anything... to have it.” He lets go of her hands and flips a switch on the wall by the stairs that lead up to his house. The fluorescent lights hum and flicker throughout the basement, lighting up the shelves of potted, broken skulls filled with flowers. The table in the center of the room was covered with a white, blood-stained, rusted, soiled cloth hanging over its edges.

Beth’s breath came faster as she twirled around the room, the scent of fresh soil and death lingering in the air. “I... I want to win... I have to win...” She moves to the wall of skulls and sees a familiar face. She gasps, placing her frozen fingertips to her mouth. It was the Sheriff’s head. His flesh bloated and decaying, peeling from his skull, and newly born stems and leaves sprouting from his eyes, mouth, and top of his cracked head. The sprouts feeding off his coagulated blood and brains like a newborn hungry for its mother’s milk.

“And you will win,” Mr. Daniels whispers in her ear, his hands slipping over her thin, bony shoulders, his fingers cold against her skin. “But you must give yourself to it. Let it consume you.”

His lips brushed against her neck, cold and soft as he turned her around slowly. Beth’s thin fingers clawed at his chest, her breath sharp, desperate. The mist from outside seeps through the cracks of the basement doors and twists around them, thick and cold. The dark flowers swayed in their gruesome pots, their thick

petals brushing against her skin, as she backed into the shelved tomb plants.

“I... I need it...” Beth whispered, her voice a desperate gasp. “I need... I need your soil... your garden...”

“Then take it,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice a low, hungry growl. “Become it.”

Beth’s thin frame twisted against him, her wild hair spilling over her shoulders, her cold, pale hands clawing at his chest. His thin, pale fingers twisted against her back as he led her to the table in the center of the room. He lays her down on the table gently, then reaches into the barrel next to the table and grabs a handful of thick, dark soil, smearing it against her skin.

The thick, dark potted blooms seemed to sway, their petals reaching out for them, wanting to brush against their tangled bodies, the cold, damp scent clinging to them.

Knox couldn’t sleep that night because of his dreams and the dull ache in his belly. He was staring out his window at the stars, wishing to have something better, something more, when he saw the shadows slipping through the mist. Had seen his grandmother’s pale, thin frame disappearing behind the dark, iron gate.

His chest tightened, his breath sharp. He knew it. He knew something was wrong. He knew she was slipping away. But she wouldn't listen. Wouldn't hear him.

And so, he followed.

The cold mist clawed at his face, his thin shoes slipping against the wet gravel. The thick, dark blooms seemed to watch him, their petals swaying, their thick vines twisting.

He crouched behind the thick, twisted bushes, his breath sharp, his chest tight.

And then he saw them.

His grandmother... and Mr. Daniels, talking, then slipping into the basement. So he went to the window where it all began. He got down on all fours, his hands and knees cold and wet with mud, and then he saw everything.

His grandmother's pale, thin frame twisted against his, her wild hair spilling over her bony shoulders. His large, pale hands caressing her, his thin, dry lips pressed against her neck, his dark eyes calm, hungry.

Knox's chest tightened, his breath catching. He tried to look away. Tried to close his eyes. But he couldn't as rain started to come down in thick droplets, landing on his face.

Beth's wild, desperate fingers clawed at Mr. Daniels, her voice a low, shivering whisper. "I... I want more... I want to win..."

“And you will,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth.
“You will bloom, Beth. You will be beautiful.”

His hands twisted with hers, as he then took more dark soil and smeared it across her pale skin, their bodies tangled among the thick, twisting vines that slithered across the floor from several larger potted plants around the room. Her skin shimmered, slick with damp soil, her eyes wild, desperate. Mr. Daniels then undid his belt with one hand, and his pants fell to the ground instantly off his bony frame. He climbed onto the table and on top of Beth, where he rubbed another huge handful of soil all over Beth’s bare chest. She moaned, and the smell of the soil on her body made her open for Mr. Daniels.

Knox’s stomach twisted, his chest heaving. He wanted to scream. Wanted to cry. But his voice was gone. His legs were weak. And then, as the mist twisted around them, Mr. Daniels’ dark eyes seemed to lock with his, that thin, empty smile twisting in his lips as he thrust into Beth’s quivering body.

Knox stumbled back, his breath sharp, his chest tight. His legs gave out, his back slamming against the cold, wet soil. The mist twisted around him, thick and cold, the whispers clawing at his thoughts.

He couldn’t stay. He couldn’t watch.

He turned, stumbling through the thick, wet grass, his legs shaking, his breath sharp.

But even as he ran and the rain swallowed him, he could still hear them—his grandmother’s desperate whispers, Mr. Daniels’ smooth, soothing voice, the thick, dark flowers twisting beneath the pale moonlight.

Knox ran, his breath sharp, his chest tight. He burst through the front door of his house, his thin fingers clawing at the cold, damp walls. His heart thundered, his breath ragged.

But his grandmother didn’t follow. And she didn’t come home. Not that night. Not until morning, when the rain became more of a drizzle, and her garden had grown even thicker, and even more beautiful overnight

Chapter 12

The Devil's Smile

Duskmire Avenue shimmered beneath the pale, watery sunlight, the wet cobblestones gleaming, the fresh rain leaving scattered puddles along the cracked sidewalks. People walked with careful, measured steps, their gazes flicking nervously to the still pools of water, their shoes avoiding them with quiet, instinctive caution. Conversations were hushed, eyes sharp, and when the breeze stirred, there was always a pause—an anxious glance toward the dark, stagnant water.

Knox stepped around one of the larger puddles, his shoes skirting the slick edge, his chest tight. He didn't know what lurked beneath the surface, but he had heard the stories—how shadows twisted beneath the glassy water, how something cold and dark waited to reach out, to pull.

But today, something else had his attention on the way home from school.

A sleek, black car was parked in front of his house. A long, elegant vehicle with a glossy sheen, its dark windows reflecting the gray, misty light. The kind of car that didn't belong in Moonville. The kind that seemed too perfect, too clean. And the man standing on the porch was even more out of place.

Mayor Damian Sinclair. Tall, impeccably dressed in a sharp, charcoal suit that seemed to drink in the light, his thick, dark hair slicked back, a faint, perfect smile tracing his lips. His face was smooth, his features sharp, almost beautiful. But his eyes... they were dark. Too dark. Deep, black pools that seemed to drink in everything they touched.

Knox's stomach twisted and stayed back around the corner, and he watched to see if the car would leave. He already had a hard enough time staying focused at school with what he witnessed, and going to school was still better than staying at home.

Beth stood on the porch, her thin hands nervously twisting the hem of her apron, her face pale, her eyes wide.

"Now, Mrs. Hargrove," Mayor Sinclair's voice was smooth as silk, his smile soft, his dark eyes locked on her. "I must say, your garden is... extraordinary this year. Truly a marvel. It's going to be quite the competition."

Beth's lips trembled, but she forced a smile. "Thank you, Mayor. I... I've just been lucky, I suppose."

"Luck?" The Mayor's smile widened, his teeth a perfect, gleaming white. "Oh, I don't believe in luck, Mrs. Hargrove. Not in this town. I believe in... effort. Dedication. And, of course, the right... partnerships."

Beth's gaze flicked nervously to the mayor, "*Partnership?*" she thought.

“Yes, well... I suppose you’re right,” she whispered.

The Mayor’s perfect smile never faltered, but his gaze grew sharper, darker. “Of course, I am. Well, just a reminder, Moonville Floral Competition is only three days away. The most sacred tradition in this town. A celebration of beauty... and of those who have the power to nurture life in this town of— how should I put it, never-ending fear. We need this competition in this town.” His dark eyes seemed to pierce through her, his smile thin and sharp. “But remember, Mrs. Hargrove... the roots of a garden run deep. And sometimes, the most beautiful flowers bloom from the darkest soil.”

