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Hausheld

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## Abstract

### Hausheld

By Kelly Doyle

The novella *Hausheld* tells the story of Sadie and Taylor, a mother and daughter who go to great lengths to bury the pain of their past until Robert, the deceased husband of Sadie and father of Taylor, appears as a ghost. “The barn,” Robert says, urging them to return to his family home in New Hausheld, Pennsylvania, where they must face the hidden history that shaped their family. Memories, they learn, cannot be ignored or denied. Secrets feed on neglect, until they’re too big to conceal.

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# PART 1

“Your memory is a monster; you forget—it doesn't. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you, or hides things from you—and summons them to your recall with will of its own. You think you have a memory; but it has you!”

— John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

## Chapter 1

### Sadie

The car's headlights exposed the dirt road in segments before them. Gravel and dust surrounded by black fields, otherwise unadulterated by windows or streetlamps. It was dark, real dark, the kind of dark that grows harder to come by with the construction of each new skyscraper or apartment high rise. Sadie had been driving for hours now, the stretches between houses increasing from one mile, to two, to three, and her daughter's head had begun to dip every few minutes in the passenger's seat. Taylor had only recently grown tall enough to sit in the front, and she had promised to keep Sadie company for the duration of the drive. They were almost there, or so Sadie thought.

She had been to Robert's family's farmhouse only a few times before he died, and not once in the years since. Sadie was afraid she wouldn't recognize it, but when she finally steered the car into the driveway, navigating the rises and dips of muddy puddles left from a storm two days before, she knew they had arrived. The house was dark, but in the car's headlights she could decipher its white body, skirted by a sagging front porch, and topped with a pointed head. Taylor shook herself awake and gazed out the window.

“Come on, let’s go look around,” Sadie said, and reached over Taylor to open the glove compartment.

“Can I wait in the car?”

“No, I don’t want you here alone,” Sadie said, extracting a large flashlight.

“I’ll lock the doors.”

“Taylor, the answer is no.” She opened her door and directed the flashlight across the field. The grass was inky black and shiny. Sadie stepped out into the cool night. Taylor met her in front of the hood and, when they joined hands, Sadie was glad she wasn’t alone. The grass was wet, twisting between her toes and making her rubber flip flops squeak as they traversed the field, their backs to the house. They followed the trail of the flashlight to the double doors at the front of the barn.

“We’re going in?” Taylor asked, her voice shaky.

Sadie nudged the door open. The soil floor of the barn yielded like moss, having absorbed the moist air left behind by the storm. It smelled like moss too, wet and warm and alive. Sadie traced the beam of the flashlight toward one wood, slatted wall, projecting the spiked silhouette of a hay bale against it. She moved the beam slowly to the far side, then up a ladder poised in the center of the room to the loft fifteen feet overhead.

An array of bats suddenly erupted, squawking, and dispersed in a cloud of flapping leather. Taylor jumped, but Sadie’s eyes lingered on the platform. She had an urge to climb the ladder, pull herself onto the platform, and study the barn from above. But then she felt Taylor’s hand tightened in hers. She couldn’t ask that of her, too. Sadie brought the beam back down and lit a row of empty stalls underneath the loft.

“Why are we here?” Taylor asked. "What are you looking for?"

“I don’t know,” Sadie said, trying to smile in a way that was reassuring. “Your father brought me here once. Right after we got engaged.” She finished her circle with the light, finding a third bare wall.

Sadie had lost her job not twelve hours before, taken too many summer days off to spend with Taylor, whose shyness had made her lonely. Sadie hated waitressing. She would’ve quit anyway. But she still might not have been at her best when, earlier that day, she herded her eleven year old daughter into the car and drove her across the state of Pennsylvania at the whim of a ghost.

Sadie’s lungs compressed as she let out a gust of air. She hadn’t admitted that before—not to herself, not to anybody—that she believed in ghosts. A dream, she could concede. A hallucination, she could reconcile. But she granted her husband enough reality to reach into her world and cause action. And Robert *had* come to her, no less than five times over the past month. Before he died, Robert asked her to return to his family, presumably, Sadie thought, to rectify his relationship with his father. But it was too strange, too far away, too aimless. Okay, really none of those things, but too painful. Sadie didn’t have the strength. Only, now he implored her again.

Robert came to her at night like a mirage, a substance so diluted with water and air as to be nearly translucent. The first time, Sadie didn’t so much as blink, afraid he was a trick of the light and she might have to feel the disappointment of his loss, though lesser, again. After his first visit, she accepted the dream and encouraged it, looking for him in shadows and spider webs until, one night ago, he finally spoke to her. He gathered the air in the room and expelled it through his half-formed body into words. *The barn*, he said, or she thought he said, and then Sadie could dismiss his reality no longer. She had to come.

Now Sadie, her hand still encompassing Taylor's, walked to the wall of the barn, splaying her fingers from the stem of the flashlight and running them along the rough wood.

"I'm scared," Taylor said.

"You don't need to be scared," Sadie dropped to one knee so she could meet Taylor's eyes. Though her daughter had grown four inches in the past year, she was still small. Her arms were the same width from her wrists all the way up to her shoulders, and her knees protruded from between her shins and thighs like door knobs. She blinked rapidly, eyelashes catching on the dark hair that fell across her forehead, Robert's dark hair.

"It's only scary because it's dark," Sadie said. She pointed the flashlight into a stall below the loft. "Do you see that corner?"

"Yeah."

"Your dad and I kissed there."

"Was it this smelly?"

"Worse because there were animals. But we didn't care."

