

MICROFICTION

Pine Sap

The Empty Bedroom • Expanded Canon

written by
Oryxia Bluebelle

Pine Sap

Avery found the pine sap beneath her thumbnail three days after Lily came home.

She was washing her hands at two in the morning when the sharp green scent rose from warm water and pulled her back to the Hawthorne bedroom: polished wood, frightened adults, too many shoes crossing evidence, one clean window latch wearing a smear of forest where no forest belonged.

“You’re still working,” Rowan said from behind her.

She met his eyes in the mirror. “You’re still awake.”

“I didn’t claim innocence.”

He came closer, not touching until she turned her hand palm-up. His thumb hovered over the tiny stain.

“That led you to me,” he said.

“It led me to the woods.”

“Same thing.”

Avery smiled despite herself. “That is an alarming amount of confidence.”

“It’s an alarming amount of accuracy.”

She should have argued. Instead, she remembered the first moment between the trees when neither of them had reached for a weapon. Recognition had come before trust and trust before common sense.

Rowan finally touched her hand. “Does it bother you?”

“The sap?”

“Me.”

Avery studied him the way she studied scenes—breathing, posture, eyes, the silence between words. He was hiding fear, not guilt.

“Yes,” she said.

His hand loosened.

She caught it before he could withdraw. “You bother every sensible part of my life.”

A breath of laughter escaped him.

“But,” Avery added, “I’ve never trusted sensible parts to solve impossible cases.”

Outside, the city slept. Somewhere beyond it, pine trees moved under a dark wind.

Rowan bent and kissed her knuckles.

Avery let the last trace of sap remain.

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