



A NOVEL

THE FLOWERS
SEE
EVERYTHING.

WHERE
DARKNESS
BLOOMS

ANDREA
HANNAH

WHERE DARKNESS BLOOMS

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HANNAH



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The land had always been parched but its thirst for blood was learned.

The people indigenous to the land could not stay as no crops would grow. Travelers exploring the west never stayed for longer than a fortnight. Frontiersmen swept through—first on horses and then by wagon. Each time they left behind only that which they no longer wished to carry. They left broken spindles and dried pinto beans and scuffed horseshoes, a trail of useless, forgotten things, in their wake.

Stay. A whisper in the dusty breeze. But they never heard the plea.

When the travelers attempted to pass through, the land called on the winds to lash their wagons and overturn their carriages.

Stay. Its yearning was laced into the wind.

But they mended their splintered wheels and reshoed their horses by dawn.

New travelers arrived, and this time, the land did not hesitate. Its winds roared across the honeyed plains, toppling carriages and

basins, coaxing the flames of oil lamps toward the sun-dried fields. Burning up the opportunity to abandon it.

It held them hostage on its dry, cracked earth. The travelers regrouped, picking up what was left within the ash.

Stay. A rumble from its greedy roots.

But the mourners moved on, as they all had done, the bones of their dead marinated in its lifeless soil. Where blood had been spilled, sunflowers grew over the unmarked graves. They swayed in the wind, alone, roots drinking from the decay.

Until a traveler with a birthmark the shape of an ivy leaf arrived with his wife.

Stay, the land whispered, as it always did.

This time, the traveler paused.

The land shivered in excitement. The winds picked up to carry its words closer to the traveler's heart.

Keep me.

The traveler could feel the words at the edge of the wind, like the weight of a secret just before the telling. He grabbed his great-grandfather's weather vane from his carriage and placed it at the edge of the field. The wind rattled through the rusted metal. This time he heard them.

KEEP ME.

How? The traveler wondered.

The wind shuddered through the field where the sunflowers swayed, where the stolen lives of the dead lay. *Blood. Blood. Blood.*

The traveler told his wife about the whispers through the weather vane, the sunflowers calling. "There will be prosperity here. This place is different." There was only one requirement.

He reached for his wife's wrist and pulled his hunting knife from his pocket. "Just a few drops," he promised.

His wife refused. "No," she said, pulling away. "This is madness."

She ran, but it was too late. The cut to her wrist had been made, and it was much deeper than what the traveler had promised. She

dropped into the dust like a sinking ship, the brittle grasses swallowing her whole.

The man buried her in the barren earth. When he rose the next morning, sunflowers with butter yellow petals surrounded the spot.

The land whispered, *More*.

"I will get you more," The man replied. Then he began to build.

As other travelers came to the wretched land, they saw what the man had begun to create. They saw the opportunity to start anew amid the golden fields. Finally, *finally*, they stayed.

Yet the land had tasted blood, and it wanted *more, more, more*.

The traveler did not tell his next wife before he brought out the knife.

CHAPTER ONE



The day Delilah's mom disappeared, there was a wilted sunflower on the bathroom sink. Two years later, all that was left was a smudge of yellow, a stain she could only see in just the right light.

On that day, she'd woken up for school and stumbled into the tiny bathroom on the third floor in this dusty old house, still achy from the night before. She'd spent a full minute poking at the bags under her eyes before she'd noticed the brown butter petals hanging limp over the faucet.

It wasn't necessarily odd for Indigo Cortez to leave bits and bobs around the house, soiled paintbrushes and rolls of washi tape trailing after her like breadcrumbs. But Delilah's mother was an artist. She had a taste for color, for light. She liked things that felt *alive*.

Delilah had held that half-dead sunflower in her palm for only a second before tossing it in the trash. Such a shriveled thing couldn't belong to her mother.

Now she knew to hold on to things a little tighter. A little longer.

There were no more sunflowers—dead or alive—in the last

house on Old Fairview Lane, except for the obstinate ones across the road that refused to stop multiplying. It shouldn't have annoyed Delilah as much as it did. Kansas *was* the Sunflower State. And in a town like Bishop, all wide open fields the color of corn silk even in the high heat of summer, it only made sense they continued to spread. Bishop was surrounded by them, a wall of aggressive yellow looming on the periphery with their empty, unreadable faces. They always seemed to be looking in, no matter which direction the sun faced. Delilah had always felt watched by them, but lately, something was different. It felt like they were *listening*, too.