"Gross," Taylor said, but Sadie saw her shoulders relax.

It was a small, white lie. They very well *could* have kissed there. Though Robert had never been keen on the farm and had never kept Sadie there long enough to kiss in all the places she may have wanted to.

Sadie threw one more sweep of the flashlight across the space, over the stalls and haybales, and the platform above. The barn was immense, but empty. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but she was expecting *something*, and this wasn't it.

"We can go now," she said.

They walked back across the field toward the car. Taylor climbed into the front seat while Sadie walked to the mailbox, pulling a folded piece of paper out of her back pocket. The note was for Valerie, Robert's sister. Sadie had written it on the roof of the car while pumping gas earlier that day, just a few scrawled lines in messy handwriting. She had considered writing it to Robert's father, Marcus, since he was officially the owner of the house and the head of the family. But he was an intimidating man, and it was easier to phrase something for Valerie, who Sadie had once spoken to effortlessly. Valerie was just like Robert.

*Hi, Valerie!*

*It's Sadie. Hope you're doing well. I know it's been a minute, but Taylor and I wanted to stop by. Call me tomorrow? (Everything's fine.)*

*Love, Sadie.*

The mailbox creaked as she opened it and slid the letter inside. Before she could change her mind, she took one last look at the farmhouse, its white tip disappearing in the black sky, and walked back to the car where Taylor waited.

She turned her key in the ignition and the radio began to play, filling the silence. They drove until they hit the only hotel in town, a single building with an orange neon sign promising free breakfast and Wi-Fi. Sadie checked in while Taylor inserted coins into the vending machine and waited for a bag of goldfish to fall.

"Are we going to see Aunt Val tomorrow?" Taylor asked, plunging her arm into the machine and feeling for her goldfish as the metal flap pressed into her elbow.

“We’ll find out in the morning,” Sadie said. “Come on.” Taylor popped up and followed her down the hall, tiptoeing along a tan stripe in the carpet as if it was a balance beam.

“What if we don’t?”

“What if we don’t what?”

“What’ll will we do if we don’t see her?”

Sadie stopped at their door and rifled through her pocket for the key only to realize it was in her other hand. “We’ll see her,” she said, while opening the door. Two twin beds with maroon sheets, shiny like plastic, awaited them. Sadie collapsed onto one, its springs creaking under her.

“You said—”

“Taylor, I’m tired.”

“Can we watch a movie?”

“Put it on really quiet.” Sadie closed her eyes. She could fall asleep right there, in all her clothes, feet hanging off the end of the bed. But when she didn’t hear the television switch on, she opened her eyes and turned to look at Taylor. Taylor was seated on the other bed, goldfish discarded beside her, looking at her watch.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I just wish I knew what we were doing tomorrow.”

“We are going to see Aunt Val.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.” Sadie grabbed the remote off the nightstand and tossed it to Taylor, who caught it and turned the TV on quietly, like Sadie had asked. Sadie hoped beyond hope that Valerie would find her note and call, that she would want to see them. But either way, Taylor was reassured for now.

Sadie tried to sleep, but Taylor's comfort set hers on an inverse path, reminding her just how far she had driven, just how far she had taken her daughter from home. And for what?

Nothing, maybe.

*Maybe.*

## Chapter 2

### Sadie

The next morning, Sadie's phone rang while she and Taylor were eating complimentary Raisin Bran in the shabby dining area of the hotel.

"Hi, Sadie," Valerie said. She sounded tired, but if she was surprised to hear from Sadie, she did not show it. Sadie felt a wash of gratitude that Valerie did not immediately acknowledge how random her note was after so many years.

"Why don't you come by the house mid-morning?" Valerie proposed.

"Okay." When Sadie hung up, Taylor was studying her from across the table. "Mid morning," Sadie told her, suddenly feeling nervous. "Eat your cereal, so we'll be ready to go."

Sadie spent the next two hours hurrying Taylor, then stalling, then hurrying her again, wanting to arrive at the perfect time but having very little idea of when that might be.

"Come on," Sadie said, banging on the bathroom door.

The shower switched off and she heard the metal rings of the curtain being yanked aside. "You said I could shower," Taylor yelled through the door.

"I know, but I want to get going."

“I thought we had time.” Taylor emerged, hair dripping down the front of her t-shirt, perturbed.

“Get your shoes on.”

“Where's my watch?” Taylor asked, crossing to the bed.

“I don't know,” Sadie said. “Wherever you left it.”

“I always put it on the nightstand.”

Sadie caught the edge in her voice.

“It's not there.” Taylor swept her hands over the table, peering around the lamp, yanking open the drawer. “Where is it?”

“Taylor, don't start. I'm sure it's in a bag.” Sadie said, gesturing to the zipped duffel at her feet.

Taylor fell to her knees and pawed at the bag, but Sadie grasped her arm before she could pull the zipper.

“We can look when we get back.”

“But mom—”

“We have to go. Come on...” She paused, catching sight of the watch peeking out from under the sheets of her own bed. “Oh, there it is.”

Taylor snatched the watch from the bed, stroking its face with her thumb before fastening it around her wrist.

“I forgot I used it when you were in the shower,” Sadie said, like it was no big deal even though she knew it was. “Let's go.”

“We almost left without it,” Taylor said, glaring at Sadie. Then she became very quiet, following Sadie out of the hotel to the car.