Beth’s breath caught. “I... I understand.”

“Do you?” The Mayor’s voice was soft, almost a whisper, but it seemed to echo, thick and cold. “I do hope so. Because when you make a deal with the earth... it always demands something in return.”

Knox’s heart pounded, his fists clenched. He watched from behind the damp, twisted bushes, his breath coming fast.

The Mayor turned, his gaze drifting across the street. For a heartbeat, his dark, endless eyes locked with Knox’s. The boy felt a cold shiver twist through his chest, a darkness clawing at his thoughts. But then the Mayor smiled, a soft, slow smile. The kind of smile that was both a promise and a warning. He didn’t return to his car. Instead, he turned, his smooth stride carrying

him next door to Mr. Daniels' house. Knox's heart raced, his breath catching.

Mr. Daniels stood at his gate, his thin frame shadowed by the thick, twisting flowers, his dark eyes calm, his straw hat tilted low. He smiled, a thin, cold smile that seemed to curl just beneath the shadow of his hat.

"Mr. Daniels," Mayor Sinclair greeted, his voice smooth as velvet. "Always a pleasure. Your garden is... spectacular, as always."

"Thank you, Mayor." Mr. Daniels' voice was a whisper, but it carried, smooth and cold. "I do my best to keep it... thriving."

"Oh, I know you do," the Mayor whispered, his dark eyes lingering on the thick, dark blooms. "But this year is special, isn't it? Something greater seems to be blooming beneath the surface."

Mr. Daniels' smile widened, his pale, thin face seeming almost too still. "The roots run deep, Mayor. You know that better than anyone."

"I do indeed," the mayor whispered, his dark gaze drifting to the thick, twisting vines. "But remember, Mr. Daniels... a garden is only as strong as the soil beneath it. And the earth... is always hungry."

Mr. Daniels' thin smile didn't quiver. "Hunger is what makes a garden bloom, Mayor."

But just as they spoke, another car pulled up—an old, mud-splattered patrol car. Officer Michaels stepped out, his sharp eyes fixed on Mr. Daniels. His thick, gloved fingers gripped his hat, his jaw clenched.

“Daniels,” Michaels called, his voice rough. “I need a word.”

The mayor’s smile widened. “Ah, Officer Michaels. Always vigilant. But you needn’t worry yourself. The case with Sheriff Garlow... It’s been resolved.”

“Resolved?” Michaels’s gaze snapped to the mayor. “We found his car torn to pieces. Blood. Claw marks. Something got him.”

“Indeed,” the mayor whispered, his voice smooth, hypnotic. “This is Moonville, Officer. We all know there are... things in the woods. Monsters. Always hungry. Always lurking. And some tragedies... well, they are simply part of life here.”

Michaels’s jaw tightened. “But... but we should—”

“You should let it go, Officer Michaels.” The mayor’s dark eyes seemed to drink in the light. “Focus on keeping the town safe. Don’t waste time chasing shadows.”

Michaels’s sharp gaze staggered, his thick fingers trembling. But then his shoulders sagged, his gaze dropping to the wet gravel. “Yes... Yes, of course... Mayor.”

“Good man,” Sinclair whispered, his smile cold, perfect. “Moonville needs you... calm, vigilant... but not chasing ghosts.”

Michaels turned, his face pale, his steps slow, as though his will had drained away. His patrol car rumbled to life, the engine fading into the mist.

The mayor turned back to Mr. Daniels, his dark smile widening. “A tidy resolution, wouldn’t you say?”

“Quite so,” Mr. Daniels whispered.

“Well! It was nice to see you again, sir. I do have several more competitors to visit.” He makes his way to his shiny, polished car. “Two weeks, Mr. Daniels. May the best garden win!” He thrusts a fist into the air and gets into his sleek, black car, purring it to life. The dark vehicle then glides away, vanishing into the misty gray streets.

Knox watched them go, his heart racing. He didn’t know how he knew, but he did somehow—Mayor Sinclair wasn’t just a man. He was something else. Something worse. And this gut-wrenching feeling told him so.

Beth stood on the porch, her pale face turned toward the garden, her lips moving in a faint, desperate whisper. Her thin fingers clutched at her apron, her wild eyes fixed on Mr. Daniels’ house. Her eyes played like a projector in her head the night before. The smell of the rain, her body quivering with his touch, the gritty soil being rubbed all over her body, and the taste of it hitting her tongue as he was on top of her. She hadn’t felt like what she experienced in decades, if ever, and craved more.

Knox stepped out from behind the bushes. “Grandma?”

Beth flinched, her gaze snapping to him. “Knox! What are you doing out here?”

“I... I saw him. The mayor. What did he want?” Knox’s voice was sharp, his fear twisting into anger.

Beth’s face twisted with fear. “Nothing. Nothing for you to worry about.”

But Knox’s gaze flicked to the neighbor’s house next door, where Mr. Daniels still stood, his dark eyes watching under his straw hat as if he was putting his grandmother in some hypnotic trance.

Chapter 13

The Roots of Betrayal

Knox didn't sleep that night. He lay in his narrow bed, staring at the dark ceiling, his heart pounding. His grandmother's frantic whispers drifted through the thin walls, a feverish murmur of desperation. He could almost see her, pacing the cramped kitchen, her thin hands twisting together, her wild eyes fixed on the garden outside. And beyond the thin, misty curtains, the thick, twisting blooms of her roses seemed to sway, their dark petals whispering in the pale moonlight. The competition was only three days away, and the town was coming alive with feverish excitement. Every house along Duskmire Avenue seemed to swell with lush, vibrant flowers, the gardens thick and full, the colors almost too rich, too radiant. Neighbors whispered and gossiped, their envy and admiration twisting together. But beneath it all, there was fear. The quiet, suffocating fear that came with every cautious glance at the thick, dark soil. With every whispered tale of missing pets, people, and of strange shadows slithering beneath the earth, of flowers that seemed to twist and bloom in impossible colors.

Knox's chest froze and tightened. His grandmother wasn't just trying to win a competition—she was becoming something else. Something hungry. He needed to stop her. He needed to show her what was happening. But she wouldn't listen. Not

anymore. His thoughts were wild, and as time passed, he drifted off to the same nightmare as before, unable to escape and unable to breathe.

The next afternoon, the mist seemed to hang thick over Moonville throughout the day, the damp air clinging to the crooked rooftops and narrow streets. Knox wandered through the pale fog on his way home from school, the spring air trying to creep its way into the gloom of this town. His gaze flicked nervously to the scattered puddles that lingered on the cobblestones, the dark, still water twisting with faint, shadowed shapes just beneath the surface. His stomach twisted. He felt trapped, suffocated. No one listened. No one believed him. Not his grandmother. Not the neighbors. Not even Toby, who had become one of the other kids, pointing, laughing, whispering that Knox was a freak.

But he wasn't crazy. He knew what he had seen. He knew what was coming.

As he passed the park, his gaze caught on a familiar figure—Bram, the tall, handsome night nurse, pushing his rickety cart along the narrow path. His dark, brooding eyes were fixed ahead, his jaw tight, his elegant features shadowed beneath the mist. Knox's breath grew heavy. Bram. The man whom everyone knew, especially the women, because of how handsome he was. Knox's fists clenched. He knew he shouldn't. Knew it was

dangerous. But he couldn't help himself. He looked out of place and had to see what he was up to.

Bram's long, confident strides carried him through the mist, the cart rattling over the uneven stones. Knox kept his distance, slipping between the shadowed trees, his heart pounding. Bram's path wound through the narrow alleyways, past the old churchyard, and finally to the crooked iron gate of Mr. Daniels' garden. The thick, twisting flowers seemed to sway in welcome, their dark petals brushing against the iron bars.

