

ALL
GOOD
PEOPLE
HERE

A Novel

ASHLEY
FLOWERS



All Good People Here

A Novel

Ashley Flowers
with Alex Kiester



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ONE

Krissy, 1994

The residents of Wakarusa, Indiana, could spin gossip faster than a spider spins its web. Each time one of their own did something they shouldn't—when Abby Schmuckers got caught shoplifting lipstick from the dime store; when the Becker kid dropped out of the 4-H volunteer club; when Jonah Schneider fell asleep and snored in church—the Wakarusa gossip chain would flap their jaws, chewing the tidbit over so thoroughly that by the time they'd finally spat it out again, the Truth was misshapen and unrecognizable, warped into the Story. And because the people of Wakarusa were churchgoing, law-abiding, capital-G God-fearing people, the Story was always adorned with pearls of sweetness to coat its sharp edges: *Bless her heart, but...I'll be praying for them, because did you hear...? Lord have mercy on their souls.*

Even before everything happened, Krissy Jacobs had understood the power of Wakarusa's rumor mill, which is why she so stringently avoided its teeth. She went to church every Sunday, she dressed her daughter in pink and her son in blue, she wore the right shoes and made sure her husband had the right ties. It wasn't because she believed any of it mattered; it was simply because she had so much to lose. This life—her family, their farm

and house—wasn't what she'd wanted, wasn't even close, but it was more than she'd ever had before, and so she held on to it, hands tight.

On the day it all slipped through her fingers, Krissy got up to the sound of her alarm at 5 A.M. like she had every other morning in her life as a farmer's wife. She slid out of bed quietly so as not to disturb Billy, even though the alarm was for him too. Then she stepped out of the darkened bedroom and made her way down the old wooden staircase to the kitchen.

She spotted the writing on the wall before she even made it down the last step, her breath kicking out of her lungs. Scrawled in blood-red oversized letters read three horrific messages: FUCK YOUR FAMILY...THAT BITCH IS GONE...THIS IS WHAT YOU GET.

Krissy's heart pounded hard and painful against her ribs. Her first thought—bizarre and ill-fitting—was that the words looked so...*intrusive* here, on her old but pristine white walls, in the falling-apart-but-still-beautiful kitchen. Those nasty, violent words didn't belong in quaint Wakarusa, Indiana, full of good, pious people. When the town got wind of this, Krissy knew, those words would taint every member of her family for the rest of their lives.

She stood on the bottom step, shaking. Though the sun was not yet up and her mind was foggy, it was clear these words were the advent of something terrible. THAT BITCH IS GONE, Krissy read again, and this time shame colored her panic. Here something was horribly, horribly wrong, and all she'd been able to think was *What will the neighbors say?*

TWO

Margot, 2019

Margot pulled up to the curb outside her uncle Luke's house, turned off the engine, and slumped back against her seat. Through the passenger-side window, she gazed up at the squat seventies ranch-style and her body prickled with dread. The last time she'd spent the night here in Wakarusa, in the town where she grew up, was twenty years ago. She'd been eleven.

Margot's hometown was originally called Salem, but the name was changed in the 1850s to avoid confusion with the other Indiana Salem. The etymology had gotten lost to history, but conventional wisdom was that the Native American *Wakarusa* could be translated to "knee-deep in mud." Both the old name and the new struck Margot as uncanny in their appropriateness. One evoked the killing of innocent girls, the other insinuated just how hard it was to leave. Though to Margot, the mud seemed more like quicksand. The more you fought it, the more it pulled you under. For years she thought she'd escaped, and now here she was, back again.

But more than just the town, what was making Margot's heart pound now was what version of her uncle she was going to get tonight. The real one. Or the bad one.

She took a deep breath, then grabbed her bags from the back seat and made her way up the path. On her uncle's front landing was a bulb in a wire cage illuminating the space with a flickering yellow light. The sound of moths beating their bodies against it reminded Margot of childhood summers here—long, hot days of skinned knees and calves cut up from fields of corn. She lifted a fist and knocked.

After a moment, Margot heard the *plunk* of a dead bolt, then the door creaked slowly, barely, open. Her pasted-on smile faltered.

“Uncle Luke?”