As they drove past the movie theater, the pharmacy, and the huge white barn labeled *New Hausheld Farmers Market*, Sadie's eyes kept flicking to the clock on the dashboard, subtracting its two minutes fast. Corn sprung up on either side of the road, blurring into a wall of green. By the time they arrived at the farmhouse and stepped around the front of the car, Sadie felt both early and entirely too late. She reached for Taylor's hand, more for her own sake than her daughter's, but Taylor swung her hand away, eyes glued to the house.

*Right*, Sadie thought.

In the daytime now, Sadie could see that the house had changed in the years since she'd last visited with Robert. The stairs to the porch sagged a little more, and the windows were cloudier with dust and grime. Rusted tools leaned against a pile of rotted wood along the side of the house, unused. As Sadie moved forward, her steps paralleling Taylor's, she was reminded that she had once ached to know this place, believing a closeness to Robert's home would mean a closeness to him. Every doorway, every floorboard, every nail held together the story of his childhood, filling his memory like fish in a net. But without Robert, she was attached to this place only by a thread of recollections that had frayed over the past few years.

The openness of the sky and the fields overwhelmed her. She suddenly had an image of the house being sucked up into the sky, submerged in blue like water. Her stomach fluttered, but the gravity of the house pulled her closer. Her presence there felt necessary, inevitable. The steps creaked as they climbed onto the porch.

"Do you want to knock?" Sadie asked.

Taylor shook her head, so Sadie rapped her own knuckles against the glass of the storm door. They waited for a few moments and Sadie had just raised her hand to knock again when the front door opened and Valerie appeared. She had the same childlike figure she had when

Sadie met her more than a decade ago, all bones and angles, matching her thin lips and pointed nose. But her posture was better and her height gave her an air of, if not authority, then knowledge. Her brown hair was brushed back and her blouse was free of wrinkles. Sadie wished she had taken the time to shower that morning. Valerie unlocked the storm door and swung it wide.

“Hi, Sadie, Taylor.” She leaned in and Sadie, unsure what else to do, met her in the middle for an awkward kiss on the cheek. “Wow, Taylor, you are a grown up lady. I can hardly believe it. Come in. So nice to see you both.”

As they walked into the kitchen, Sadie rested her hand on Taylor’s shoulder blade, which protruded in a pyramid underneath her t-shirt. The kitchen smelled like artificial lemon, and a metal spray can sat on the counter. Valerie had cleaned for them, Sadie thought, feeling like a stranger. Valerie pulled two chairs out from the plastic kitchen table and gestured for them to sit. Once they were settled, Valerie sat across from them. Her eyelids were a dusty violet, and thin veins extended in hexagonal patterns underneath her brows. Faint wrinkles curled down the sides of her cheeks, framing her small mouth. She had exceeded Robert’s thirty years of age, grown older than he ever would be. It showed.

“You look great,” Sadie said.

“So do you.” Valerie’s eyes darted to her lap. “And Taylor you’re so pretty, like your mom.”

“Thanks,” Taylor said, and looked at her wrist.

“So what brings you to central PA?”

Sadie had rehearsed an explanation in her head as she drove. *Though time has passed, Robert would’ve wanted us to reconnect.* It was logical, and not untrue.

“We were in the area. Thought we’d stop by.” She kept her eyes trained on Valerie.

Taylor remained silent, permitting the lie.

“Well, how nice.”

Sadie cocked her head as a noise became momentarily audible. It was a gravelly, sucking sound that emerged from the floorboards beneath her, as if bits of wood and plaster and wallpaper were slowly tearing. She ignored it.

“How have things been? Did you finish your... degree?” Sadie couldn’t remember Valerie’s exact area of study—*Anthropology? Sociology? Or educational something?*—only that she was a chronic student, pursuing one degree after another after another.

“Oh that,” Valerie laughed and waved a hand in front of her face as if the subject was as consequential as a house fly. “I didn’t finish my program, or my dissertation for that matter. After Leo was convicted, someone had to care for the kids.”

“Oh.” An image of Robert’s older brother invaded Sadie’s mind. He was a brute of a man and his incarceration had surprised her only because she had barely known him. She remembered he didn’t wear a suit to her and Robert’s wedding, only a button down and khaki pants. He downed champagne like it was water and stared openly at the bride’s maids. “When does he get out?”

“About a month ago.”

“He’s here?”

“No.” The corner of Valerie’s lip caught between her teeth, and she chewed it for a moment. “He was staying here and trying to find a job for a couple of weeks, but no one wants to hire an ex-con. I’m not sure where he is right now. The transition has been hard.”

“Where are the kids?”

“Upstairs. I’m sure they’ll emerge when they’re ready for lunch. But it’s you two I want to hear about,” Valerie said. “I can’t tell you how happy I was to find your note this morning. What a pleasant surprise.”

Sadie nodded, suddenly feeling like a leach on Valerie’s kindness, adding more to her already large burden. “Where’s your dad?”

“Oh,” Valerie looked at her, then stood. “I’m so rude. I haven’t offered you anything to eat or drink.”

“We’re okay. We ate already,” Sadie said. “Is your dad here?”

“Yes, but how about some pie? Taylor, would you like a slice of pie?”

Sadie opened her mouth to speak again, but Valerie stopped her with a wane smile.

“Please,” she said. “Let me be polite. Pie?”

Taylor looked at Sadie, who didn’t normally allow her to eat sugar in the morning. When Sadie did not protest again, Taylor nodded. Valerie opened a wooden cabinet over the counter and produced a ceramic pan, containing half an uncovered pie. It was dark and smelled of sugar and molasses, covered in crumble. She set it down on the table, then turned back for plates and forks. Sadie watched her, wondering if, after all these years, Marcus still took issue with Robert. Maybe Valerie hadn’t told him they were coming.

