



Swallow Creek Spring Fair

By Cassie Laelyn

Hands firmly on the steering wheel in the ten and two positions, Amelia flicked a glance at the passenger seat, where her creased leather satchel sat in-lieu of an occupant, eagerly awaiting their adventure. A far better companion than the grouchy, uncompromising one she'd left behind. Plus, she was the one who'd received the exclusive invitation, not *him*.

A high-gloss, trifold brochure poking out from the front pocket of the satchel, once again caught her attention, causing butterflies to flutter in her stomach. She'd been counting down until the annual Swallow Creek Spring Fair and now the day was finally here.

Gaze back on the narrow, windy road, the car's GPS announced she was minutes away. Easing off the accelerator, she curved the car around yet another sweeping bend, treating her to uninterrupted views of the majestic landscape. Rolling green hills, worthy of a scene in *The Sound of Music*, filled the countryside for as far as she could see, covered sporadically with fields of flowering canola, as though an artist splashed patches of bright yellow paint across an emerald-green canvas. Squinting behind her sunglasses, she spied an

eagle in the distance, gracefully soaring in the cloudless, bright blue sky. She lowered the driver's window and sucked in a lungful of clean, fresh country air. A stark contrast to the thick, foul, dirty stench back in the city. *I love it already.*

Driving around the final turn, the small township of Swallow Creek came into view and her excitement lifted. She eased the car off the single lane road and pulled to a stop at the town limit to take a quick picture of a weathered sign.

Swallow Creek Est: 1873. Population: 607

For such a small town, they put a lot of effort into advertising the Spring Fair. Back in the car, she continued to the center of town, where she parked on the main street, grabbed her satchel, and exited the car. The gentle, balmy breeze swayed her pastel, knee-length dress, bringing a smile to her face. The first hint summer was just around the corner.

On the sidewalk, she took out the brochure again to prioritize a day of sightseeing. After waiting years to attend the invite only fair, she wanted to make sure she saw every inch of the historic township. She might not get another chance.

Weathered, stone buildings flanked the wide main street, with the tin roofs covered in a thick layer of creamy dirt as though it hadn't rained since the town's establishment. But the street was...empty. Any second now, a tumbleweed would bounce down the road like in those western movies.

Unease swirled through her middle. Where was everyone?

Tilting her neck back, she looked at the large, tattered banner hanging loosely from its tether, strung between two decaying wooden poles on either side of the street. The material aged and ripped in several places, the words faded by the sun.

Swallow Creek Spring Fair. Fun and excitement for all!

She peered at the brochure for the millionth time with the matching tagline, knowing the two-and-a-half-hour drive would be worth it, despite the sudden urge to return to her car. Something about the pictures on the brochure compared to the town before her made her pause, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Shrugging off the paranoia, she continued down the street, entering the first building which looked like the general store. A tiny golden bell announced her arrival as she pushed open the wooden door. Just inside, she glanced around the cramped space, consisting of three tightly packed aisles, a counter, and refrigeration section in the rear.

"Hello?" she called out.

No reply.

Down the first aisle, she scanned the perfectly organized shelves, running her fingertip along the stacked tins, and grimacing at the track left in the thick layer of dust. The second and third aisles were no different, all coated in dust as though the store owner had neglected to clean for like, a century. At the refrigeration section, she covered her nose and mouth as a foul stench filled the air, before finding a sealed bag of brown meat at the bottom of the chest fridge, swimming in rotten blood.

Gag.

Did the store stock anything that wouldn't give her food poisoning?

Bursting back out onto the sidewalk, she sucked in a breath of fresh air and lifted her gaze to the oversized clock tower. Huh. The clock showed the exact time she'd arrived at Swallow Creek. Which, according to her phone, was roughly thirty minutes ago.

Cheers, followed by a loud ding echoed from down the street, reminding her of the carnival game where a person slams a large hammer on the target, trying to hit the bell at the

top and win a prize. Finally, some life in this town. But as she turned to walk toward the noise, a shadow passed by the uncovered window at the top of the clock tower. She froze, staring at the paneled glass, her heart thumping with the strange sense someone watched her. Though, after a few minutes without the figure returning, she shook off the feeling. Just like she always did.

Music started from two buildings down, which looked like the Bar and Grill, so she headed in that direction. As she hurried across the street, tingles erupted at her nape, the eerie sensation of someone following her intensifying with each step. By the time she reached the Bar and Grill, sweat dotted her palms and her heart raced so fast it was at risk of a speeding ticket.

Calm down, Lia. You're overreacting like usual.

Any second now, she'd find the entire town congregated inside the Bar, all of whom would laugh at her crazy story, assuring her it was all in her head. Just like *he* always did.

She took a steady breath in...and out, before pushing open the door.

Her heart sank.

Inside, the Bar was empty. No townsfolk perched on the wooden stools, no bartender behind the fully stocked bar, no patrons occupying the handful of round tables in the center. Yet, music still played on the jukebox in the far corner.

That's it. Stay or get the heck out of here?