"Why is he going the back way?" Knox said softly, hiding behind some bushes.

Bram knocked, a faint, rhythmic tap against the weathered wood of Mr. Daniel's back porch door. Moments later, the door creaked open, and Daniels appeared, his pale, thin frame shadowed in the doorway.

"Punctual as always, Bram," Mr. Daniels whispered, his thin smile sharp. "Did you bring what I need?"

Bram nodded, his voice low and tense. "Two more. Fresh. No questions asked."

Mr. Daniels stepped aside, his thin, veined hands reaching for the cart, his pale fingers curling around the damp, stained canvas that covered it.

Knox's breath caught, his stomach twisting with nausea.

“Excellent,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his dark eyes glowing beneath the shadow of his straw hat. “The garden will thrive. It always does.”

Bram’s jaw clenched. “And my payment?”

“Of course, Bram. Always. As agreed.” Mr. Daniels pulled a thick, weathered envelope from his coat, pressing it into Bram’s hand. “You serve a noble purpose, you know. Feeding life... nurturing growth.”

Bram’s gaze was cold, his fingers tightening around the envelope. “It’s just a job and no more during the day; it was hard enough to get this to you with no one watching.”

“Of course, that’s why I included a little extra for your troubles,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his smile thin and sharp. Bram helped to lift the cart up and into his house, and then the door creaked shut. Bram turned, his gaze flicking nervously around the mist-shrouded street, to see if anyone had seen. Knox ducked behind the twisted trees and bushes, his breath shallow so as not to make any noise. Bram strode away, his long strides carrying him into the shadows of the other houses. Knox watched him go, his heart racing. He knew he should run. He knew he should hide. But his gaze drifted back to the garden when he noticed something moving behind the iron gate. Something twisting, something crawling and writhing beneath the dark soil. Thick, pale roots that seemed to pulse, weaving together, slithering beneath the damp earth. Knox’s chest tightened, his breath

coming faster. He turned, stumbling through the mist, his footsteps echoing against the wet stones. He had to warn his grandmother. Had to tell her what he saw. But he thought, *Would she even listen? Would she even care?* His mind raced, his chest tight. But even as he ran, the whispers seemed to follow him—the soft, twisted whispers of the flowers, the faint, rhythmic thrum of the roots twisting beneath the soil. And in the distance, beyond the thick, twisting mist, he saw the dark, towering steeples of the town hall. And he knew. The competition was coming. But this wasn't just about flowers. It was about life. About hunger. About secrets buried in the dark, damp earth, and he was alone.

Chapter 14

The Whisper of Thorns

Knox's days at school had become a waking nightmare. Every morning, he walked the narrow halls with his head down, his gaze fixed on the cracked, stained tiles beneath his feet. The whispers followed him like shadows—soft, sharp voices cutting through the air, twisting around him.

"Freak!" and *"Corpse kid!"* were the most popular, but the one that hurt the most was *"Rope boy!"* The rumor spread fast in a town locked in time, of how his mother committed suicide at Halo Hills Asylum by hanging herself in the commons room in front of everyone with a rope. While she hung swinging until her last breath, the people who worked there spread the story that his mother kept repeating slowly, *"Knox, Knox, Knox."* The words stabbed at him, each whisper a thin, slicing blade, especially when he'd have to relive the memories again and again of when he found out. But it wasn't just the words. It was the shoves in the hallway, the cruel laughter, the spit on his backpack, and the constant bruises on his shoulders and arms from them punching him as they all walked by. Brady and his girlfriend, Cindy, were the leaders of all of it. They didn't just mock him. They hunted him. Knox tried to avoid them, slinking from class to class, ducking through crowded hallways, pressing himself against the cold, gray lockers, his breath coming fast. But they always found

him. At lunch, they dumped his food on the floor, Cindy's sharp laughter ringing out, Brady's thick hand shoving him against the wall.

Just today, they passed a note in math class, and everyone quietly snickered until it finally reached Knox. He looked around the class, took a deep breath knowing it was probably about him, and unfolded the paper revealing a drawing of a twisted, demonic figure that looked like Knox with a screaming face, eyes rolled back, pants down, and a small erect penis pointed at a naked bent over old woman with a rope around her neck and scribbled in pencil just above *Knox is a Grandma Fucker*. Knox could feel the lump in his throat grow, and his pulse beat louder in his ears as the room grew dark. The class laughed, and when the plump teacher turned from his chalk board and saw Knox with the paper he snatched it from his depressed hands, turned it right-side up chuckled and smirked out loud before he looked back up to the class and wiped his smile off his face, then crumpling it up, throwing it away, and simply not giving a care at all.

Every moment was a twisting knot of fear and shame. He lost his best friend to a bully, the teachers didn't care, his grandma was going crazy, and he was by himself, alone.

But it didn't end at school this time.

When the final bell rang, Knox tried to hurry home. He could hear Brady and Cindy in the hall yelling, "Where is Rope Boy?"

So he weaved his way through the sea of students and out of the dilapidated school, his shoes splashing through the misty puddles on the sidewalk, their tentacles stretching for his sneakers, but he didn't care; he wanted to die. No one stepped in still water, even the bravest of bullies, like Brady, skipped over them, as he then heard their laughter fading for a moment behind him. Knox turned to see if they were close, but saw their eyes flicking nervously to the still, dark pools of water as they tried to dodge even the smallest puddles. Knox continued forward, his breath sharp, his heart pounding, and he didn't feel good in his stomach, which felt like razor blades being shaken inside him. He even thought for a moment that maybe he should see how deep that still water runs, to give up like his mother, but he continued to run, and he was starting to slow down. He thought he could get home, slip into his room, close the door, and hide. But the whispers followed him, and the laughter grew louder.

“Hey, Freak Boy!” Cindy yelled! “You wanna to play?”

“Knox, Knox, Knox!” Brady yelled creepily.

Knox's breath caught. He didn't look back, and his run was now a fast walk, as he gasped for air.. He tried to walk faster, his gaze locked on his street of Duskmire Ave, a beacon of hope for at least a lesser evil.

But they were faster.

Something struck him in the back—hard, sharp pain flaring across his spine. He stumbled, catching himself against the wet,

iron fence of the old churchyard. His back stinging, he can feel warm, sticky blood drip down his back and stick to his shirt.

“Where you going, you fucking freak?” Brady’s thick voice sneered, his heavy boots squelching against the damp earth.

Knox turned, his heart pounding, his chest tight. Cindy leaned against the fence, her sharp nails tracing the iron bars, her smile a thin, cruel line.

“Please... just leave me alone,” Knox whispered, his voice trembling.

“Leave you alone?” Brady laughed, his thick fist cracking against his palm. “But we love hanging out with you. Right, Cindy?”

Cindy’s smile widened. “Yeah. You’re our favorite little freak.”

Knox tried to get up and run. But Brady caught him by the shirt, and his thick fist slammed against his cheek, pain flaring, his vision blurring. Knox stumbled, but Cindy’s sharp kick struck his knee, dropping him to the damp ground.

“Maybe we should plant you in the ground,” Cindy sneered, her sharp nails clawing at his hair, yanking his head back. “See if you grow into a pretty... little... flower!” She pushes his bed back with her index finger.

Knox struggled, tears burning his eyes, sticky and salty snot running in his mouth. Every breath he took was sharp and painful. “Stop... please... just stop...” he said in broken gasps.

But they didn't stop. Brady's fist crashed against his ribs, his breath exploding from his lungs. Cindy's sharp laughter twisted through the mist.