“What is it?” Taylor asked excitedly, looking at the pie with her cheeks pulled into rosy balls. Sadie thought of the Raisin Bran they had that morning and remembered she hadn’t let Taylor finish. She had stopped her after barely three bites, so focused on what was to come she hadn’t considered her daughter’s physical needs. She had a tendency to do that, to get caught in her head and forget about the people around her, even Taylor. Once, when Taylor was an infant, Sadie left her in a shopping cart and went to search the grocery store. What was it she wanted?

She passed the cereal and the coffee, wandering further and further until a horrified clerk appeared with Taylor held against his chest. “Is this your baby?” he asked. Sadie just nodded, horrified at her own obliviousness.

*Taylor must be starving*, Sadie thought, as Valerie returned and sunk a knife deep into the pie’s center, which when exposed was a glossy black.

“It’s shoofly pie,” Valerie said. “Pennsylvania Dutch specialty. And your dad’s favorite.”

“Yeah, it was,” Sadie said, though she had no idea if this was true and had never seen Robert eat such a thing.

Taylor was bouncing in her seat and looking at Valerie with something near idolatry. The look gave Sadie a feeling like butterflies in her stomach, only she wasn’t anxious. She longed to pull Taylor’s gaze away from her aunt and back to her. Valerie was a bit too much like Robert, possessing not just similar looks, but similar mannerisms and expressions. They were quite the opposite of Sadie, attentive and grounded in the present moment. As much as Sadie tried not to think about it, she knew Taylor had always favored Robert. If he were still alive, Sadie would’ve laughed it off good naturedly. But as things were, she couldn’t quite.

Valerie cut each of them a slice and Sadie poked at it with her fork before lifting a tentative bite to her lips.

“Mmmm,” Taylor said, her eyes alight.

It looked like tar, but as soon as the forkful touched her tongue, Sadie’s mouth rushed with saliva. It was rich with brown sugar, butter, and the sweet tang of molasses. It melted on her tongue like a piece of warm chocolate. “It’s delicious.”

“Even better with a cup of coffee,” Valerie said.

Sadie took another bite of pie but she was distracted once again by the sucking noise, the sound of air being forced through a knot hole.

“Taylor, how old are you now?” Valerie asked.

“I’m eleven.”

“And what grade is that?”

“I’m going into sixth next year.”

“You know, I teach third.”

“What’s that sound?” Sadie asked.

“I don’t hear anything,” Valerie said, returning to Taylor. “What’s your favorite subject?”

“Language Arts.”

“No, really. What *is* that sound?” Valerie and Taylor looked at her, and Sadie was vaguely aware that she had interrupted something. “That sucking sound.”

Taylor squinted and listened. Valerie didn’t bother.

“Nothing,” she said.

“It’s something,” Sadie insisted.

“I’d rather not get into it.”

“Is someone in there?” She thought of Robert’s ghost, the way he had summoned the air in the room and expelled it through his form to speak to her. That was it: the sound of unnatural breathing.

Valerie sighed. “It’s just Dad. Breathing is a little tough, so sometimes he makes noises.”

“How is he?” Sadie asked.

“Not great, actually.”

“Can I see him?”

Valerie shook her head. “He’s very ill.”

“Please?” Sadie stood. “I feel like I should see him.”

Valerie chewed on her lip.

“We came all this way.”

“I thought you said you were in the area.”

“Well, we weren’t.”

“So why did you—” Valerie started.

“Because I wanted to see you.” Sadie sighed, her shoulders dropping. “All of you.”

Valerie chewed on her bottom lip then nodded slightly, the movement so small Sadie almost missed it. She rose and led them quietly into the next room, where a bed was arranged across from the television. Marcus lay there, his shrunken form buried under an array of brightly patched quilts. His chin rested against a tuft of gray hair that emerged from the top of his shirt and every few minutes an audible breath departed from his aged lungs.

Taylor’s hand slid into Sadie’s. Warmth passed between them, as if one’s veins flowed directly into the other’s.

“He doesn’t have much time left, I’m afraid,” Valerie whispered. Her eyes were glassy. Sadie reached for her, touching Valerie’s upper arm with her palm.

“I’m so sorry,” Sadie breathed. She looked down at the deteriorated form of a man she had once found imposing and felt pity. When Sadie had met Marcus, he was tall and muscular with a deep, resonant voice. She remembered him as a man that commanded respect, a man that rarely smiled but emanated masculine calmness and stability. Gazing down upon him now, she could hardly believe the same soul was housed in this sagging body. But it was the same soul,

the same father that had raised and cared for Robert, however close he now seemed to departing this world.

Taylor pressed so tightly against her side that Sadie could feel her breath on her arm. Valerie remained still. Sadie looked down at Marcus' hands, tracing the veins that protruded from his skin, and tried to feel Robert's presence. Was he there? She allowed her eyes to unfocus and felt a wash of calm. Up until this point, each of Robert's visits had been tainted by a sharp uncertainty, but now they seemed explained. There was a reason for him to speak, now of all times. The emptiness and immensity that had overwhelmed her inside the barn were replaced with a grim certainty. Marcus was dying. This was why Robert came to her. And he *did* come to her.

As Valerie ushered them back into the kitchen, Sadie felt like she could breath again. She wondered if Taylor could feel her pulse beating in her hand, drumming blood to the tips of her fingers like vibrations on a wire. She must not have, because Taylor dropped her hand and stepped away, sitting again at the table and staring at her pie as if disappointed that her appetite had been ruined.