Through the dark crack of the doorway, she studied the changes in her uncle since she'd seen him last. The lines on his face seemed to have deepened in the intervening months and his dark hair was unusually mussed. One thing that hadn't changed, however, was the red bandanna around his neck, the one she'd given him for Christmas twenty-five years ago, which he still wore often.

His eyes flicked over her face. “Rebecca?”

Margot swallowed. Despite sharing only superficial similarities with her uncle's late wife—short brown hair and an average build—Margot was used to Luke calling her by the other woman's name. Still, it stung every time. “I'm Margot, remember? Your niece—Adam's daughter?” This was the part that twisted in her stomach. *Adam's daughter* didn't convey that he, Luke, was more of a dad to her than her father had ever been. *Niece* didn't capture that, besides his late wife, she was his favorite person and he hers. But it was best to start small, jog his memory, and the rest would usually follow.

“Margot...” Her uncle said her name as if he were trying out the syllables for the first time.

“That's my name, but usually you call me kid.” Margot kept her voice bright and even.

Luke blinked once, twice, and then finally, as if someone had gone in and swiped a hand across old cobwebs, his eyes cleared. “Kid!” He swung the door open and extended his arms wide. “My god, you're here! What took you so long?”

Margot forced out a laugh as she rushed into his open arms, but her throat felt tight. She'd never get used to the fear that she'd finally lost him for good.

“Sorry 'bout that, kid,” he said when they let go. “I’ve been forgetting things in my old age.” He said it dismissively, as if forgetting your family was as innocuous as misplacing your keys, but there was a shadow of embarrassment darkening his eyes.

She waved a hand. “It’s fine.”

“Well, how the hell have you been? Oh, here, lemme help you with those bags.”

Margot made to protest, but Luke was already piling her bags in his arms. At only fifty, his mind may have been failing him, but he seemed strong as ever. As he turned his back, she stole a sweeping glance at his small home and her stomach dropped. It was the first time she'd been here since his wife, Rebecca, died of breast cancer the previous year. She swelled with guilt for not having come sooner. Leaning towers of newspapers were scattered around the living room floor, the coffee table was littered with dirty plates and glasses, and she could see even from where she stood at the front door that there was a layer of dust coating the built-in bookcase and old TV. The kitchen off to the right was far worse. The sink and surrounding counter overflowed with teetering piles of dishes, bowls stacked onto cups, smears of food hardened over it all. Most unsettling was the collection of pill bottles stacked by the landline phone. There had to have been more than a dozen, some empty, some toppled over. One big one was filled with an assortment of pills, round white ones mixed in with others, which were long and pale green. How much of this was because of his diagnosis and how much of it was because he was a new widower, Margot didn't know.

“Jesus, you got a lot of stuff, kid,” Luke said, his arms laden with bags. “It’s like you think you’re moving in.”

Margot cut her eyes to him to see if this was a joke—she *was* moving in after all—but there was only the twinkle of teasing in his eye, not that of knowing. She laughed lightly. “You know me.” Then, when he didn't move,

she nodded toward the door at the end of the hall. “I was hoping I could stay in the office?”

A jolt of recognition as he nodded. “Sure, sure.”

Her aunt and uncle’s office had never gotten much use, as they’d both worked in South Bend, Luke as an accountant and Rebecca part-time at an art museum. In the first fifteen years of their marriage, the room had been a cheery yellow, a crib standing forever empty in the corner. Then, when Rebecca turned forty and gave up hope, she painted the walls gray. They’d bought a desk and a futon, and to Margot’s knowledge the room was only ever used by her uncle, who sometimes liked to play solitaire on the computer before bed.

The sight of the room now made Margot’s chest ache. It was clear her uncle had, in bursts of lucidity, begun to prepare the room for her visit, though most of the tasks appeared to have been abandoned midway. The futon was pulled out, a fitted sheet tucked over three corners. Two bare pillows laid on the floor next to it. She’d have to rummage around for a blanket and pillowcases.

“This is perfect. Thanks, Uncle Luke.” She hesitated. “Well, I drove straight from the office, so I’m starving. Have you eaten?”