The world spun. The pain burned. His mind twisted with fear and shame. He was helpless. They would never stop. And then, a voice cut through the mist, cold, calm, and sharp.

"That's enough." It rumbled deep.

The laughter died. The blows stopped. Knox dared to peek through his dirt and snot-filled fingers, his gaze blurring.

Mr. Daniels stood at the edge of the misty street, his thin frame shadowed, his dark eyes fixed on the bullies. His straw hat tilted, his thin smile calm, but something was beneath it—something cold and dark.

"Who... who's this creep?" Brady sneered, but his voice shook.

Mr. Daniels stepped closer, his pale, thin figure seeming to glide through the mist, his figure glowing with the setting sun, but his dark eyes locked on them. "Go."

Cindy's smile faded. "We... we don't have to listen to you, old man."

"Oh, but you should." Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth, his gaze unblinking. "Go. Now." He said through gritted teeth.

The plants behind Knox seemed to shiver and blow violently as if there was wind, but there wasn't any. They were angry with

Mr. Daniel's anger, seemed to listen to and respond to him, and even though Knox felt like he should have been more afraid, he wasn't.

Brady looked around. The trees, the bushes, the weeds seemed angry, so he stumbled back, his face pale. "Come on... let's get out of here."

They turned, their laughter gone, their faces tight with fear. Knox watched them go, his body trembling, his chest burning with pain.

"Knox." Mr. Daniels' voice was a whisper now, smooth and calm. "Can you stand?"

Knox nodded, wincing as he tried to push himself up. His vision blurred, the pain twisting through him. But then Mr. Daniels' thin, pale hand was there, helping him to his feet, steadying him. His touch was cold, and it even stung, sending more pain throughout Knox's body.

"Th...thank... thank you," Knox whispered, his voice shaking.

Mr. Daniels smiled, a thin, calm smile. "Of course. It's in my nature... to tend to those who need help."

Knox leaned against the iron fence, his breath sharp, his gaze drifting to the mist-shrouded street. "They... they won't stop. They hate me. They... they want to hurt me."

“Fear and ignorance breed cruelty,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his dark eyes fixed on Knox. “But there are ways to... deal with such problems.”

Knox’s chest tightened. “D-deal with them?”

“Oh, yes,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth and soft. “There are ways to make sure they never hurt you again. Ways to... remove the thorns from your path.”

Knox’s heart raced. He looked up, meeting Mr. Daniels’ dark, calm gaze. “What... what do you mean?”

“Sometimes, a garden must be pruned,” Mr. Daniels whispered. “Sometimes, the weeds must be... uprooted.”

A cold shiver twisted through Knox’s chest. He didn’t know why, but a part of him understood. A part of him wanted to understand. “They... they’re just bullies. They... they’re not worth it.”

“Of course not. But a garden cannot thrive when it is choked by weeds, you’ll understand soon enough.” He helps Knox to straighten up again as they both turn the corner to Duskmire.

Knox’s breath came faster, his pulse pounding. He shook his head. “No... I... I can’t.”

“You don’t have to do anything, Knox.” Mr. Daniels leaned closer, his voice a soft, cold whisper. “But if you ever change your mind... You know where to find me.”

Knox stood alone beneath the twisted trees of his house, his body aching, his thoughts twisting. He wanted the pain to stop. He wanted the fear to end. He wanted them to leave him alone.

And a part of him—deep, cold, and desperate—wanted to know what Mr. Daniels meant, but he was afraid that he already knew.

Chapter 15

The Scent of Fear

Knox woke the next morning with a deep, aching pain twisting through his ribs. His cheek was swollen, a dark bruise blooming beneath his eye, and his lips were cracked, a faint, coppery taste lingering in his mouth. He tried to sit up, but his body screamed in protest, his muscles stiff, his bones aching. He hadn't told his grandmother what happened. She barely noticed him anyway, her wild eyes always fixed on the garden, her shaky, thin hands always paying more attention to the petals and soil in her garden. Her whispers had become constant, a soft, feverish murmur that filled the cramped house, like a creepy, distorted broken record.

“Bloom... stronger... grow... beautiful...”

Knox pulled his hoodie over his bruised face, his fingers trembling. He didn't want to go to school. Didn't want to see the sneering faces and listen to the cruel laughter. But staying home meant listening to his grandmother's whispers, watching her dig her thin fingers into the thick, dark soil, her wild eyes glowing with desperate hunger.

And worse—Mr. Daniels' words twisted in his mind. “Sometimes, the weeds must be... uprooted.”

Knox shuddered, trying to shake the thought away. He didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to remember that thin, cold smile. But he couldn't escape it. The warm spring mist clung thick around Moonville as Knox stepped out into the gray morning, its yellowish fever hue giving the damned city a plagued vibe as the damp air pressed against his aching skin. The town seemed quieter than usual, the narrow streets empty, the crooked rooftops looming against the pale sky. Even the birds were silent, their usual chirping swallowed by the mist.

Knox avoided the scattered puddles, his feet carefully stepping over each one. Still, deep down, it was almost a dangerously fun game to play, and any enjoyment in this town, even if it was dangerous, was entertaining. As he walked, his heart pounded, his gaze flicking nervously over his shoulder. He expected to see them—Brady and Cindy, the two bullies who made his life a nightmare—waiting to push on their newly created bruises in his arms and ready to give him new ones.

But the streets were empty.

A faint relief washed over him, but twisted with something darker—an uneasy, crawling dread. *Where were they? Why wasn't anyone around?* He repeated in his mind, his nervous cautions mind flicking around every corner and to every shadow. The schoolyard was shrouded in mist, the swings creaking in the cold breeze, the slide slick with dew. Knox hesitated, his chest

tight. He should be happy. Should be relieved. But the silence was too thick, too heavy.

“Knox!” a voice whispered through the mist.

He turned, his heart racing. It was Toby.

“Knox!” Toby whispered again, his wide, frantic eyes glowing beneath his wild curls. “Where were you? I looked everywhere!”

“I... I just...” Knox’s voice broke. “I’m here. I just... I don’t...”

Toby’s gaze darted nervously to the mist-shrouded street. “You have to be careful. Something’s wrong.”

Knox’s chest tightened. “Wrong? What do you mean?”

“They’re gone,” Toby whispered, his voice shaking.

“Brady... Cindy... they didn’t come to school. No one’s seen them since yesterday, and there’s a bunch of rumors about you!”

Knox’s breath caught. A cold, twisting dread clawed at his chest. “Gone?”

“Just... vanished,” Toby whispered. “My mom said the police are looking, but can’t find anything. No one knows what happened to them. I...I know I haven’t been like a good friend lately, and I’m sorry, okay, but everyone is saying that you maybe did something to them and...and, I had to warn you, cause I know you wouldn’t. Right?”

Knox's mind twisted, his pulse racing. Memories of Mr. Daniels' cold smile twisted through his thoughts, his soft, smooth voice echoing.

"Sometimes, a garden must be pruned," Knox mumbled softly.

"What did you say?" Toby looked worried at Knox, staring off into the distance with his bruised and cut eyelids.

"No..." Knox whispered, his fists clenching. "No, it... It can't be."

Toby grabbed his arm, his grip tight, his gaze desperate. "What do we do, Knox? What's going on?"

Knox pulled away, his breath quick, his thoughts spinning. "I... I don't know. I... I have to go."

"Go where?" Toby's voice was a sharp, desperate whisper. "Knox! Wait!"

Chapter 16

The Cassette

Knox ran, his feet slamming against the damp sidewalk, his breath sharp and desperate, and this time he didn't care about the still water maze. He needed answers. Needed to know what happened.