"I should put lunch on to heat," Valerie said, running the back of her hand against her nose and blinking rapidly. "The kids will be hungry soon." She opened the refrigerator and removed a large silver pot, depositing it on the stovetop with a clang. She turned the knob and let it click a few times before reaching for a matchbook. It caught in a puff of flame, and she jerked her hand away. Sadie could smell the gas.

"I hope you like chili," Valerie said. "You wouldn't believe how much Addie and Seth eat. They would've eaten us out of house and home if I didn't start renting out the land."

Sadie summoned a look of sympathy, nodding and frowning her brow.

“I hope you’ll stay awhile. We have an extra bedroom.”

“We’d love to,” Sadie said, which wasn’t entirely true. She felt awkward and out of place in the house, but she owed it to Robert. She was relieved that Valerie spared her the additional difficulty of finagling an invitation. Valerie must have noticed it was a Wednesday, and Sadie wasn’t at work. Perhaps she offered the room out of pity, or to spare them both awkwardness.

“I have the kids but it still gets a little lonely here,” Valerie said, smiling at Sadie and Taylor. She plunged a metal ladle into the pot and stirred. Soon the kitchen was filled with the spicy smell of beef and cumin, and footsteps pounded on the stairs.

“There’s Addie and Seth,” Valerie said. Both kids had dark hair, long arms, and protruding jaws. Taking seats at the table, they suddenly made Taylor look very small. “Do you remember Aunt Sadie and your cousin Taylor?” Valerie asked.

“Hi,” Addie said. Her voice was surprisingly deep. Taylor shrank in her chair and looked at her watch, likely counting seconds, a habit she had when she was nervous.

“They’re visiting for a while.”

“You’re Uncle Robert’s kid?” Seth asked Taylor.

Taylor nodded.

“Do you remember him?” Sadie asked.

Seth and Addie shrugged, and Sadie deflated a little. Valerie scooped chili into bowls and planted them before the two kids. They didn’t wait for others to be served before giving in to their apparently voracious appetites. Valerie served Sadie and Taylor next, then sat down across from them.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Sadie asked.

Valerie shook her head, an odd smile on her face as she watched Leo's children eat.

"You should have some," Sadie said.

"I want to make sure there's enough for seconds. I'm not hungry anyway."

Sadie considered pushing her own bowl across the table to Valerie, but could imagine her reaction would not be positive. Sadie's eyes migrated to Taylor, nibbling politely at the chili, then to Addie and Seth as they devoured it in great gulps, then to Valerie. Valerie sat with her hands folded in her lap, watching them. The way she monitored the children was so like Robert.

"Don't you like it?" Valerie asked, noticing Sadie wasn't eating.

"Yes," Sadie replied, and moved the spoon to her mouth robotically. The meat was rubbery in her mouth.

Later, after everyone had finished lunch, Sadie and Valerie sent the kids to their rooms so they could clean up, Addie and Seth to the attic and Taylor to the spare bedroom she was to share with Sadie.

"I don't know how you do it, Val," Sadie said.

"Do what?" Valerie was bent over the sink, arms covered to her elbows in suds.

"Take care of all these kids."

"Only two," she laughed.

"Yeah, but they aren't even *yours*," Sadie said, wanting to tell Valerie that she had lost her job, unable to balance the parenting of one child with a job where, in her thirties, she was the oldest employee still waiting tables. But something in between embarrassment and nervousness stopped her.

"It's family," Valerie said. "Speaking of, I need to check on Dad."

“You’re a better person than me,” Sadie said. Valerie laughed as she dried her hands on a dish rag.

Sadie laughed too, but a lump formed in her throat as she realized the truth in her words. This wasn’t what Robert intended. She needed to *do* something. “I’ll check on Marcus,” she offered.

“That’s okay. I have to bring him water.” Valerie pulled a glass from the cabinet. “You can come.”

“I can help.”

“Tomorrow.”

Sadie sighed, but just as quickly as her motivation came, it thinned and diminished like steam. “Okay,” she said, and hardly paid attention as Valerie held Marcus’ head and tipped the glass between his lips.

## Chapter 3

### Sadie

When Sadie woke the next morning, Taylor was curled away from her at the edge of the full-sized bed they shared. They had checked out of their hotel the day before, and now their bags were resting in the corner of the first floor bedroom in Robert's family house. Sadie had never spent the night there before, not even while he was alive.

A blue and red quilt was bunched in the gap between Taylor's ear and her shoulder, and the pale nape of her neck was exposed. Sadie wanted to kiss Taylor there lightly, like she might have when Taylor was a baby. But she could no longer do that, just as she no longer took Taylor into her lap or buckled her into a car seat. Sadie had never felt very good at those things anyway.

Sadie rolled away from Taylor to face the room. Grey light streamed through the window, the sun not yet fully risen, but Sadie could hear Valerie moving about the kitchen. The refrigerator opened then closed, and the stovetop clicked to life. Sadie yawned, moisture collecting in the corners of her eyes. As she looked about the room and became fully awake, a rush of disappointment overwhelmed her. She was certain Robert would appear to her again, now that she was in his childhood home. The rose colored knobs on the dresser, the full length mirror, and the crochet carpet didn't suggest a young boy's bedroom, but it might as well have

been, years ago. It occurred to her suddenly that she could very likely be lying in his bed. So why, she wondered, swallowing the lump in her throat, hadn't he come to her last night?