After Margot assessed the contents of her uncle’s refrigerator—mostly condiments, mostly expired—she picked up a pizza from Wakarusa’s only pizza place and they sat down at the kitchen table with glasses of tap water and their slices on paper towels instead of plates because there were no clean dishes. Margot had learned from their phone calls over the past few months that conversations were best when she was the one talking, so she spoke between bites, all the while aching for the days not that long ago when, if they were in the same room together, she and her uncle could talk for hours.

“Thanks again for letting me stay,” Margot said, sneaking a look at Luke’s face. What she really wanted to say was: *Do you know why I’m here? Do you remember your diagnosis? How are you coping with it all?* But every time she brought up anything related to his illness, Luke’s voice turned hard. Margot recognized the emotion hidden beneath—her uncle was

losing his mind at the devastatingly young age of fifty and he was terrified. So she talked around it. When she'd invited herself to move in, she'd told him she needed a change of pace and wanted to be closer to him, citing a made-up "new flexibility at work" as a seemingly good opportunity to do so.

"Of course," Luke said, his eyes on his pizza. "You know you're welcome anytime."

"And just remember I'm happy to help out, so if you need anything..."

Luke smiled, but it was tight. "Thanks, kid."

Margot opened her mouth to say something else, but he'd already changed the subject. "Hey, how's Adam doing? And your mom?"

Margot stifled a sigh. They'd just jumped from one sticky topic to another, and she didn't know how to navigate any of it. Until six months ago, she'd never hesitated to tell her uncle the truth—about his brother or anything else. But with his diagnosis, he seemed fragile, and from her research, she knew that fragility could lead to mood swings and outbursts. It had only happened a few times over the phone so far, but the thought of Luke losing himself scared her. "He's—"

"Still a mean drunk who refuses to get help?"

Margot burst into surprised laughter.

"C'mon, I may be losing my mind, but there's no way I could forget that," he said, and she laughed even harder.

It wasn't that she found anything funny about the fact that her father was fonder of whiskey than of both his only brother and his only daughter, but this was the Uncle Luke she missed. The one person in a town of fakes who'd always speak the truth. The person who made Margot feel understood without her having to try. The person whose sense of humor was the exact same as hers, who'd one time made her laugh so hard midsip that soda had come out her nose. Plus, the absence of her dad's affection, or her mom's, for that matter, wasn't new to Margot. Her childhood home had been one of shouted arguments punctuated by hurled glasses shattering against walls. It was why she was so close with Luke. Every day after school, she'd walk to her uncle's house rather than her own. On the

weekends, she'd spend the night. She *would* have moved in with him and Rebecca—they'd offered many times—but her mom had worried about what people would say.

Similar was her reaction a few weeks ago when Margot told her mom she was moving back to Wakarusa. "What're you gonna tell people when they ask you why you're back?" her mom had said.

"What do you mean? I'm gonna tell them the truth, that I'm staying with Luke to help out."

"That's nobody's business, Margot. Anyway, your dad says it can't be that bad. Luke's his *younger* brother."

"How the hell would Dad know? When was the last time the two of them talked—2010?"

"If you're really this worried, why don't you just hire a nurse or something? You don't want to go back to that sad little town where that terrible thing happened."

Margot had pulled the phone from her ear to give the screen an incredulous look. "A nurse? With what money?"

"My lord, Margot. Sometimes you sound so crass." When she spoke next, her voice had gone breathy as if the whole thing was beneath her. "You have a good job. I'm sure you'll figure something out."

Now, to Luke, Margot said, "And Mom's the same as ever. Delusional."

Luke snorted. "What's Bethany delusional about this time?"

"She seems to think I'm a millionaire because I write for a newspaper."

"Wait. You're not a millionaire?"

She grinned.

"How is the paper, by the way?"

Margot looked down. "It's fine, yeah." She hated keeping things from her uncle, but she couldn't stomach the idea of making him feel guilty for something he couldn't control. She couldn't tell him that her work had been suffering for six months now because her mind had been in Wakarusa with him instead of in Indianapolis with her paper. She couldn't tell him how reluctantly her editor had signed off on Margot's move to remote work. "Really," she added more brightly this time. "It's great."

But when she looked up, her uncle was giving her an odd look. His eyes darted from the slice of pizza in his hand to Margot's face, a hard line on his brow. "Rebecca?"