She wanted to flee, but really, she'd come all this way, it would be a shame to let a few creepy moments ruin her adventure. Especially one she'd waited so long for. But, if she didn't find people in the next building or down by the field, she would high-tail it out of there. This was the beginning of a horror story, and she had no desire to become another statistic, regardless of the personal invitation.

Outside, she quickened her step toward the open field, silently praying any moment

the townsfolk would jump from behind a building and yell “surprise!”.

At the end of the street, where the road suddenly stopped, she exhaled a sigh of relief. Beyond the four-foot wire fence, spread across a lush, grassy paddock the size of a football field, was the Spring Fair. Cheers and laughter filled her ears, competing with the country music blaring from nearby speakers.

Finally!

A shiver skated down her spine as she pushed open the rickety gate to enter the fair, but she didn’t care. An abandoned town would give any normal person a creepy feeling. Everything was fine now.

Stall after stall lined the rows before her, and she took her time wandering through them, yet the giggles from the carnival rides, beckoned her closer. Excitement bubbled in her chest as she gravitated to the giant chair swing—her favorite ride, and the only one currently paused for thrill seekers to board.

Not finding an attendant, she quickly chose a vacant chair on the outer rim and strapped herself in. The moment she latched the safety chain across her front, the ride began to rotate.

Gradually, the speed increased, and her chair floated outward, gifting her with a panoramic view of Swallow Creek and the glorious mountains beyond. Strands of golden hair fell from her braid, blowing across her face, and she tucked them behind her ear. Closing her eyes for a moment, she relished in the calming rays warming her wind-blown cheeks.

On the third spin, she reopened her eyes. Her breath caught. A guy sat on the chair to her left. The same chair that had been vacant when the ride started.

But he was the first person she’d seen all day.

“Hi!” She waved to him.

He didn’t respond. Didn’t acknowledge her. Instead, his gaping eyes stared straight

ahead as he gripped a piece of paper in his hand.

Hang on. She leaned forward and squinted.

The guy clutched an aged copy of the Swallow Creek Spring Fair brochure. Only, the faded paper was a sepia tone like an old family photograph. Not like the glossy one she'd received in the post.

Bile rose in her throat. Her hands shook as her brochure gradually changed to the same sepia tone right before her eyes, while a date magically appeared on the paper.

Swallow Creek Spring Fair 1873. Fun and excitement for all!

Wait, what?

Frantically, she scanned the seats on the ride. One by one, more people appeared, each of them dressed in various clothing styles as though they belonged in different decades. Each person clutched the same sepia tone brochure, their eyes wide in horror.

Her pulse pounded as she yanked the safety chain, trying to release the belt in front of her. It refused to budge.

“Help!” she yelled.

It made no difference. The soulless people on the ride couldn't hear her screams.

On the fourth rotation, she eyed the township below—or rather, the ruins of it. Decrepit abandoned buildings lined the main street she'd strolled down only moments ago. Damaged bricks littered the cracked sidewalk. The only building that remained intact was the clock tower, still displaying the same time she'd entered the town.

Wait, was that—

On the fifth rotation, she narrowed her gaze on paneled glass window directly below the clock face. *Oh my god.* A dark, ghostly figure with haunting yellow eyes stared back. On

the next rotation, the eyes snapped to something on the street. She sucked in a breath, following the line of sight. A woman, about her age, strolled down the empty street...heading toward the fair. A glossy brochure pinched between her fingers.

No. *No, no, no.*

She had to stop her.

She yanked the safety chain harder, again and again, until her hand cramped and her fingers bled. It was no use. The metal clasp was fused shut.

Ice slithered down her spine as realization struck. She'd signed her fate to ride the swing forever, the moment she'd sat down.

"Stop!" she screamed at the top of her lungs to the woman below, but she couldn't hear her.

Seventh rotation.

The tingling sensation at her nape intensified. Peering over her shoulder, she swallowed a lump, as a monstrous black fog drifted across the grassy field toward the fair. Toward her. The fog thickened and darkened the closer it crept, like a vicious thunderstorm rapidly building in intensity. Screams echoed in the distance as the fog swallowed carnival rides one after the other.

She searched for the woman, who had now reached the gate of the fair. Her face lit with the same excitement and anticipation, Amelia had felt only moments ago.

"No!" she shouted. "Don't go through the gate."

The woman stilled, tilting her head as though she'd heard a noise. But a split second later her grin widened, and she pushed open the gate, entering the fair...at the exact moment, the population figure on the town sign increased by one.

For the second time, today.

Below, the sickening fog crept closer, nearing the chain swing she helplessly hung

from. Her screams joined the hundreds of others, the terrifying moment black tendrils of fog stretched up from the sinister darkness below, reaching for her feet like long whispery fingers.

Oh god, please no...

Her pleas were pointless. Because once more, the quaint country town of Swallow Creek had lured an unsuspecting tourist to their annual Spring Fair, with the prospect of fun and excitement for all. But only now, would the fun truly begin...

The End!