At least she could keep them out of the house.

She stood at the kitchen window, watching the flowers lurch in the wind. It had started to pick up in the last hour, even though her phone said the winds wouldn't come in until later that night. The app was wrong, though, like it often was about Bishop's weather. The storm was already here. Delilah could feel it in the pea green sky hanging low overhead, the way static electricity in the air clung to her like a briar patch.

She hustled to the back of the house and yanked open the door to the storage closet. A riot of faded roof shingles, splintered patio furniture, oil cans and buckets rusted shut, and cardboard boxes—so many boxes—sat cluttering up the room. These were the things she had to choose from, a graveyard of broken things to prevent even more broken things. Flattened boxes to shore up the windows, shingles and old sheets and painter's tarps to drape over sharp objects. The furniture to push in front of the doors when it was going to be a really bad one.

She stared at the boxes, contemplating. The last thing Delilah wanted to do was call all the girls before the weather was even a thing. She could already hear Whitney's voice on the other end. *Oh my god, Delilah, chill.* Feel the breeze in the doorway as Jude marched past her, clearly annoyed. And Bo. Honestly, it didn't matter what Delilah told Bo. She had never been one to listen.

They already thought she was overprotective and that she'd only gotten worse with time. They weren't wrong, exactly. Once all the custody papers had been signed and their already-absent fathers had agreed to let them stay in Bishop, Delilah had been too grief-stricken to consider that maybe Whitney shouldn't try to do her own stick-and-poke tattoo in the crease of her arm, or that Jude should have a curfew, or that Bo . . . well, that Bo was always angry for a good reason.

But time had hardened her—hardened them all in one way or another. And now Delilah knew better than to leave too many doors open. There were too many ways for things to get in.

And out.

Just as she was about to close the kitchen window, a door on the other side of the house swung open, making the frames on the walls rattle. Jude bustled in first, her long ponytail spilling over her hoodie.

"Where's Whitney?" Delilah asked. "And leave—"

"—my sneakers at the door, I know." Jude kicked off her dusty purple sneakers with a little more force than was necessary before she plopped on the couch. "She's right behind me."

Delilah waited. The front door hung wide open, the scuffed brass knob making a *sh, sh, shhhh* sound as it rubbed against the wallpaper. She dug her fingernails into her hand to keep herself from slamming it shut.

A second later, Whitney threw herself through the entranceway. Where her twin's hair was always pulled back into a tight ponytail, Whitney's was as wild as a windstorm. Her soft curls, which usually hung well past her shoulders, puffed out like a dandelion. It had always been easiest to see the difference between them during a storm. When the weather turned feral, Jude turned in on herself. She became smaller, paler. The muscles in her jaw clenched until the worst of it had passed. Whereas Whitney became *more* herself in the thick of it. Something lit up behind her endlessly brown eyes whenever the wind kicked up.

“Made it,” Whitney said, shoving the door closed behind her.

“Where’s Bo?” Delilah asked, tilting her head to look through the small glass pane in the door.

“Dunno,” said Jude, tapping the buttons on the remote. “Don’t we get some kind of basic channels? I want to check the weather.”

Whitney flopped onto the couch beside her sister, stretching her long legs out across Jude’s lap. “I already have the radar pulled up on my phone. Look.” She turned her phone toward them. The screen was blotted with red.

Delilah shifted to glance out the front window. The sunflowers were bent over now, their backs to the gray-green sky. The storm was getting worse. Her fingers twitched. A part of her knew she should just call Bo, tell her to get home quick. But the other part of her knew it wouldn’t matter if she did. Bo barely even texted her back nowadays. There was zero chance she’d answer a call.

Delilah turned. “Where did you see her last?”

“In town,” Whitney answered, not looking up from her phone. “She was talking to the event committee about the memorial.”

Beside her, Jude continued to flick through the channels, all of which were blurry and unwatchable. “Looks like the satellite dish is out,” she said, still absently tapping the buttons.