He skidded to a stop in front of Mr. Daniels' garden. The thick, twisting blooms swayed gently in the mist. Mr. Daniels was there, his thin frame crouched among the flowers, his pale, thin hands picking weeds and raking the soil with a small three-pronged rake.

"Mr. Daniels!" Knox shouted, his voice shaking.

Mr. Daniels looked up, his smile calm, his dark eyes gleaming. "Knox. Such a lovely morning for a walk, but shouldn't you be at school?"

"Brady and Cindy... they're gone. What did you do?" Knox's fists clenched, his voice breaking.

"Oh, I have just been tending to my garden, Knox. That's all I do." He continues raking his soil.

"No! You... you did something!"

"Gardens are fragile things, Knox. They must be nurtured. Protected. And sometimes... pruned."

Knox's chest tightened, his pulse pounding. "This... this is wrong... it's... It's evil..."

"Evil?" Mr. Daniels' smile widened. "Oh, Knox. It's just... nature."

And then he pulled something from his coat—a small, black cassette tape. A weathered label scrawled with jagged letters:

PLAY ME.

"I found this on my doorstep this morning," Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice a calm, cold whisper. "Perhaps you should listen."

Knox's chest tightened. He knew these tapes. The entire town knew about these tapes. They were never good. They never brought anything but pain. But Mr. Daniels' cold, calm gaze held him.

"Listen, Knox," Mr. Daniels whispered, placing the cassette in an old tape player and handing it along with headphones to Knox. "You need to know."

"No! These tapes are bad, everyone knows that!" Knox pushes the player away.

"Knox, this one is helpful, I promise." Mr. Daniel's raspy voice cuts through the air as Knox's nervous hands grab the player.

Knox stares at Mr. Daniels, who just started raking again and plucking weeds, one by one, and then choking them in his other hand, squeezing their life away, as he probably did with Brady

and Cindy. He takes a deep breath, places the tape inside the Walkman, its plastic door snapping shut, locking the tape inside. He furiously and bravely places the headphones on his cold ears. The cheap orange foam instantly made his ears uncomfortable as it stuck to his sweat and made his ears itch. He doesn't hesitate and slams the play button instantly with his thumb. He could feel the tape player roll its wheels on the inside as the tape crackled and a low hiss twisted through the tiny speakers of the headphones. Knox stretched his ears to hear anything, but the hissing sound continued until a loud blast of music made him jump. Trying to get past his exploding heart pounding in his ear, he hears an 80s synthesized version of "Pumped Up Kicks" by Foster the People play. Knox knows the song and has a feeling of where this is going, his heart racing, and then the voices of Brady's frantic, panicked voice mix with the music.

"...we do it tomorrow... the school... we... we take them all out... and Knox... I want to save him last. Little freak...I want to tie him up and make him watch! I want him to know we will kill the whole school because of his lame pussy ass. So don't forget, get your dad's gun, lots of ammo, and maybe his handcuffs tonight, when he's sleeping."

Knox's breath froze, his chest tightening, his pulse racing.

Cindy's voice twisted with fear. "I... I...Okay... but we have to actually do it...I'll get everything tonight."

“We can finally say goodbye to Rope Boy.” Brady’s laugh was pure evil as it plagued Cindy, which vibrated the headphones back to the song.

“You better run, better run, run from my gun...” The song cuts over their laughter, then the tape clicks off.

“They were planning to kill you, Knox, along with others at school.” Mr. Daniels stood next to Knox, his whispered voice sincere. “But they can’t hurt you now, nor the school.”

Knox’s knees felt weak, his breath coming in as if he was gasping for air after drowning. “You... you... You stopped them...”

“I protected you,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his dark eyes unblinking. “Sometimes, the weeds must be uprooted.”

Knox stared at him, his chest heaving. But somewhere, beneath the fear, something else twisted—something cold. Something dark.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Mr. Daniels smiled, thin and calm. “Of course. It’s what I do.”

“B...But shouldn’t we just tell the Sheriff his daughter was going to help shoot the entire school? He can stop them!” Knox nervously stuttered and was unsure about the tape. “Those tapes are bad, but what if it’s not true! What if they didn’t really say that?”

“My boy, these tapes are evil, yes, I agree, but this tape is calling me, calling you to stop them! The sheriff isn’t going to do anything. Cindy and Brady already had their dad’s gun and were ready. We are trapped like rats here with the worst possible sinister creatures, and Brady and Cindy are one of them.” Mr. Daniels’ black eyes stared into Knox’s soul.

Knox handed the cassette tape player back to Mr. Daniels.
“Thank you, but...”

“Knox, just let me handle this, okay. I have something else I want to show you, but not at the moment.” He looks at the top of his eyes at Knox, glaring at him with sorrowful eyes. “Now, go home, okay.”

“Okay.” Knox nodded and turned as if in a trance toward his home. He knew it was wrong, but it was needed, and after all, this was Moonville, and it had always been survival of the smartest.

Chapter 17

The Bloom of Betrayal

Knox didn't sleep as usual. He lay in his narrow bed, his gaze fixed on the dark ceiling, his chest rising and falling in quick, sharp breaths, and his stomach ached like hell. He tried to eat earlier and made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich since his grandmother had been doing nothing but staring out the back window and murmuring. His stomach cramped, but the whispers of the tape twisted through his mind—Brady's frantic voice, Cindy's sobs, and Mr. Daniels' calm, smooth words.

But this didn't feel like protection. It felt like something else, something darker, something cold; it was wrong, just as wrong and wretched as Brady and Cindy.

The next couple of days bled together. School became a gray, misty blur, his bruises darkening, the whispers of his classmates twisting in the air around him. But it was the whispers at home that gnawed at him most. His grandmother, Beth, had changed. Her obsession with the garden had become a fever. Knox watched as she smeared thick, dark soil across her thin arms, her wild eyes fixed on the brightly colored flowers and vines. Her hands, once careful and steady, now dug into the dirt with desperate hunger, her fingers trembling.

But there was something else.

Mr. Daniels had started visiting more often. His tall, thin figure would appear in the mist, his straw hat tilted low, his dark eyes focused and precise. Beth would greet him, her face lighting up, her thin fingers brushing against his. And then they would disappear into the garden, their whispers twisting through the air.

Knox followed them once, to an area in Mr. Daniel's garden that he had never been to. He had formed a round, hidden room in the garden of thick, swaying roses, topiaries, and vines. In the center was a large patch of dense, lush grass, the kind that is so soft that anyone could fall asleep in it. Knox watched as his grandmother knelt and lay on her back in the lush grass. Her smile was happy but wicked, her breath sharp, and her chest heaving. Mr. Daniels then began to put his pale hands against her thin shoulders, his voice a soft, smooth whisper in her ears. She leaned closer, her thin arms wrapping around him, her lips pressing against his. But it was more than just a kiss. His pale fingers brushed against her bare skin, trailing dark, damp soil across her arms, her chest. His hands moved with a slow, sensual precision, tracing lines of soil along her collarbone, her thighs, her stomach. Beth's breath came faster, her thin body arching beneath his touch, her wild eyes glowing with desperate hunger.

Knox shuddered, tearing his gaze away. He didn't understand. Didn't want to understand. He left them be, and the thoughts added to what was already haunting him.

But the next morning, Beth didn't speak to him. Didn't even look at him. She moved through the house like a shadow, her thin fingers tracing the window frames, her wild eyes fixed on the garden.

And then the next day, she was gone.

Knox waited. Waited for her to come home. Waited for her thin, wild voice to call his name, force him to eat her cooking, for her frail figure to appear in the mist outside in her garden.

But she didn't.