Her disappointment mingled with frustration. Unable to lie still any longer, she pulled herself out of bed and left the room quietly so as to let Taylor sleep.

The door to their bedroom opened into the living room where Marcus rested. His body, though mostly obscured by piles of blankets, appeared crumpled and irregular. Sadie drifted toward him until she hovered above his sleeping form. His chin was covered in gray hairs and his purpled lips were parted, revealing one missing front tooth. Still, she could see the man he once was through the arch of his overgrown eyebrows, the prominence of his chin, and the width of his forehead. He had retained most of his hair, though it was wild and gray now. Sadie remembered finding him intimidating when she first met him, though he cried at Robert's funeral—while she had remained dry faced. Sadie leaned toward him, searching for Robert underneath the dark freckles on his cheeks and the gathered folds of skin around his mouth. The cavity just underneath his trachea fluttered. She squinted her eyes and looked closer. It moved again then his mouth opened wide and a shaking breath like crumpled leaves departed from his throat, sending hot air over her face. She jerked back.

“You're up early.”

Sadie turned and saw Valerie standing in the doorway. She held a bowl in one hand and a washcloth in the other.

“Yeah.”

Valerie traversed the room and perched on the edge of Marcus' bed. Sadie stepped aside, and Valerie dipped the washcloth in the water and ran it gently over Marcus' face. His eyes opened momentarily, before fluttering closed.

“Val,” he said when Valerie returned the washcloth to the bowl, his eyes slowly opening again.

Sadie stood back, feeling somehow shocked that he could speak. But of course, he could speak. It was Marcus, she reminded herself. He was still the same person.

“Are you hungry?” Valerie asked him.

“No.”

“I’ll bring you some oatmeal later.”

“Thank you.” He closed his eyes and his body immediately became inanimate again, so still he seemed made of wax.

Valerie set the bowl on the end table and motioned with her hand for Sadie to follow her into the kitchen.

“Coffee?” she asked once they were out of Marcus’ earshot.

“Please.”

Valerie poured two cups from the coffee maker, and they sat together at the kitchen table. Valerie was dressed in jeans and a clean white V-neck, her hair wet and plaited down her back. Under the table Sadie wiggled her bare toes, which peeked from under the hem of her sweatpants. She felt adolescent, sitting next to her sister-in-law.

“Did you sleep alright?” Valerie asked.

“Well enough.” Sadie took a sip of coffee and relished the way it burned, as if it might cleanse her throat of Marcus’ air.

“I’m not used to having company this early in the morning. It’s kind of nice,” Valerie said with a smile, wrapping both her palms around the mug as if she was cold.

“Why do you wake up so early?”

“I have to check on dad. Usually I’m up a few times throughout the night as well. I worry, you know?”

“Oh, right.” Sadie nodded, remembering when Robert was ill. During his last few months of life, worry drove her every thought and movement. It was maybe the only time in her life that she felt she acted selflessly. She loved him so much, it was more a compulsion than anything else. Yet, her actions changed nothing. And then she went right back to being the way she was before. She wished she could be like Valerie, like Robert—selfless always. “I can help you with Marcus,” she said. “I think Robert would want you to have some help.”

“That’s very kind of you to offer. But I don’t know if you would like the first order of business.” Valerie puffed out her cheeks and laughed.

“What?”

She grew serious again. “Oh...I’m being very insensitive. I have to change him in a minute.”

“Change him?”

“He doesn’t have a lot of mobility. He’s been wearing a diaper recently, only the last few weeks or so.”

“Let me do it,” Sadie offered, before considering the full implications of the task. Her heart acted before her mind had time to intervene. She pulled in a long breath. “Yeah, let me,” she suggested again, setting her jaw. The words brought relief from a discomfort she had not been able to identify before. The idea of employment, of using her hands, of acting rather than just thinking, made her feel solid. She needed to do this.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Val, I can handle it.”

“It’s,” she paused. “Difficult.”

“I’ll manage.”

“But it’s my responsibility,” Valerie said.

“Says who?”

Valerie pulled her chin back and paused, unblinking. Sadie rested her hand on the inside of Valerie’s elbow, where it sat on the table. “You are a kind-hearted person, Val. But you deserve some help once in a while. Let me help you.”

Valerie stood by the window gripping her coffee mug as Sadie approached the semi-conscious man. He had very little awareness of what was going on around him, and he did not look up when Sadie stood over him.

“Let me help you lift,” Valerie offered, placing her mug on the window sill.

“I’ve got it,” Sadie said, grinding her teeth. She could feel Valerie’s gaze heating her face gradually, like an incandescent light bulb.

Teachers and mothers used to judge her like this when Robert was still alive. They could tell that he was the more capable parent, and their puckered lips showed they didn’t like it. It wasn’t natural for a woman to approach parenting with such awkwardness and uncertainty. Or for a girl to so obviously crave her father’s comfort over her mother’s. Sadie felt this same distaste from Valerie as she lowered the quilts to reveal Marcus’ lower body. She splayed then contracted her fingers a few times, gathering confidence.

“Why don’t you go make the oatmeal?” Sadie said, her stomach turning at the thought of food.

“I should stay—”

“Valerie.”

“Okay.” She backed out of the room, and Sadie waited until she heard a pot clang against the stovetop.

Marcus was wearing gray, drawstring pants. His eyes slid open. They were dark brown and shiny.