Margot swallowed. "It's me, Uncle Luke. Your niece, Margot."

He blinked for a moment, and then his expression cleared, a smile spreading across his face. "Kid! I'm so glad you're here."

"Yeah." She nodded. "Me too."

That night after Luke had gone to bed, Margot washed dishes until one side of the sink was empty, then she sat at the kitchen table and made a list. She needed to make a copy of Luke's house key for herself and organize his medications. She needed to clean the kitchen and living room and stock up on toilet paper and paper towels, both of which he seemed to be almost out of. She'd read somewhere that putting labels on things, like what was inside the kitchen cabinets, would help him navigate the house when memory failed him, so she wanted to do that as well. Also, with all the time it had taken to move to Wakarusa, she'd fallen about a week behind on work and needed to pump out some articles that weren't complete garbage. She added *Do your job* to the list. Then, at the bottom, she wrote a reminder to herself to call the subletter she'd found for her apartment in Indianapolis. He'd sounded unnervingly wishy-washy the last time they spoke and she needed him to move in, make his first rental payment. Otherwise she'd owe a full month's rental payment for a place where she was no longer living. Just looking at the list made Margot tired, but she'd have more time tomorrow.

But by the next day, the town was abuzz with what had happened—the news of it ripping through Wakarusa like a storm cloud—and it was hard to get anything done at all.

Margot first noticed something was off the next morning at the pharmacy. She'd left Luke a few minutes earlier nursing a cup of coffee and doing the

book of crosswords she'd brought from Indianapolis because she'd read they could help keep him sharp. A bell above the shop's door announced her arrival, so even though no one was behind the counter when she walked in, she assumed the pharmacist would appear soon. She stood by the counter, running her fingers absently along the bags of cough drops on display, the indistinct sounds of a TV coming from the back.

"Excuse me?" she called when no one had showed after a minute. "Hello?" She waited. Still, there was nothing. "He-*llo*?"

Finally, she heard a movement in the back, then a man poked his head around one of the aisles. "Oh!" he said, plucking a pair of glasses hanging from a chain around his neck. He settled them on the bridge of his nose, squinted, hurried over. "Sorry 'bout that. I got caught up in the news, you know. Terrible what's happened, isn't it?" But before Margot could respond, he jerked his head back as if just now seeing her for the first time. "Not often I see an unfamiliar face in here."

Margot smiled. "I'm here to pick up some prescriptions for my uncle." She twisted her backpack around to the front, so she could pull the two orange bottles from the pocket. Earlier, she'd sifted through the mess of bottles Luke had accumulated, and to her relief, most of them were for the same drug, different month. She'd organized them all into three current prescriptions, two of which needed refills: one that seemed to be a statin, one for blood pressure, and one for blood sugar.

"Who's your uncle?" the pharmacist asked.

Margot placed the two bottles atop the counter. "Luke Davies."

The man's eyebrows shot high on his forehead. "*You're* Luke and Rebecca's niece? That must mean you're Margot."

His expression was more curiosity than friendliness, but Margot returned it with a smile nonetheless. "That's me."

"I'm so sorry about your aunt, dear. That cancer was so fast. And my goodness, I haven't seen your folks in ages. Good people, though, *good* people. How're they?"

Her smile tightened, but only a bit. She'd known this was coming from the moment she made the decision to move back. The uncertain look about

Luke and Rebecca, the fawning one for her mom and dad. Her parents had been the perfect Wakarusa residents until the moment they moved away, which was ostensibly for her dad's exciting new job in Cincinnati, but was really so he could go to rehab, which not only didn't work, but turned him resentful and meaner than before.

"They're great," she said to the pharmacist. "Do you think you could help me out with these prescriptions? I've heard of a statin before, but is that for your heart or your cholesterol?"

Margot waited for what seemed like far too long for the man to fill two simple prescriptions, and when he came back, he looked flustered and anxious, frowning distractedly as he stapled her little white bag shut. And then, as she was walking out, she passed a woman on her way in, a phone pressed hard to her ear. The woman was so absorbed in her conversation she didn't seem to see Margot at all. But just before the door closed behind her, Margot heard the woman say, "I know. I told you. The Jacobses are innocent."