Delilah sighed. “Again? I’ll fix it later. And I didn’t know Bo was planning to do that,” she added casually. But secretly, Delilah knew better. Even though she had begged Bo to just let it go, she knew Bo wouldn’t listen. Bo would end up at the town hall to insert herself into planning the memorial anyway.

It wasn’t that Delilah hated the idea of Bishop hosting a memorial. In fact, she was the one who’d proposed the idea to the committee in that relentless, fever-pitch month after the girls had come home to their empty house, the front door swinging in the wind. But no one had listened back then. Their mothers were missing, but there was also the aftermath of the windstorm to deal with.

Besides, missing women were as much a part of Bishop as the sunflowers and storms.

Growing up, it seemed like she'd attended some kind of haphazard memorial for women dead or missing at least once a year. Mrs. Rosen found cold in her pastel pink bathtub. Hailey Ramiro just up and gone, vanished from her bedroom in the middle of the night, not a trace of her left behind. The cops always came and investigated, like they were supposed to, but no one ever found anything other than a corpse that had died of natural causes or the stale air left behind in an empty house. Over time, the townsfolk had come to the conclusion that Bishop just wasn't the kind of place that could satisfy hungry, restless women with sharp edges.

Well, that woman was a little too wild, they would say, when one was found facedown in the garden.

She was always talking about leaving one day anyway, they'd said when a woman vanished in the midst of her well-worn life.

She never did follow the rules, they'd whisper, when another had tucked herself into bed only to never wake up again.

Delilah's stomach clenched whenever she let her mind wander in that direction. She knew those women had done nothing wrong—nothing to deserve that kind of fate—and there were no “rules” that would keep them alive and safe if followed. It was all rumors. Just people trying to make sense of this place.

Delilah *knew* that. And still.

There was a small part of her that believed if she could just keep them all in line, keep them smiling and obedient and whisper-quiet, maybe they wouldn't come across as girls with sharp edges. Maybe they'd somehow be spared from a similar fate as the others.

But another had gone missing just six months ago, and that girl had done everything right. Eleanor Craft had dropped dead in front of the oak tree in her yard at only eighteen—the same age Delilah was now. She'd been a model student, the kind the teachers

always praised in front of everyone else and used as an example. With her flame-red hair and the sparkle behind her eyes, she instantly warmed everyone she came into contact with.

There had been no memorial for her. Eleanor's only living relative, her grandmother, hadn't wanted one, so the townspeople went about the business of getting on with their lives, just as Delilah had after their mothers disappeared. She'd combed through her mother's life insurance, cleaned out the bedrooms, and reorganized the pantry. *This* part had been Delilah's memorial in those early days. She had figured out how to care for them all because there was no other option.

For the event committee—and Bo—to want to bring this all up again, to drag her back into her own head, was cruel. And it didn't even make sense. Why a memorial and a big, flashy statue dedication *now*, two years too late? And why only to their mothers when there were so many missing and forgotten women?

"Got it!" Jude said, setting the remote in her lap. Through all the fuzz, Delilah could just barely make out a woman in a blazer, her hair pulled back into a tight bun.

"This is a . . . for all of central Kansas . . . hang on tight and . . . evacuation . . ."

The weatherperson's words were punctuated with white noise as the image wobbled onscreen. Delilah frowned. *Evacuation?* She was pretty sure she'd heard that right. Bishop was smack dab in the center of the state, in the middle of Tornado Alley, and the girls had faced down a million windstorms—both with and without their mothers. They'd never attempted to evacuate once. No one in Bishop had. It was almost like it was understood: storms came and went, but townsfolk always stayed.

Except for when they didn't.

Delilah looked out the window one more time. She tapped her fingers against the glass. *No Bo*. "We better start boarding up the house."

Whitney swiped the remote from Jude's lap and flicked off the TV. "I don't know why we don't use the storm cellar."

"Bo," Jude said softly, and they all settled into silent agreement.

They wouldn't go hide in the underground cellar because of Bo. That had been the agreement for two years, even though Bo had never asked them to do it. They all understood that it might feel safer between the damp asphalt walls of the cellar for three of them, but to Bo it would feel as dangerous as being swept up in a storm.

So they went to work.

