

Like emerging from a long illness, the first week of Spring heralded an undeniable sense of relief. The air felt somehow lighter, carrying a strange sort of sweetness free from dark clouds and icy gusts of wind. Cascading through the clear sky, the sun's rays painted the air with a pleasant warmth that seeped into Ethel's skin and warmed her dark grey hair.

For the first time in a long time, she stood in her garden without a coat. The once-wilted flowers stood up straight again, their leaves shining in various shades of green. Over the fence, rolling hills stretched out before ending in a small town and a winding harbour.

Ethel leaned down, her stiff joints protesting as she braced them against the pebbled path she had made many years ago. Unlike the blooming azaleas before her, she was long past her prime.

Reaching forward, she took the spade from her apron pocket and pushed it into the empty dirt. Her eyes tracked the slicing movements the tool made as it carved through the earth. The metallic glint of silver burned through her mind.

*Dig. Dig. Stab—*

Laughter echoed through the air. Ethel leaned back on her heels, watching as a young boy ran towards her, his blonde hair shimmering in the evening light.

“Grandmother!” He cried, coming to an abrupt stop by her side.

“Good evening, Arthur,” she smiled, peering behind him. “Where is your mother?”

He shrugged, and Ethel raised her eyes questioningly. The toddler was rarely allowed outside alone, and she doubted that the boy had asked permission.

“Look,” Arthur held out a pure white flower that was slightly creased from being clasped in his hand. “For you!”

Ethel laughed and wiped her hands on her apron before taking the flower. Recently, she could never seem to keep the dirt from beneath her fingers.

“Arthur, there you are!” A new voice entered the space and the boy’s mother came to his side, picking him up despite his protests. “Sorry for interrupting your work.”

“Oh, how will I ever recover?” Ethel rose, her grin like the sliver of a knife. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m alright, everything considered,” Carol said, the bones in her wrists sticking out as she held her son close to her chest. “Still no sight of him.”

Ethel nodded, making sure not to let her gaze linger too long on the dark bruise around her daughter’s eye or the healing cut on Arthur’s forehead. With any luck, the injuries would fade as if they’d never been.

“Perhaps he bolted.”

Carol nodded, and Ethel didn’t miss the tension that drained from her creased forehead. Simply thinking of the ex-convict made the older woman’s stomach churn. She didn’t understand how he had ever been considered fit to be a free man—the glow that had resurfaced in his wife’s eyes during his absence told it all.

A bee whipped past Carol’s face and she turned her head to watch as it darted away to its hive, circling at the entrance with several of its companions. A wasp struggled to pass through.

“What are they doing?”

Ethel took a breath. “They’re guarding their queen.”

A silence stretched between them, and Carol departed after saying something about getting Arthur ready for bed. A breeze sidled through the air as the sun fell lower in the sky—although it was spring, it still became cold at night.

Ethel didn’t move from her position, watching the fight between the insects in silence. One bee was particularly persistent. After a long struggle, it dropped like a dead weight, taking the wasp with it.

The woman turned her eyes back to the flowerbeds before her, perfectly lined up and dappled with the sun's final rays.

Perfect.

So perfect, that she knew nobody would ever question what lay underneath.