Another two days passed. The house grew cold and empty. The twisted blooms in the garden seemed to sway, their dark petals becoming wild and untamed. He noticed that they were increasing, leaning, merging toward Mr. Daniels' garden, as if they yearned to become a part of his. The twisting ache in Knox's stomach had already started to dull, except for the hunger pains. He began to feel less weak than he had ever been. He was almost out of bread, just the butts were left as Knox called them, and he finished off the peanut butter and jelly last night. There wasn't anything else to eat, and without his grandmother, there was no one to help get food. With motivation and a mission, he dressed and went to Toby's house. He was smart, and maybe he could help him.

Walking depressingly and hungrily slowly, he walked about a five-minute walk to Toby's. His house was much nicer; he could

see that his parents cared and always worked together to keep their little bubble safe, in a town that was popping everyone's bubble. Brady and Cindy almost popped that bubble, and Knox was grateful that Toby realized what he was doing. It was a Friday, everyone was outside fixing their lawns and gardens, playing hooky from work and school to fix their living art, and Knox was getting stares from everyone as he moped down the sidewalk. He climbed the stairs to Toby's front porch and knocked on his nicely painted and cleaned door. The lock on the door unlatched, and its metal thud on the door frame made Knox jump. A tall, beautiful woman with long brown hair answered, wearing a light pink sundress.

"Knox! Well, we haven't seen you in a long time." Her bright pink lips moved effortlessly.

"I...I know I've been sick, but I'm ok now. Is Toby home?"

"Of course! Let me get him, okay." Her dress follows her twirl back inside the house, the door still open slightly.

Toby's loud, clunky footsteps pound on the stairs to his house and closer to the front door as he whips the door open. His glasses already slid to the tip of his nose, "What's up, skibidi!"

"Huh?" Knox gives him a confused look.

"Cool, huh? I learned it from school, and Andrew learned it from the new person in town. Actually, there are two new people, you know, from the outside. I think his name's Cove or something. I don't know the other person's name. But we are all

like saying it now.” Toby rambled quickly and excitedly, trying to fill Knox in on the latest.

“Oh, ok, cool! Skibidi. Got it. I didn’t know there were new people.” Knox was confused and forgot that he was starving.

“That’s because you never come to school or go outside anymore.”

“Well, I’ve been feeling much better, so I want to go, especially with no Brady and Cindy around.”

Toby closes the door to his house. “Did you do it? It’s okay if you did, I’ll still be your best friend.” He whispers.

“Did I do what?”

“Like kill them or something.”

“What? No! I have no clue what happened to them.” Toby swallowed hard. He knew exactly what had happened, but it was only half a lie.

“Okay, well, I trust you! We are all happier at school. You should come back.” He pushes his glasses up.

“Toby... I... I don’t know where she is. I don’t know where my grandma is...”

Toby’s face twisted with fear. “She... she didn’t leave a note?”

“No!” Knox’s voice broke. “She... she just... she just vanished!”

“You... you don’t think...” Toby’s voice trembled. “You don’t think Mr. Daniels... Maybe he did something with Brady and Cindy and now your grandma?”

Knox’s chest tightened. “No... no, he... he wouldn’t... I don’t think...” But he didn’t believe it. His mind twisted, his pulse pounding. He knew Mr. Daniels did something to Brady and Cindy, but did he take his grandmother? What if... what if she just left? What if she were like Brady and Cindy—locked away, trapped? Knox’s mind raced with intrusive thoughts.

“Well, just be careful, I’m sure she’s around.”

“Yeah, but I’m hungry, Toby. She hasn’t been around, and I don’t have any more food.”

“Oh shit, okay, um, you don’t have any money?”

“I did, but I think my grandma took it after giving it to me.”

“That’s messed up! I can tell my mom, maybe she can help take us to the store.”

“No, I... I don’t want to do that; maybe my grandma will be back soon. I’ll just wait.”

“Okay, well then hold on!” Toby darts back into his house.

Knox looks around and admires how clean everything is. How the air even smells cleaner, and how it feels lighter as it blows through the porch. The birds even seemed to sing more here, and Knox couldn’t help feeling relaxed just standing on the porch. For the first time in a long while, he was able to close his eyes, take a deep breath of fresh air, not worry, and just listen to

the good that was here in Moonville. Toby's clunky footsteps grow louder, interrupting his silence as they race toward the door, and then he gives it a good kick to open.

"Here, take this." He whispers loudly and hands Knox two plastic bags stuffed with food.

"Toby! Seriously?" Knox whispers back.

"Yeah, go ahead, they won't notice, and we can just go get more."

"Dude, you're so skibidi!"

"There ya go! You got it!" They both laugh.

"Okay, go before my mom sees." Toby starts to push him to leave and looks back at the door and the front windows.

"Okay, okay, thank you! You're my best friend! I owe you!"

"Ya, ya, I'll see you later maybe."

"Ok, thank you!" Knox yells a whisper as he's already walking down the sidewalk quickly back to his house. His stomach rumbles at the sight of cookies and chips sticking out from the top of the bag. He can't remember the last time he ate this good.

Chapter 18

A Work of Art

Beth's body was a canvas. Her pale, thin limbs stretched wide, her frail frame suspended between the thick, twisting vines coiled around her arms and legs. The dark soil smeared across her bare skin, her once-soft flesh now rough and cracked, her veins dark beneath the surface.

But she wasn't alone.

Across the dim, damp basement, Brady and Cindy were tied to the rusted metal chairs, their wrists bound with thick, twisted vines, their faces pale, their eyes wide with horror. Their muffled screams twisted through the damp air, their desperate struggles sending the chairs scraping against the cold, wet stone floor.

Mr. Daniels stood before Beth, his dark eyes calm, his thin smile serene. His straw hat rested on a nearby table, his pale, thin hands gloved with dark, damp soil.

"You wanted beauty, didn't you, Beth?" His voice was soft, a gentle breeze against her withered skin. "You wanted to bloom. To be the envy of them all."

Beth's wild eyes stared blankly ahead, her thin lips parting in a faint, desperate whisper. "B-bloom... yes... beautiful..."

"Oh, you will be," Mr. Daniels whispered, his pale fingers tracing her cheek, the dark soil thick beneath his touch. "But beauty must be earned. It must be cultivated."

Behind him, Brady thrashed against his bonds despite being starved for days, his muffled screams twisting through the damp air. Cindy's sobs were sharp, frantic, her wide eyes smeared and dripped with mascara, which locked on the twisted vines coiling around Beth's arms and legs.

"See them, Beth?" Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth. "The young, the cruel, the thoughtless. The weeds that choke the garden. But you... You will become something greater."

The vines twisted tighter, the thick, dark tendrils slithering across Beth's body, wrapping around her thin limbs. Thorns pricked her flesh, thin trails of dark blood trickling along her pale skin. But she didn't scream. She couldn't. Her voice was a faint, desperate whisper, her wild eyes dull and empty.

But the transformation didn't happen on its own.

Mr. Daniels stepped closer, his pale, gloved fingers tracing the thick, dark vines. He pulled at the twisting tendrils, guiding them, wrapping them around her thin arms, legs, and waist. The dark roses bloomed along the twisting stems, their crimson petals brushing against her exposed skin, drinking and feeding on her. But the vines needed to take root. They needed something to cling to.

"Skin is but a canvas," Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth. "But beneath it lies true beauty."

His fingers pressed against her thin shoulders, his grip firm. Slowly, carefully, he began to pull—thin, pale strips of Beth's

skin peeled away beneath his touch, the dark, damp soil thick against her exposed muscles. The thick vines twisted beneath his hands, their thorny tendrils digging into the fresh, exposed flesh.

“See how the roots take hold?” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice almost soothing. “See how they embrace you?”