Delilah trekked back to the storage closet and grabbed the boxes. Jude pawed through the toolbox for duct tape, and Whitney shot through the hallways like a feral breeze, slamming doors and windows closed in her wake. Together they slapped cardboard over the windows, silver tape streaking across them. They moved clunky pieces of furniture in front of the windows, blotting out the slivers of gray-green sky that were still exposed, just in case the storm still managed to bust through the glass. Their mothers might not be here to protect them, but their old, nicked-up furniture was still here to soften the blow from shattered windows.

The last thing to do was cover up the small panel of stained glass in the front door. Delilah grabbed a sheet of cardboard that she'd stacked on her mother's velvet reading chair and tugged at the roll of duct tape. As she began to place it on the window, she glanced outside.

Bo stood at the edge of the gravel driveway, her back to the house. The wind lashed at her honey blond hair so hard that it looked like freshly pitched hay. She was a fierce, tiny angel with a lopsided halo.

Delilah flung open the door and screamed, "Bo!" But the wind swallowed up her words before they reached the porch. She stepped outside, the door rattling behind her.

"Bo!"

This time, Bo heard. She slowly turned, her eyes glazed over. When she did, Delilah saw the puddle of blood at her feet, the sunflower the size of a dinner plate in her palm.

Delilah's heart picked up speed. She tried again. "Bo! Get inside!"

Bo didn't answer. Instead, her fist clenched around the flower until her fingertips turned white and every last petal dropped into the dust.

CHAPTER TWO



Bo held the sunflower in her hand, gently at first. And then, slowly, her fingers curled around the head. Her nails sank into the wet, seedy part in the center and the silky petals began to fall, one by one.

She liked the way it felt.

Bo had never really loved flowers—not like her mom had. Cori Wagner had wallpapered her tiny office with them. There had been delicate violets and full-blossomed daisies, ballet-pink lady’s slippers and vines of sweet peas tangled up in them all.

But then everything changed. Cori’s desk chair remained, worn and empty. And Bo painted the whole room navy blue.

“Bo!”

Bo blinked, and Delilah appeared in front of her, her light brown curls pulled back into a bun. Behind her, the old tire swing in the side yard creaked on its chain, metal grating against metal, and petals floated around her like dust. Bishop’s warning sirens had already started to wail on her walk home, but now they were relentless.

Delilah clamped her hands on Bo's shoulders and squeezed. "Come on!" she yelled. "The wind's getting bad!"

Bo sighed. She tossed the now-dead sunflower back into the field it had come from and followed Delilah up the porch steps. A ribbon of blood ran down her knee and pooled at her shoelaces.

"Hey, what happened—"

But before Delilah could finish her sentence, Bo brushed past her, ignoring Whitney and Jude on the sofa, and stomped up the narrow staircase at the end of the hall.

She knew what they were doing. She knew what they were saying. It wasn't like Bo was oblivious to what the three girls she lived with thought of her. Bo couldn't remember how many times she'd overheard Delilah whispering words like *so mad all the time* and even *vicious*. And of course, there was Whitney's favorite line.

Why are you such a bitch, Bo?

Well, let's see, Bo thought as she limped into the tiny room at the top of the staircase. *My dad's gone, my mom's missing, and I have to live with the rest of you until I get out of here.*

And then there was the other thing. The thing that threatened to bubble over like a hot spring every time she walked back into town, or to school, or happened upon the wrong place at the wrong time. The constant hum of dread pulsing in her veins that she hadn't been able to shake since that night.

Bo flung open the door to her mom's old office and flopped on the bed. Well, *sort of* bed. When she'd realized that her mother was probably never coming back, Bo had moved out of the room down the hall she'd shared with Delilah and into this office. It was only a quarter of the size, but it had been her mother's, and that mattered. Plus, then she didn't have to share with Delilah and deal with her incessant poking and prodding.

What's going on with you lately, Bo?

Why won't you just talk to us?

Are you okay?

No, Bo answered in her head to no one. But it wasn't like she could talk to Delilah about it.

So instead of her old double mattress, Bo had dragged the camping cot out of the garage and set it up where her mom's desk had been. She'd layered it with old, musty afghans and pushed it up against the wall so she had enough space to close the door all the way.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Bo had painted that navy blue, too. When she had painted the wall where her mom's desk used to sit, she'd discovered little specks of black coffee in the corner, sprawling all the way across the wall, almost touching the ceiling like a watery constellation. She'd imagined her mom sitting in her chair, her favorite mint-colored mug in her hand, headset on, as she tried to explain to someone's grandma what a web browser was. Cori never complained about doing tech support, but the aggressive coffee splashes on the walls told Bo everything she needed to know about her mother's job.

