

THE LITTLE LIGHTS

THE HOUSE ON BLACKWOOD LANE



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THE OPEN OYSTER PRESS

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a novel by

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FREE SAMPLE — PROLOGUE AND CHAPTER ONE

The world is your oyster — open it.

PROLOGUE

October 13, 1922

The Manhattan speakeasy called the Blue Hour had no sign above the door. People found it because someone they trusted whispered the address, and because those who entered rarely forgot it. The air inside was thick with cigarette smoke, and the trumpet never stopped playing — though no one, afterward, could remember the musicians. Eliza Vance sipped gin from a teacup; proper glassware was not among the pleasures the place granted.

Across the crowded room, Lillian Sharpe threw her head back and laughed, flirting, glowing, a cascade of golden light from the fixture above lining her young face and catching in her beautiful brown eyes. She was the new star of the Ziegfeld Follies. Eliza's smile was a practiced thing, rehearsed across five decades and two names, and it did what it had always done: it made the person receiving it feel chosen. Lillian returned it. She did not ask what she had been chosen for. Lillian had the role Eliza had coveted, stolen with a flutter of innocent eyelashes and the easy arithmetic of youth. The cold, familiar void in her chest, the hollow ache she had long ago named the Hunger, gnawed at her, sharpened to a razor's edge by the sight of such effortless, wasted youth.

Later, in the privacy of a shadowed hallway that smelled of spilled whiskey and cheap perfume, Eliza produced a delicate silver flask from her sequined clutch.

"A toast, darling," she purred. She poured a measure of amber liquid into Lillian's glass, the gesture intimate and conspiratorial, the sort of secret shared between women who might have been friends in another life. "To your brilliant future. May it burn ever so brightly."

It wasn't liquor. It was a tincture, dark and viscous, steeped from

grave-moss and nightshade and quickened by a single precious drop of Eliza's own blood over a blackthorn flame, a recipe from a book bound in what she took for ancient skin, passed down through the women of her line, a legacy of survival written in stolen time. Lillian drank. She laughed at something Eliza said. She squeezed Eliza's hand and called her darling in return, and swept back into the golden noise of the room, luminous to the last. The next morning, a maid found Lillian Sharpe — the nineteen-year-old starlet — aged fifty years overnight: skin stretched over bone, glorious hair gone white, her body withered beneath the silk sheets. The papers called it a mysterious wasting disease and printed the story beside advertisements for cold cream.

That night, Eliza looked into her gilded mirror. The faint, treacherous lines that had begun to feather the corners of her eyes were gone. She ran a finger, smooth now and firm, over the cracked cover of the ancient grimoire on her dressing table. The cover yielded beneath her fingertip. Not leather yielding. Skin yielding: the minute living give of something pressed gently enough not to wake. Eliza held her finger there. Deep in the binding, a pulse answered her own — once, twice, then a third beat after her heart had paused between rhythms. In the mirror, Lillian Sharpe stood behind her with the white hair and ruined face the maid had found that morning. Eliza turned. The room was empty. When she looked back, her reflection was smiling. She was not.

The Hunger would always return, and she would always need to feed it. "The little lights are indeed the sweetest," she whispered to her flawless reflection, and tapped the glass twice with one fingernail, tap, tap, the way a careful woman levels sugar on a spoon. And the book is always hungry.

CHAPTER 1

The dare was an old one. Every child in Bridgewater inherited it the way they inherited the town itself, without being asked: touch the gate of the house on Blackwood Lane and live to tell it. The littlest children had a skipping rhyme for it, clapped out on the elementary playground every October, nobody remembering who had taught it to whom: Blackwood House on Blackwood Lane, count the lights out in the rain; one out, two out, three out, four — if it taps you five times, don't cry anymore. The mothers made them stop singing it near the house. The mothers could not have said why. It was exactly right about the five. It had been dared for longer than anyone's parents could remember, which should have been the first clue, in a town that forgot things on purpose, that the dare was older than the forgetting. On this particular October afternoon in 2026, the world was painted in shades of gold and fire, and three boys stood at the safe end of Blackwood Lane arguing about whose turn it was. The smallest was seven-year-old Tommy Aldridge, and he was famous. Famous the way you are famous at seven: for two accomplishments, both glorious. He could burp the entire alphabet — all of it, A to Z, one letter to a breath, a feat performed at the back of the bus to genuine acclaim — and he told the most enormous lies in the elementary school. Not mean lies. Magnificent ones. Sharks in the Slake. A granddad who had wrestled a man in Marrakesh. Dreams, above all: Tommy's dreams, retold at recess, were serialized adventures with cliffhangers, and everyone knew they were lies, and everyone listened anyway, because the lying was a kind of generosity. Tommy Aldridge would hand you a better world than the one you both stood in, free, for the pleasure of watching you take it. His best audience was Mickey Sabatino, third seat, who would kick the bench in front of him and shout, "Tell it again," and Tommy — who had been saving the shark for Friday — would give it to him early, and Mickey would laugh first and loudest, every time,

as though he had never heard it before in his life.