“Bloom... beautiful...” Beth’s voice was a faint, shivering whisper.

“Yes, Beth,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice soft and calm. “You will be. Forever.”

Brady’s muffled screams grew louder, his body thrashing against the thick vines that bound him. Cindy’s pale face twisted with horror, her muffled sobs tearing through the damp air.

But Mr. Daniels didn’t stop. He moved with slow, deliberate care, pressing thorned seeds into the exposed muscle of Beth’s shoulders, thighs, and stomach. The seeds started twisting inside of Beth, their thin roots growing and digging into her flesh, spreading beneath the damp soil he smeared across her body. The vines coiled tighter, their thick, dark tendrils twisting around her torso and limbs. Roses bloomed along the twisting stems, their deep crimson petals brushing against her exposed muscles, their roots digging into her flesh, but some of the vines struggled to take hold, as Mr. Daniels placed some glasses on the tip of his nose and inspected the growth. The slick, exposed muscle resisted them, and Mr. Daniels leaned closer, “Ah, I’ll help you,

my lovelies.” His fingers pulled at the thin strips of her peeling skin, tearing it away to expose the dark, wet muscle beneath.

“There we are,” he whispered, his voice soft, almost soothing. “Sometimes, the garden needs a helping hand.”

His fingers pressed the vines into her raw flesh, his hands guiding the twisting tendrils.

“Please...” Brady’s voice was a faint, muffled sob. “Please... let us go...”

Mr. Daniels turned, his calm, dark eyes locking with Brady’s. “Why? So you can spread your poison again? So you can hurt... destroy... consume?” His voice went from caring to deep with anger.

Cindy’s wide, desperate eyes filled with tears. “We... we didn’t mean it... please...”

“Meaning is irrelevant,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth. “Intent is a seed. And your seeds have already grown.”

He turned back to Beth, his pale fingers pressing against her withered face. “But you, Beth... you will bloom. You will be beautiful.” His voice was calm and nurturing once more.

The vines twisted tighter, the roses blooming thicker, their roots sinking deep beneath her exposed muscle, the tiny, thorned seeds quickly sprouting small leaves. Her thin, wild eyes stared blankly ahead, her lips parted in a faint, desperate smile. He begins to pose her rigidly formed body. He moves her arms to the front of her, and then her hands almost touching as if she’s

holding something. He then takes the chains that hang from the ceiling, wrapping them under her arms, and connects them to form a loop with the rusted red hooks. He then walks to another chain hanging by the basement wall and begins to pull it down. The slow clanking of the chains with the hoist's click and echo throughout the basement. Cindy watches from across the room in horror, flinching with each click. Beth's body is slowly rising from the table and is then suspended hanging from the rusty chains, her arms still in perfect place. He then adjusts her head, moving down to her legs, and finally adjusts her feet to make her look like she's walking; her left foot toes behind her and her right foot heel in front of her.

“Heel, toe, heel, toe,” He starts to hum the waltz and dances to some cabinets on the wall behind him. He pulls out some wire and then grabs his rusted pliers from the wall. Still humming, he wraps the wire around Beth's waist and weaves it through her dress to help make the dress look as if it's flowing behind her. He then waltzes back to the same cabinet and, with a jar of seeds and another jar of oozing red sludge, sets them on his metal table with a thud. He opens the large jar of sludge first, its metal lid falling and clanking on the table loudly. He then puts the jar to his nose and inhales its rancid aroma, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. Then looks at Brady and Cindy. “Your insides will soon be this.” He gives them an evil smirk as they

look at each other, and their cries are muffled with their snot-filled gag cloths.

He begins to hum again, holding the jar with one hand, like a football, then sticks his bare hand in the jar, scooping globs of the petrified entrails over Beth's formed dress. He then paints more over her body and arms, where her dress would have been. He places the jar back on the table, wipes his hands clean on his apron, and grabs the seeds. He carelessly opens the jar, scoops handfuls, and spreads the seeds where he just placed painted Beth's body.

"B-bloom... yes... beautiful..." Beth whispers under the fast-growing leaves that are starting to choke her air.

"Yes! Yes, my beautiful!" His raspy voice places the jar on the table, wiping his hands again on his apron. "Oh, almost forgot!" He excitedly grabs a small round terracotta flowerpot from the floor, fixes it to Beth's hands with more wire, and the sounds of squelching flesh being stabbed as he pokes and twists the cables so the pot will stay. He fills the pit just enough with his special blend of soil and then walks toward Brady and Cindy, and they both gasp and start to cry heavily.

"Oh, stop it, it's not your turn yet." He reaches for Officer Garlow's head that is still decaying, his flesh hanging from his skull, the coagulated blood and brains still being fed on by beautiful purple lilies that had formed and broken free from his cracked skull.

Cindy screams, and Brady's breath becomes sharp and rigid. They had no idea human skulls were used to feed plants just above their own heads.

"Perfect! Perfect!" He places Garlow's head in the pot Beth is holding and adds more soil.

And finally, Mr. Daniels stepped back, his dark eyes calm, his thin smile serene.

Beth's twisted body stood before him, a delicate, grotesque sculpture of twisting vines and blooming roses; her withered face and body were hidden behind a mask of dark, blooming petals and leaves. Mr. Daniels flips a switch on the wall, as several lights near Beth flicker on with purple, full-spectrum, iridescent lights illuminating the entire room. The seeds he just spread start to form in front of his eyes. The vines and flowers soak up the light as they twist, grow, and feed off Beth's body.

"A masterpiece." He smiles, admiring his work.

Chapter 19

The Seeds of Truth

Mr. Daniels' neighbor's house was quiet. There wasn't any screaming, any tears, and no jealous old woman staring at his garden through her kitchen window. Knox was snoring in his bed and surrounded by candy wrappers, cookies, and chips. For the first time in a long time, he slept without any dreams, without any stomach pains, or feeling horribly sick. A loud *bang, bang, bang*, came from the front door. Knox moved slightly to the sound, echoing in his head, knocking several candy wrappers to the floor. *Knox, Knox, Knox*, another set of knocks on the door, but his name was heard instead as loud whispers in his ear. This set, this time, made him sit straight up in bed, breathing heavily, drool dripping from his chocolate-stained and chip-crumbed mouth. *Bang, bang, bang*, another three loud knocks. He wipes his mouth, yawns, and gets out of bed to go downstairs.

"Knox? You in there?" A grungy, muffled voice outside the door gets his attention.

He yawns again, making his way downstairs, the steps echoing in the silence. Grips the cold door handle and swings open the door.

"Did I wake you?" Mr. Daniels' tall, skinny figure towers above him. "You must have had a good night last night, it's nearly noon."

“I...” he yawns. “I finally slept really good and Toby helped me with food.”

“Ah, well, I see now.” He takes off his hat and shuffles it around with both hands. “Well, I’ve got something I want to show you. Something I want you to see. Right now.”

“Um...okay.” He yawns again and fixes his hair, raking through it with his fingertips to comb his wild curls down.

He followed behind Mr. Daniels, whose garden loomed ahead, the thick, swaying blooms whispering in the sunlight. Knox can feel the warmth and the cool breeze flowing through his tangled hair, and finally, after a while, he remembers this feeling. He hadn’t felt free enough in a long time to pay attention. But something was different. Something was off. His grandmother’s garden had merged with Mr. Daniels’, and he must have been up all night pruning it for the competition. And then he saw it as they approached the center of his garden.

A new figure stood among the flowers—a tall, elegant shape, its thin arms stretched in front holding a potted lily, its slender body twisted in a delicate, graceful pose. The thick, dark vines curled around the figure, thick petals blooming along the twisted limbs, and a beautiful, flowing dress made from tiny white baby’s breath. Butterflies were already dancing around her and feeding off her flowers.