Bo lay in the dark, listening as the tire swing outside began to slow. That was what storms were like in Bishop. It was like the winds knew right when someone was thinking too hard about a different kind of life. They'd pick up at the worst moment, pummeling her skin until it was red and raw. The storms pushed them all back into their homes. Away from the edges. Away from one another. Then they'd start to ease. And for a little while, everyone in Bishop would forget that they had ever wanted to try something different—*be* someone different—in the first place.

"Hey," Delilah said, tapping her knuckles on the door. She stepped into the room before Bo could tell her otherwise. "You should come downstairs."

Bo sighed again. "It's just another storm. I'm fine."

"Really? Why are you bleeding all over your bed then?"

Right. Bo had forgotten about her scuffed-up knee for one blissful second. She shrugged. "I fell."

“Where?”

“Up at school. I went to pick up my schedule.”

Delilah went still, and Bo stole a glance at her. She immediately regretted it.

Bo hadn’t hit Delilah—not once, not ever—but every time she lied to her, Delilah winced as if she’d been slapped.

“Juniors don’t pick up their schedules until next week,” Delilah said quietly. She glanced at the floor, the velvety blue walls, the pile of laundry festering in the corner. Anywhere but at Bo.

“Fine, fine, *fine*. I was in town. I was going over some stuff for the memorial tomorrow.” Bo sat up and swung her legs over the bed. She had to get out of here before more questions came hurtling toward her. “Are we done here? I have to clean out this scrape.”

“Bo,” Delilah huffed. That was it. No more nice Delilah. No more tender Delilah who talked to her like she was a preschool teacher trying to spoon-feed her the alphabet. Bo had reached her max allotment of patient, saintly Delilah. She pushed a limp pillow out of the way and sat on the edge of the cot.

“Why are you doing this to yourself? To *us*?” Delilah said.

Bo scoffed. “What you really mean is why am I doing this to *you*, right, Delilah?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but it was too late. The embers that had been licking at Bo’s insides all day erupted into wildfire. If Delilah wanted to have this conversation again, then Bo was going to have it, and she was going to burn everything to the ground.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Bo said through gritted teeth. Delilah pursed her lips. “You’re just going to tell me to let it go, that our moms are gone and we’re going to ‘move on.’” She curled her fingers into air quotes. “But I don’t know how you expect any of us to move on when we never even figured out what happened!”

“Bo.” This time when Delilah said her name, that single syllable, she said it so gently that it almost made her crack around the edges.

Almost.

“They never even found them!” Bo erupted. She jumped off the bed and started to pace in a tight circle like a cat trapped in a cage. “No one even knows what happened. So if some ridiculous event committee wants to build statues for them, and they want everyone to sit in the sun and tell stories about them for an hour, then why *not*? Who knows? Maybe we’ll find out something and—”

Delilah stood. She grabbed Bo’s shoulders and squeezed, just like she had beside the sunflower field. “It’s been *two years*, Bo,” she said, her face crumpling. “There’s nothing to find.”

If it wasn’t Delilah standing in front of her with her doe eyes and perfect skin, she might have broken. She might have softened enough for Delilah to see the fault line that split Bo right down the center, into the Before Bo and the After. The crack that had spread like a spiderweb, starting with the night their mothers had disappeared.

It was only supposed to be a party.

It was just supposed to be some meaningless night out, a bonfire on the very edge of town where the sunflowers crested a dead-end road. And it *was* that, at first.

When Bo had come home from a run that afternoon, no one was there. Not their mothers, not any of the other girls. It wasn’t uncommon for them to go their separate ways throughout the day, but as the sun began to wane, they would all find their way back to the house before dinner. Bo had hopped in the shower, letting the steam settle into her skin, and gotten dressed.

The house was still empty.

She didn’t like being alone in the house. The way it was tucked into the dusty corner of the street, how the sunflowers always stared ominously at her through the windows in spite of the weather. She texted Whitney, *Where are you?*

Bonfire at the clearing, she replied.