He did not want to touch the gate. The house did not stand out, and yet it never went unnoticed. It was an abscess in the town's side, a quiet, festering wound everyone had learned to live around without ever quite learning to ignore. Drivers found their eyes drawn to it as they passed and then, just as quickly, found reasons to look away. Dogs would not walk its stretch of sidewalk. Birds did not land on its roof. To the children of Bridgewater it was more than a building. It was a held breath. And the three boys, who had grown up on its street with it for a neighbor, a fenced-off fact of the world, half warning and half furniture, stood in the long gold light and felt, without any of them saying so, the particular attention of its windows. Understand the town, and you will understand why nobody stopped them; why, on a street of drawn curtains, no adult tapped a pane. Bridgewater occupied a folded corner of northern West Virginia, less than twenty miles from Pennsylvania and Ohio, where the Meer River came down brown from the ridge and lost its name inside a mile of reeds and black reservoir water called the Slake. The mine and rail work that built the town had left generations earlier. The boys stood among shuttered banks, thrift stores, a payday lender and one surviving butcher, in a place that had learned to live beside what it could not repair: sealed mine portals, empty churches, the company settlement drowned when the valley was impounded in 1953, and the children still missing from that flood. Speaking changed nothing, people said. Speaking only let the cold in. Bridgewater had made not-looking into a civic virtue — perhaps exactly the soil a thing like the house on Blackwood Lane needed, and exactly why it had chosen to grow there and stay. Their parents had told them, in words worn smooth by generations of telling: don't cut through the garden, don't look in the windows, don't knock on the door, not even on a dare. Their parents told them it was just a house. Their parents were wrong about the second part, and the boys knew it, which was precisely why the first part never stood a chance.

"Five seconds," said the biggest boy, whose idea it was, the way the worst

ideas always belong to the one with the most to prove. “Flat hand. On the iron. We count.”

Tommy went because he was seven and famous and the famous have obligations. The walk down the lane took a year. The gold light lay along the sidewalk like something spilled, and the gate grew in front of him the way things grow in dreams — no nearer, no nearer, then all at once enormous. Up close the iron was black and scabbed with rust the color of dried blood, and the house behind it watched him come with its shutter-boarded eyes, and the last thing he thought before he did it, the last ordinary thought of his ordinary life, was that the birds had stopped, and that he could no longer hear his friends counting. He put his hand flat on the gate. The sleeve of his sweater pulled back, showing the tiny healing puncture inside his elbow from the school clinic three days before. It was cold. Not October cold — the light was still warm on his shoulders — but a cold that closed around his hand, and it came up through his palm and into the small bones of his wrist, and with it, for the length of half a heartbeat, came a feeling he had no word for at seven and would not, by morning, remember needing one for: the feeling of being noticed. Of something very old looking up, the way a shopkeeper looks up when the bell above the door goes. And beneath the cold, coming up through the iron: a pulse. Slow. Patient. The house had a heartbeat, and it had just turned it toward him.

Then he ran. His friends, in the manner of friends, were already gone. Behind him, in the shuttered garden, something began to whistle — slow, tuneless, contented, the way a person whistles when the day’s work has gone well. Tommy, who had whistled back at everything his whole life, felt the answer rise in his chest, and swallowed it. The grandmothers of Bridgewater had a name for whistling after dark. The devil’s music, they called it: you whistle, and whatever hears you learns the tune, and anything that knows your tune can call you home by it. He put his hands in his pockets and did not whistle once, all the way down the lane. He walked the last streets home alone, and at the corner of his own road he stopped, and

gathered himself, and burped the alphabet, A to Z, one letter to a breath, to nobody, to the dusk, to prove he was still Tommy Aldridge. It mostly worked. At dinner he told his mom an enormous lie about where he'd been, and she knew it was a lie the loving way she knew all his lies, and let it stand. Tommy's family lived in a duplex where the walls were thin enough for two households to share arguments. His mother worked mornings at the pharmacy and evenings three days a week at the truck stop. His father lived in Ohio now and sent birthday cards two weeks late with twenty-dollar bills taped inside. Tommy explained this arrangement by saying his dad had been recruited for a secret interstate mission.

On the night after the gate, his mother found him at the kitchen table drawing a road. It began at Blackwood Lane, crossed the page, continued over the table and down his bare arm in blue marker. Along both sides he had drawn houses beneath water. In their windows stood small yellow circles.

"Hey," she said. "That marker better be washable."

Tommy looked up too slowly. "It said Dad can come home."