Knox’s chest tightened, his breath sharp, his mouth dropped in dreary dread. *No. No, it couldn’t be.* He screamed in his head.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Mr. Daniels’ voice whispered, smooth and calm.

Knox turned, his chest heaving. Mr. Daniels stood in the mist, his thin figure calm, his straw hat tilted low.

“Where... where’s my grandma?” Knox whispered, his voice breaking.

“Right here, Knox. Blooming. Becoming part of something greater.”

“No!” Knox screamed, stumbling back. “No... that’s... that’s not her!”

Mr. Daniels’ calm, dark eyes met Knox’s. “It is. But not in the way you remember. Beth has become something... beautiful. Something she always wanted.”

Knox’s chest heaved, tears burning in his eyes. “You... you did this... You killed her!”

“I saved you, Knox,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice smooth, almost soothing. “I protected you. And I protected everyone she would have poisoned.”

“Poisoned?” Knox’s voice broke. “No... she... she loved me... What did you do!” He fell to his knees, hopeless.

“Did she?” Mr. Daniels’ thin smile widened. “Would you like to hear it for yourself?”

Before Knox could respond, Mr. Daniels reached into his coat and pulled out a small, black cassette tape—an old, weathered tape with thick, dark writing across the label:

Play Me.

Knox's breath caught, his chest tightening. "That's... that's another one of those tapes..."

"Yes," Mr. Daniels whispered, his smile thin. "One of Moonville's little mysteries. But this one is special. It's your grandmother's confession."

Knox hesitated, his fear twisting with desperate curiosity. He nodded.

Mr. Daniels slipped the cassette into a small, old tape player like before and handed it to Knox. He didn't hesitate. He didn't fight; he reached up and grabbed the black Walkman, which felt like a thousand pounds in his hand. His arm instantly collapsed to the freshly cut grass by his knees. He places the headphones on his ears, the orange cushions instantly itching him, and presses play.

The tape crackled with static, a low hiss twisting through the sunlight. Then a loud, blasted guitar and pounding drums blast through the speakers, and then a grungy voice starts to sing "Somebody Puts Something in My Drink" by the Ramones.

"It feels like somebody put something.

Somebody put something in my drink.

Somebody put something

Somebody put something."

The tape crackles, fades, and then Beth's voice takes over the music—sharp, bitter, twisted with hate.

“I hate him. I hate that little brat. I never wanted him. Never wanted to be stuck with this snot-nosed brat!” Sounds of cooking were in the background, pans clanking, and a sound of sizzling. “His no-good mother got herself finger-fucked by that idiot from work in her car and didn’t even see her idiot husband riding his stupid bicycle on the road.” Her voice twisted with venom, a faint, twisted laugh escaping. “Dumb bitch sent his body flying like a rag doll. Zombie freak he turned out to be, clinging to life for weeks before finally dying.” Beth snorts and chuckles at herself.

Knox’s breath staggered, his chest tightening, his pulse racing.

“Then that dumb bitch couldn’t handle it. Weak! Weak dumb bitch! No daughter of mine. Now she rots in Halo Hills. And I was left with him. That little shadow. That little curse.” Her voice became a sharp, twisted laugh. More pans clanking, and a plate was tossed on the kitchen countertop. “Every morning, I mix just a little—just enough to make him weak, just enough to keep him tired. He’s too stupid to notice. Then one day...” She cackles and snorts again. “Just a few drops in his tea. Just a sprinkle in his eggs. He’ll think I’m feeding him... he thinks I care.” Her voice twisted with dark amusement. “But I don’t. I never did. He’s weak. A shadow. A curse. Like his mother. But he won’t be for much longer...”

“It feels like somebody put something. Somebody put something in my drink.” The grunt voice of Joey Ramone, drums, and electric guitar, takes over Beth’s maniacal laughter.

The tape clicked off. The warmth surrounded Knox on his knees, his head drooped, and he stared at the grass below him. A butterfly had landed on his hands, holding the tape player, and taking his attention away. Tears rolled down his face, “No... no, she... she loved me...” Knox whispered, his voice a thin, desperate thread.

“She loved only herself, Knox,” Mr. Daniels whispered, kneeling beside him. “Her garden. Her pride. Her control. You were an inconvenience. A burden she didn’t want.”

Knox’s vision blurred, tears burning his eyes. His grandmother... the woman who raised him... who told him she loved him... she hated him. She had been trying to kill him.

“Why... why didn’t you tell me?” Knox sobbed, his voice breaking.

“I tried to protect you,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his voice calm, almost gentle. “I tried to show her a better way. But she chose to feed her darkness. And in the end... it consumed her.”

Knox stared at the twisted figure in the garden, the thick, dark vines curling around the elegant shape, the purple geraniums blooming along the twisted limbs.

“She... she’s... she’s dead...” Knox whispered.

“Not dead, Knox,” Mr. Daniels whispered. “Transformed. Part of something greater. Something beautiful.”

Knox’s breath came faster, his chest tightening, his thoughts spinning. He was alone. His grandmother was gone. She had tried to kill him... and she never loved him.

“I... I don’t have anyone...” Knox whispered, his voice a thin, desperate whisper. “I... I’m alone...”

Mr. Daniels reached out, his pale, thin fingers brushing against Knox’s shoulder. “You are not alone. You have me. I will care for you. Protect you. Teach you.”

Knox looked up, his wide, desperate eyes meeting Mr. Daniels’ calm, dark gaze. “Teach me?”

“Yes,” Mr. Daniels whispered, his thin smile calm. “Teach you how to tend the garden. How to nurture life... and prune what poisons it.”

Knox’s chest heaved, his breath coming in sharp, desperate gasps. But then something twisted within him—something dark, something cold. His fists clenched, his breath slowed.

“I... I want to learn,” Knox whispered, his voice trembling. “I... I want to know how... how to care for the garden.” He stood up firm and direct.

Mr. Daniels’ smile widened, his dark eyes gleaming. “I thought you’d never ask.”

“Come, Knox. It’s time you learn to tend the garden.”

Mr. Daniels turned, his thin figure gliding toward the back of the house, his pale hand beckoning. Knox followed, his chest tight, his breath heavy but even. They passed through the twisting blooms, the thick, dark flowers swaying in the spring air. He looks back at his grandmother and the butterflies that surround her. *She got what she deserved*, he thought, *but she's more beautiful than she'll ever be now.*

Mr. Daniels pulled open the cellar door, the dark air clawing at Knox's face. They descended the narrow, creaking stairs, the flickering light casting twisted shadows against the cold stone walls. Knox's eyes had to adjust from the bright sun outside; everything seemed dark, and he could only see a few inches before him. His nose flared, with the scent of soil and something putrid. His heart sank when he finally found the other end of the basement. Brady and Cindy squinted their eyes from the lights, still tied to the rusted chairs. Their faces were pale, and their eyes became wide with desperation as they saw Knox, their faint, muffled voices yelling for Knox. Their muffled screams twisted through the damp air, their bound bodies thrashing against the thick, twisted vines that coiled around their wrists and ankles.

"Knox..." Cindy sobbed. "Knox, please..." Her voice squealed through her gag rag.

Mr. Daniels smiled, his dark eyes gleaming. "Knox... a garden must be pruned. Weeds must be uprooted. And now... You will learn."

Knox's breath came faster, his chest heaving. But something dark twisted within him, his fists clenching, his breath slowing.

"Show me," Knox whispered, his voice a thin, cold thread.

"Show me how to... prune the garden."

Mr. Daniels' smile widened. "As you wish." He turns and slams the basement doors closed, locking them behind him as the room fills with darkness.

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