Meet us.

And even though Bo had thought she’d finished sweating for the

day, she jogged across town in the late-summer heat. As she cut through the center of town, more and more people began to pop up like dandelions in front of the small-town shops and in spaces between buildings. A couple of them waved, but most quickly looked away and continued shuffling down the sidewalk. That happened a lot to Bo. People would catch her eye and then look away, pretending she was a ghost instead of a girl. She never knew if it was because of her, or if seeing her churned up some kind of uneasiness about her missing mother, or if it was something else entirely.

She had just started to catch her breath at the clearing when Whitney slipped a red plastic cup filled with something that looked like honey and smelled like fire into her hand.

Bo drank it down. It was as thick as syrup.

The boy appeared as she finished the last drop. He was summer in human form, with hair so sun bleached it was almost white and freckles all over. He towered over her, which wasn't saying much considering Bo was one of the shortest girls in her class. The lip of his plastic cup brushed her shoulder.

Hey, he'd said. It was one trivial word, and it made Bo's skin flush.

She hated that.

He reached for Bo's wrist, his calloused fingers cupping it, his thumb pressing into the soft skin where her pulse thrummed.

It was the first crack.

The rest of the night unraveled like a spool of thread. Bo never caught the end again before the whole thing came undone. She'd been trying to smooth out the tangled remnants of her life ever since, and a second-chance memorial had felt like a way to wind everything back into place. But now that the memorial was only a day away, Bo had started to think that nothing—not even a permanent stone statue—could fix what had been broken inside of her.

"Sit," Delilah said, her voice cutting through the memory.

Bo blinked, suddenly woozy. She sank back onto her bed.

"What happened?" Delilah asked, softer this time. She leaned forward, careful to avoid the angry wound on Bo's knee.

"An accident."

Delilah stiffened. She glanced up. "Try again."

"I just . . . something happened when I was leaving the planning meeting. Just a little, um." Bo winced as she swung her legs back onto the bed. "Fine, I kicked Evan Gordon's ass on my way home."

Delilah pressed her hands to her face. "Bo, why—"

"Trust me, he's way worse off than I am." She glanced over at Delilah, who had squeezed her eyes shut like she was trying to force herself to teleport out of this room—or out of this life. Bo sighed. "He was right outside of town hall and he started saying stuff. And I couldn't ignore it. I didn't ignore it."

"You can't go around kicking people's asses every time they say something you don't like," Delilah said softly, but even as she said the words, she couldn't hide her mouth from creeping up in the corners.

She touched Bo's knee, which was already puffing up. In the last few minutes alone, a throbbing knot had taken over her entire kneecap, turning the skin the color of a ripe plum. "That has to hurt."

Bo shrugged. She knew it should hurt, but honestly, it didn't. Still, Delilah would think she was lying again if she told her she could barely feel this wound that cut to the bone.

It wasn't that it didn't *hurt*, exactly. It was that everything else hurt so much more. In some ways, the scrapes and cuts and bruises made Bo feel more alive than anything else. Like maybe she wasn't just a walking ball of hellfire.

Bo had lost so many things she loved that night at the bonfire. Her love of late-night runs, the protection of the storm cellar. The way she felt around the other girls. The way she felt in her own skin.

Her mother.

"I'll go get some things for it." Delilah hopped off the bed. She didn't look at Bo. "Be right back."

She watched Delilah trudge toward the door, searching for a way to soothe this wound, despite the fact that she had spent most of the afternoon staring out into the storm, waiting for Bo to come home.

"Hey, Lilah?"

It was a nickname the girls had called Delilah when they were growing up, when they all still had fathers and their mothers were best friends instead of roommates, and they lived in separate houses on a different, dusty street in Bishop.

Delilah slowly turned. "Yeah?"

"Thanks," Bo said softly.

Delilah's eyes shone. She blinked quickly and swept out of the room as if the wind were pushing her out.

Bo leaned back onto her bed and stared up at the navy ceiling. If she imagined hard enough, it almost looked like Evan's blue jeans as she'd kicked him into the dirt after he'd said those words.

Your mother never wanted you.

He never wanted you.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but nothing happened. She patted the skin beneath her eyes. Still dry.

Bo had forgotten how to cry, but she still knew how to bleed.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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