His mother stopped sorting mail. "Who said?"

"The boy at the gate."

There had been no boy in his story before. She pulled out the chair opposite him. "What boy?"

Tommy considered the question with the seriousness he usually reserved for improving lies. "The one who's older under his face."

She touched his forehead. Cold. "You're not going back there."

"I don't have to." He returned to the road. "It knows our house now."

At nine, she tucked him in and checked both window locks. At 9:15 he called down to ask whether the Ohio state line could stop dreams. At 9:20 he asked whether fathers could visit without bodies. At 9:30 he was asleep. His

mother stood in the doorway longer than usual. She almost woke him. Almost would become a country she lived in for the rest of October: almost kept him home from the clinic, almost called his father, almost told the doctor what he said, almost believed the warning before belief could help. Downstairs, the drawing remained on the kitchen table. At midnight, every yellow circle in every drowned window went black. One remained lit. It was drawn inside Tommy's chest.

That night, the dream came. Tommy was sitting at the back of the school bus, telling the best lie he had ever told. He knew it was the best because every seat was occupied and every child had turned to listen. Mickey Sabatino, in the third seat, who always laughed first and loudest at the shark ones, was turned so far around he was kneeling on his backpack. Even the driver watched him in the mirror while the bus traveled a road with no bends and no houses. The story was about a boy who found a door at the bottom of the Slake. Behind it was a country where nobody got ill, nobody went away and every bedtime story continued after sleep. Tommy had not invented that country. The details arrived as he spoke: the blue trees, the warm black water, the mothers waiting on the shore with towels around their arms. It was better than anything he had ever made up. That frightened him, although he could not have explained why. At the back of the bus, something pale climbed over the final seat. It did not use the aisle. It came across the seat-backs on all fours, slowly, placing each narrow hand beside a listening child's head. Nobody turned. With every soft placement, the bus gave a small contented sigh. Tommy stopped speaking. The children continued listening. Their faces had no eyes now. Only the attentive smiles remained. You missed the ending, said a voice inside his head. It was his mother's voice made smaller, the voice she used when waking him gently for school. The pale child-shape had reached the seat in front of him. Its black eyes held all the endings Tommy had ever forgotten.

"I don't know it," Tommy said.

I do. Go to sleep and I'll tell you.

“I am asleep.”

The thing smiled. Not enough. Its hand closed over the top of his seat.

Tommy heard his own heart beating: one, two, three, four. Beneath the seat, something tapped back: one, two, three, four — five. The fifth tap came from directly below him. Tommy woke screaming at 3:10 with no memory of the bus, only a dissolving impression of something pale that smiled as it crawled and a cold that stayed in the middle of him. His mother sat with him until his breathing softened.

“Growing pains,” she told him, and herself. “Too much screen.” She left the landing light on.

After she went, Tommy counted the beats under his palm to prove his heart was his own. At twenty, he stopped. Something under the bed tapped twenty-one. The dream came the next night, and the next, and by the fourth night Tommy had stopped remembering it at all. The nightmares went underground, the way they do, and took something with them each trip. His mom noticed only that her son was tired lately — tired in the mornings, tired at dinner, tired in a deep, unchildlike way that made her stand in his doorway an extra moment some nights. Growth spurt, she decided, because she was a good mother, and good mothers are given, by towns like Bridgewater, a whole vocabulary of reasonable things to decide. And at recess, Tommy Aldridge told no stories about his dreams. Someone asked. He changed the subject. Whatever was in there now, some sensible animal part of him refused to go back in after it, even for an audience — and if anyone had noticed that, the boy who lied about everything going quiet about the one thing, the whole of what came later might have gone differently. Nobody noticed. It was a town where the adults had made an art of not looking, and its children caught the habit young.

The house was patient. It had to be. It had waited through wars and winters, through generations of children who grew up and moved away and swore they didn’t believe, even as they kept their own children from its gate. It

knew, the way a spider knows the geometry of its own web, that youthful curiosity was a far more effective lure than any obvious threat. Tommy forgot the house by Friday. The house did not forget Tommy.

On Saturday his mother asked for one of his enormous lies to cheer her while she washed up. Tommy opened his mouth and found a beautiful blue country waiting behind his teeth. He knew the trees. He knew the shore. He knew that if he began, the story would finish itself. He bit his tongue until he tasted blood. From the drain beneath the sink, his own voice whispered the first sentence anyway. It had waited this long. It could wait a little longer.

A TASTE BEFORE YOU BUY

*“Everything in this world is bought, girl, and everything is
paid for.”*

This file is the free sample of *The Little Lights* — chapters one and two, complete and unabridged. The full edition continues from the page after the last page [here](#).

Publication dates, pre-orders, and the audiobook edition
are announced in *The Tide Letter*.

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