Margot snapped her head around to look at the woman through the glass, frowning. Maybe she just misheard her. The name was probably just at the top of Margot's mind because she was back after all this time. It was impossible to be in Wakarusa and not think about the Jacobs family. Plus, the woman's voice had sounded urgent, and the Jacobs story was two decades old. Still, Margot had the urge to go back through the door and ask the woman what she was talking about, but the idea of willfully inserting herself into this town's rumor mill stopped her. She'd just look it up on her phone.

Her Google search in the car yielded no new results, so she put it out of her mind. She had too much to think about already anyway.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of cleaning. She did dishes and scrubbed counters and collected an entire trash bag full of soda cans, used paper towels, food wrappers. When she walked into her uncle's bedroom that afternoon as he went for a walk, she clamped a hand over her nose and mouth. His bedsheets smelled sour with the accumulated scent of human,

with sweat and urine. She didn't even bother washing them, just threw them out and bought fresh ones from the Walmart in the nearby town of Elkhart.

She was so distracted in fact that she'd forgotten about the incident at the pharmacy entirely until she walked into Shorty's Bar & Grill that evening to pick up dinner for her and Luke. She'd have to get her uncle off a diet of pizza and burgers eventually, but she hadn't yet made it to the grocery store, so takeout would have to do for the time being.

The restaurant was packed, tables full of people, their heads bent in animated conversation. The TV in the corner was tuned to a news station, but the collective din was drowning out whatever the two newscasters on screen were saying. Margot approached the bar, crowded with customers, and tried to catch the bartender's eye. But the woman was focused on the man across from her, her arms crossed and eyes wide, nodding along as he spoke, gesticulating wildly with his beer as he did. "...exactly what I thought all along!" Margot heard him say.

She waved in the bartender's direction. "'Scuse me?"

The woman behind the bar turned her head to look at her. "Hold that thought, Larry," she said to the man, then made her way over. "What can I get you, hon?" she asked Margot. She looked as if she were fifty, but Margot suspected she was probably closer to a rough forty. Her skin was like worn leather, her hair the consistency of straw.

"Hi, I'm picking up a to-go order for—"

"Holy shit!" the bartender exclaimed so suddenly Margot jumped. "A to-go order for *Margot!* You're Margot Davies." In her periphery, Margot saw a line of heads swivel in her direction. She forced her wince into a smile. The pharmacist had worked fast. It had been less than seven hours since she'd told him her name.

"Hi."

"How're your folks? Gosh, I haven't seen Adam and Bethany for ages!" The bartender's face dropped dramatically. "I miss them. Will you tell them Linda says hi?"

Margot nodded. "Sure. Yeah, course."

“Oh my god!” Linda exclaimed, then her voice dropped an octave as she said, “Is this why you’re here?”

“Um.” Margot shook her head. “Is what why I’m here?”

“Well, the story of course. You’re a reporter, aren’t you?”

“Yes...” Margot was so thrown by how much this stranger seemed to know about her, she was having trouble following the conversation. “What story? What’s going on?”

Linda’s eyebrows shot up. “You mean you don’t know?” She whirled around, looking for something, and finally her gaze landed upon a TV remote beside an open jar of maraschino cherries. She grabbed it up and pointed it at the TV. On the screen, the volume bar grew.

“...on a recent event that’s happened in Nappanee, Indiana,” a male newscaster was saying. The town name jolted in Margot’s chest. Nappanee was a stone’s throw from Wakarusa. If she got into her car now, she could be there in under fifteen minutes. *“Early this morning,”* the newscaster continued, *“five-year-old Natalie Clark was reported missing by her parents. According to her mother, Samantha Clark, the girl disappeared from a crowded local playground. Mrs. Clark had been feeding her youngest, an infant, when she looked up to check on Natalie and her son, but Natalie was nowhere to be found.”*

A photo of the missing girl flashed on the screen, all teeth and wild brown hair, and suddenly everything fell into place: the anxious look on the pharmacist’s face, the woman’s phone call and her mention of the Jacobs family. Margot hadn’t misheard her after all. And now she knew what Linda was going to say even before the woman turned to her to say it.

“It’s happening again. January Jacobs. Her murderer is back.”