

Sixteen year old Flower doesn't dream of marriage and children like other girls. For now, she's content with coloring and her family's love. When her safe, simple life is threatened by evil, her family must find a way to rescue her. Their struggle against tyranny forever changes them.

Weeding the Garden

By Kathleen "Kitty" Trock

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Garden

Kathleen Trock

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Chapter 7

Harry waited, crouched in the corner, until his legs screamed to get out of their squat. Men walked back and forth in front of him, ghostly in the dark shadows, as their lanterns waved and the cinders crunched under their boots. When he heard the engine gather her power, he moved. He cleared the expanse in two steps, then jumped in, and rolled to the end of the car with a thud. The train lurched to a start as the door slid closed. He breathed a sigh of relief, and was trying to stand up, when a match flared and lit up the corner. He froze.

“You didn’t think you could sneak away without me, did you, buddy?” A voice hissed out of the dark, not much louder than the slow clackety clack of the rails.

Harry gasped. “Andrew, what are you doing here? What about your graduation?”

“I told old Heimer off after you split. He kicked me out. I was on the edge, anyhow. I figured if I go out on my own and make it, my old man might think I’m worth something after all.” He pushed aside some musty hay. “Have a seat, friend, and we’ll see where the wind takes us.”

When Claire opened the door, her confidence dissolved like a sugar lump in hot tea. She hadn’t expected Dr. McCaw. Dr. Sheperdson waved her to a chair. She sat down and took a deep breath. *I’m going to throw up.* She stared at the floor, reluctant to meet the eyes of either man.

Dr. Sheperdson took the lead. “I reviewed the incident from yesterday, Claire. I talked to Darlene and she denied your having asked her to monitor your patient. The other two girls you mentioned confirmed this. I feel there are extenuating circumstances in this situation, and since it

appears to be your word against Darlene's, I made my decision without taking that information into account."

Claire sat with her hands together in her lap, determined not to cry. *I should have known Darlene would lie. She's nothing but trouble.*

"I also had a long discussion with Dr. McCaw," Dr. Sheperdson said. "He and I agreed it is not wise to leave a student with a vulnerable patient unless an older, wiser nurse is also in attendance. Isn't that right, Dr. McCaw?"

Dr. McCaw glared at Claire. "You should have said something if you couldn't perform your duties because of some real or imagined problem with your digestive system."

Claire looked at his red face. "You're right, Dr. McCaw. I take full responsibility for my behavior." He snorted and turned his head.

"We see eye to eye on the next steps, Claire," Dr. Sheperdson said. "Based on your excellent record, you may continue your course here. You will be assigned to a senior nurse who will monitor your progress and report daily to me. I believe this is an isolated incident with a very unfortunate ending. I expect you to move beyond it and become a wonderful nurse."

"Thank you, Dr. Sheperdson. Dr. McCaw. I won't disappoint you," Claire said. The vise around her heart opened its jaws and she was able to breathe. "If you don't mind, Dr. Sheperdson, may I have a word with you alone?"

"Of course," he said. "If you will excuse us, Dr.?"

Dr. McCaw bared his teeth and pointed at her. "I'll be watching you." He left the office without looking back.

"I want to apologize to the man who lost his wife," Claire said. "If you have no objection, may I look at the record and call on him?"

Dr. Sheperdson nodded. "I understand, Claire. When I was a young intern, I was at fault in a similar situation, and had to apologize to a grieving family. It didn't lessen the pain of their loss, but their forgiveness, coupled with my honesty, freed my soul and theirs. I learned a valuable truth. Making life and death decisions for another person is an honor and a God given responsibility. I'll get you the information you need to contact the family." He took a sheet of paper from his desk drawer. "Here are your assignments for the rest of the week. Sister Mary has agreed to mentor you. She's waiting in the classroom." He opened the door. "All the best, Claire."

Sister Mary's hands were clasped on the desk in front of her and her eyes were closed. Her lips were moving without voice. *She looks like an angel.* "Sister Mary?" Claire said.

"Claire, come in," she said. "How did it go?"

"Dr. Sheperdson was very gracious." Claire paused and the dam holding back a flood of fatigue and worry cracked. She started to cry. "I feel so guilty, Sister. That poor child is without a mother, and a husband lost his wife. If only I could live that day over. I would change everything."