“Hi,” she breathed, though he seemed to be looking over her shoulder. “It’s me, Sadie. I’m going to help you...” she faltered when his eyes lolled shut. She waited to see if he would rouse again, but when he didn’t she began fumbling with the ties of his pants, working them open so she could hook her fingers into the waist. A shudder ran through her body as her knuckles brushed the warm skin of his stomach. She glanced at his face. His eyelids were half shut, a sliver of white showing through a curtain of lashes. He did not know what she was doing, but somehow that made it feel more wrong.

She had cared for Robert in his last days, but his ailment was internal. The enemy was embedded within, so in defense, his person grew separate from his body. On good days, he smiled and laughed as if a war wasn’t being waged inside his body. It made it easier to imagine that his soul was slipping intact from his inhospitable form rather than deteriorating or disintegrating with it. In the case of Marcus, his problems had risen to the surface, his mind and body decaying alongside one another. It was impossible to pretend that death wasn’t near.

The skin of his stomach was spotted and hairy. Sadie stared at the deep cavity of his navel and felt her insides shrivel. She lowered the waist of his pants. His thighs were thin compared to the rest of his body. She pulled at the Velcro tabs underneath his hips and they detached. As she lowered the front of the diaper, she felt that she was violating him in some unforgivable way. The odor rose to her face like steam, and she could feel the heat of blood

rushing to her cheeks and neck. Tears began to blur her vision. How could a man who had once yelled at his sons from atop a tractor not know he was sitting in his own soil? She rolled the diaper underneath him, eyes fixed on the task.

Sadie held the diaper in one hand and slid the other behind his back. She could feel his shoulder blade as she pulled him towards her. For such a sickly man, he was heavier than she expected. She hauled once, then twice, and finally his spine rose from the mattress. His head lolled back, Adam's apple pointing towards the ceiling, like an arrow. Sadie pulled him closer until he slumped against her. His chin pressed into her shoulder. His breath tickled her neck. They were embracing, almost like mother and child.

He let out a moan, regaining some level of consciousness. Sadie felt a sob rise in her own throat. She pressed her lips together to keep it in, but her nose dripped and her eyes stung. She tried not to cry into Marcus' neck, submerged in the smells, sounds, and textures of his failing body.

"Sadie," Valerie called, appearing in the doorway behind her. Valerie rushed across the room and wrapped her arms around her father, relieving Sadie of the weight. Sadie didn't think she could suppress her sobs any longer.

"I've got him," Valerie said.

Sadie ran into the bedroom then, slamming the door behind her. She fell to her knees and dragged the trash can into her chest. Her insides churned, and vomit surged through her mouth. When she looked up, tears and sweat plastering her hair to her cheeks, Taylor was sitting up in bed.

"Mom?"

Sadie heaved again.

Taylor climbed from the bed and crouched next to her mother. Her eyes were wide and fearful. Sadie thrust the trash can away and buried her face inside her elbow. She wanted to disappear, to float away like Robert had. She wished, not for the first time, that they could have traded places. She felt Taylor's small hand on her back, rubbing in circles.

"Mom, what's the matter?" Her voice cracked.

Sadie sniffed and looked up. Taylor had begun to cry, and Sadie felt acid rise in her throat, shame eating her from the inside out. She swallowed hard. "It's okay," she said.

"I'm worried."

"I just got sick."

"But what happened?"

"Nothing," Sadie's voice was sharper than she had intended. She wiped her mouth and found her chin was covered in thick saliva. She couldn't bare Taylor's eyes on her. She rose, her vision clouding with black dots for a moment, then went to the bathroom. She was aware that she had left Taylor sitting alone on the floor with no explanation, but she was unable to comfort her, or even face her, in that moment. As Sadie splashed cold water on her face and neck, she remembered what her mother had told her when she was a kid. *Stop crying. It only reinforces what everyone already thinks—that girls are weak.*

When Sadie returned to the living room, Valerie had finished the task and was standing before the TV flipping through channels, Marcus resting peacefully in bed.

"I'm sorry," Sadie whispered.

"It's really okay. It's difficult."

Sadie linked her hands together and glanced at Marcus, whose lips were moving ever so slightly in his sleep.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“No. I’m just putting on something he’ll like when he wakes up, and then we can make some breakfast. I burned the oatmeal.”

“I’m sorry.”

Valerie continued to flip through channels, spending hardly long enough on each for the sound to catch up to the picture.

“Can he see the TV?” Sadie asked after some more flipping, knowing even before the sentence fully formed in her mouth that it was the complete wrong thing to say.

Valerie expelled a puff of air out her nose and looked at Sadie. “Yes, he can.”

Sadie nodded and retreated to the kitchen, fiddling with the pots and pans until Valerie came in and took over.

After that, Sadi and Taylor started a game of monopoly on the living room floor while Valerie maintained the facade that she did not want Sadie to overexert herself. When Addie and Seth stormed through the room on their way to the kitchen, Marcus roused momentarily. His eyes darted back and forth and Valerie gestured for Taylor to stand. Taylor dropped the dice and stepped over the monopoly board, approaching the man with trepidation. Valerie took her small hand and put it in Marcus’.

“Dad, it’s Taylor,” Valerie said, her back to Sadie, but her smile showing through her voice. “Your granddaughter.”

“My granddaughter,” he said. “So nice of you to come visit.”

“Hi, grandpa,” Taylor said. Sadie felt queasy again, hearing her daughter say those words. For better or for worse, they had been a family of two for a long time.

“You look just like Valerie when she was little,” Marcus said slowly, his lips turning up in a smile. “Just like Robert.”