Sister Mary embraced her. "The first step toward healing is to forgive yourself. Everyone makes mistakes. It's the way we live our lives afterward that shows the world what we're made of. I believe in you. Now dry your tears and let's review your schedule," she said in the no nonsense voice she was known for. "We're going back to the maternity floor today to assist Dr. McCaw. This will give him a chance to see how hard you're willing to work." She marched into the hall and motioned to Claire to follow.

Meanwhile, in the sunny first floor waiting room, a large woman glided in unnoticed. “Excuse me. I am looking for Alice Smith.” Alice looked up from the papers on her desk. It was the same woman who had given her the pamphlet the day before. “Are you Alice Smith? I’m here in response to a telephone call we received earlier today and must speak to Alice Smith.”

Alice smiled and extended her hand. “I’m Alice Smith.”

“Gertrude Blackburn.” She gave Alice a quick, gloved handshake. “I represent the Department of Human and Family Services.” She looked around. “Is it safe to talk here?” Alice nodded. “I came to inquire about the family you mentioned,” Gertrude said. “If your information is accurate, I will pay you for the referral.”

Alice relayed the events of the day before. “I believe the girl was feeble-minded, just like the pamphlet described. She looked like a teenager, but entertained herself with children’s books until her mother came back for her.”

“Who did the mother want to see?” Miss Blackburn said.

“I...” Alice’s voice trailed off. *This doesn’t feel right. What if I lose my employment?*

“I assure you, all my sources remain completely anonymous,” Miss Blackburn said. She placed her right hand over her heart like she was going to say the Pledge of Allegiance. “Our mission is to identify those members of our society who need help. If we didn’t have concerned citizens like you, we would not be able to reach them with our assistance.”

Alice thought about her two little girls and the cold, dark, rough space they would be sharing for another night. “She asked about a student. Claire Epperson. She said she was Claire’s mother and needed to speak with her.” She lowered

her voice. "If this is one of the families you are seeking, when could I expect to be paid?"

"Where is Claire Epperson working today?"

Alice checked her clipboard. "You are sure this is entirely confidential?"

"I told you so," Miss Blackburn said. She huffed. "I do not like repeating myself. It's a waste of time." She leaned across the desk and replaced her smile with a frown.

Alice sat back in her wooden chair. "Claire Epperson is working in the maternity ward. Go to the third floor and stop at the entrance. The sister at the desk will call her for you." She wrapped her arms close around her body and willed her heart to slow down.

Miss Blackburn swung away. Her bulky body, shrouded in her black wool cape, resembled a large bat taking flight. "You'll hear from me within the week," she said over her shoulder.

Alice felt both dread and expectation as she watched the woman climb the stairs. *What if I was wrong?*

Claire was apprehensive as she started her assignment, but under Sister Mary's guidance, the problems of the day before became as puddles after a hard rain. She knew they were there, but was able to step over and around them and continue her journey. Her first patient was a young woman, close to Claire's age. Her husband stood in the hallway, rejecting Sister Mary's offer of a chair or a moment with his wife. Whenever the door opened, his pale face peered in for just a moment, before he withdrew to the safety of the hall.

Claire prepared cool, clean washcloths to bathe her patient's face, and whispered encouragement into her ear. She straightened bed sheets, offered sips of water, and wondered

why the smell of blood and sweat wasn't making her sick. Dr. McCaw, starched and white, was in and out of the room to monitor his patient. He didn't speak to Claire and gave his orders to Sister Mary, who relayed them to the younger nurse.

The hours dragged as the woman worked to bring her child into the world. Sister Mary checked under the sheet. "It won't be long now," she said. "I'll fetch Dr. McCaw." When they returned, the older nurse directed her student to a place behind the doctor. Claire watched in amazement as a tiny girl with black curls emerged. Dr. McCaw held her up by her heels and slapped her bottom. The baby responded with a shrill cry that continued until the cord was cut and she was swaddled in a soft blanket. "I'll take her to the nursery," Sister Mary said. "You remain here and assist Dr. McCaw."

Claire looked at him and took a breath. "Of course," she said, and washed her hands.

Dr. McCaw scrubbed his hands and arms and motioned to a suture kit on a metal tray. "Unwrap it. I'll tell you which instrument to hand to me," he said. She quickly complied.

After the young woman was stitched together, Claire washed her gently and covered her with a clean sheet. She asked the patient's husband in and he stood by the bed, shifting his feet, and wiping his face with a handkerchief. Dr. McCaw assured him that everything was fine. Before the young woman was moved to the ward for new mothers, she squeezed Claire's hand. "Thank you," she said.

Dr. McCaw turned to Claire as he was leaving the room. "Don't think I was impressed," he said. He sneered, and then closed the door. Claire stared, too stunned to reply.

Claire was cleaning the labor room when Sister Mary walked back in. "That was a fine job," she said and hugged

her prodigy. "Let's break for lunch so you can finish your day with renewed energy."

Claire looked at her watch. *One o'clock. Where did the day go?* "All right, Sister. I'll be in the student rest area."

"I'll meet you back on the floor in twenty minutes," Sister Mary said.

Claire worried about Dr. McCaw's comment as she walked. *I hope I don't have to work with him again.* She shuddered and nearly tripped when someone grabbed her.

"Claire. I called you three times." Sister Catherine was reaching across her desk, her eyes amused, and her fist full of the white fabric of Claire's skirt. "There is someone here to see you."

"I'm sorry, Sister. I was deep in my own thoughts." She looked at the woman waiting at the desk. *I don't recognize her.* "Hello, I'm Claire Epperson," she said. "How can I help you?"

"Miss Blackburn from the Department of Human and Family Services," the woman said. She shook Claire's hand. "Is there somewhere we can talk privately? It won't take long."

Claire led the way to the student rest area, and after making sure it was unoccupied, invited Miss Blackburn to sit down on the wooden bench. She took her sandwich out of the pocket of her cape. "Will you excuse me for eating while we talk?" Her stomach growled and her face flushed. "I'm sorry. This is my first break of the day."

Miss Blackburn nodded. "Of course. There's not enough time in the day, my dear, for hard workers. And extra food for a well earned lunch is not easy to come by."

In spite of the other woman's ominous appearance, Claire was comfortable. She nodded. "It's been very difficult for our

family to make ends meet,” she said and took a bite of her butter and jelly sandwich.

Gertrude touched Claire’s arm for a moment. “I came to offer you my help. I understand you have a younger sister who may qualify for our services,” she said and smiled.

Claire studied the woman’s face. *She looks nicer when she smiles.* “How do you know about Flower?” she said.

“A referral was given to me just today. Our agency is offering services to people in our community with special needs. We recognize the struggle families have in surviving these hard economic times,” she said. “We have funds to assist with food, heating costs, clothing, and even medical care. The basic necessities of life.”

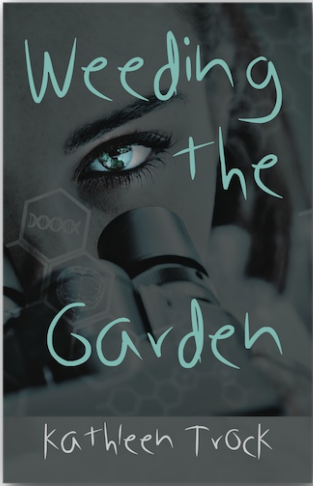
Claire finished her sandwich and gulped some water. “Why haven’t I heard about you before? This would have been such a help to my parents.”

Miss Blackburn shifted her wide bottom and the narrow bench groaned. “Our funding is from a special grant created by people in our nation who maintained their standard of living and generosity in spite of the depression. The monies and means to disperse them just became available. If you provide me with your parent’s names and address, I’ll call on them at the earliest possible date and offer my assistance.” She handed Claire a small note pad and a pen.

Claire wrote down the information, gave it to Miss Blackburn, and said goodbye. It was late in the day before she realized Miss Blackburn hadn’t answered her question. *How did she know about Flower?* She was cleaning the labor room after yet another delivery when someone touched her shoulder.

“I think we can call it a day,” Sister Mary said. “I’ve given a good report to Dr. Sheperdson, so I’ll see you in the classroom at 7A.M. sharp.”

Claire was grateful. Every muscle and bone in her body was aching. "Thank you, Sister," she said and completed her task. The day was winding to a close when she walked through the peaceful streets. The spring birds were already quiet in their nests.



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