“Your turn,” Sadie called, suddenly protective. Did Marcus remember that Robert was dead? What might he say? And how might Taylor react? “Come on, your roll.” When Taylor returned to the carpet and Sadie handed her the dice, she sent them flying into a row of houses, scattering the green, plastic boxes across the board.

“Sorry,” she said, but Sadie could tell she was distracted.

Addie and Seth continued to make a racket in the kitchen, arguing over the last chocolate chip Eggo Waffle, until Valerie sent them outside to play in the field so Marcus could sleep again if he wanted to. When he finally fell out of consciousness, he looked like a corpse.

Valerie made tea and Taylor sat on the couch sipping carefully from a yellow mug as Sadie cleaned up the game of monopoly. As she did, she noticed that Marcus’ head was bent so that his jaw had slipped from the pillow and rested on the mattress. She moved to reposition him, lowering his shoulders and pushing the pillow up behind his head, touching him for the first time since that morning.

“Be careful,” Valerie said.

Sadie finished adjusting the pillow.

“I think he’s having trouble breathing.”

Sadie's hands froze in place, the silence of his body stealing her breath like plastic over her mouth. Valerie rushed to Sadie’s side, swatting her hands away and yanking the pillow from where she had placed it. Marcus’ throat made a sound like tearing paper then his chest inflated.

A shot of adrenaline rushed from Sadie's chest to the tips of her fingers. Her muscles tensed again as she realized the gravity of what had just happened. Valerie lowered her head until her forehead touched Marcus' chest and breathed with him, her shoulders paralleling the rise and fall of his lungs.

Sadie took a shaky step back. Taylor sat on the couch, frozen, the mug resting on her knee. Sadie wanted to say something, but her throat was swelling, bulging until the skin stretched. Finally, Valerie stood straight again. She did not look at Sadie but instead gazed out the window, overlooking the field where Addie and Seth were throwing a baseball back and forth, snapping each toss into their mits before hurling the ball back in a wide arc. Valerie's eyes followed each toss. Sadie felt as if her lungs were imploding.

She did not try to help with Marcus after that. She was too nervous, though every moment that passed made her feel more like she was failing her husband. The only useful thing she was able to do was order a pizza for dinner that night and pay for it. But even that felt hard. The price stamped across the receipt was higher than she anticipated. But the credit card went through, and she did it, and Valerie thanked her so many times that it almost sullied the gesture entirely.

When it was finally time for bed, Sadie was relieved. She felt completely drained, though Valerie looked no worse for the wear. Sadie promised herself that the next day would be better.

Sadie and Taylor brushed their teeth side by side in the tiny bathroom sink, then changed into their pajamas, and got into bed. It wasn't long before Taylor had turned away and her breathing slowed. She was probably wondering now more than ever why Sadie had brought them

there. Doubt crept up on Sadie, and she decided she would stay awake as long as she could. She was certain that if Robert appeared, he would surely connect her to a purpose once again.

The room was lit only by a blue night light plugged into the wall by the door. In the pale illumination, Sadie traced the lines of peeling paint on the ceiling. The lines looked almost like arid desert soil, cracked by heat. The longer she stared, the more she felt the gorges traverse her chest, just as though she, too, had been left to dry and crack in the sun. She was disappointed in herself.

Each minute that passed without a sign of Robert left her more desperate. She couldn't stand waiting. She glanced over at Taylor, then swung her legs out of bed and walked to the door, the knob cold in her hand. She kept as silent as she could, crossing the living room past Marcus and into the kitchen. She flipped on the light and found a glass in the cabinet. Before she could hold it under the faucet, she heard a call. Sadie stiffened, and moved to the door.

“Val?”

It was Marcus. She stepped into the living room again. He was just a smudged silhouette against the bed. “Valerie? Could you get me a glass of water?”

Sadie thought of going to Valerie, knocking on her door, waking her for help. But it was such a simple task. She looked down at the glass in her hand.

She returned to the kitchen and filled it three quarters of the way, and then carried it back to Marcus. She knelt beside his bed and took his hand in hers, wrapping his swelled fingers around the glass.

“Thank you, Val,” he said, as he raised it, shaking, to his lips.

“It's Sadie,” she said. “Robert's wife.”

“Sadie.”

“Hello, Marcus.” Her voice came as only a whisper. A chill tingled up her back and down her arms to her fingers. She shivered, but it was not unpleasant. She was overcome with something, as if Robert had returned and placed his hand on her shoulder. She could not see him, but she almost felt him. In the dark, Marcus’ eyes were visible only as two sparkles. “Robert wanted me to come see you,” Sadie said softly.

Marcus shifted under his blankets. She could not see his expression, but she knew he was listening. She glanced over her shoulder. All doors were closed. They were alone.

“He told me to come back.” Sadie removed the glass from Marcus' grasp and set it on the ground, then she took his hands in hers and squeezed them lightly. “He wanted me to come here for you. To make things right.”

Marcus’ mouth opened and she could see the gap where his front tooth had been. “Right how?” he echoed, the words only a breath.

“Make things right with *you*.”

“Robert?” His hands tightened on hers.

“Yes.”

“No,” Marcus shook his head, and Sadie felt tears forming in her eyes. His voice was fading, as if he was on the brink of sleep.

“Please,” she shook his hands as if to rouse him, but she could see his eyelids sinking.

“No,” he said again. “The child.”

“What?”

“I’m very tired.” Marcus’ said, his head settling into the pillow.

“What child? You mean Taylor?”

His chin tucked into his chest, and his eyes closed.

“What about Taylor?”

It was too late. Marcus' breathing deepened, and soon he was snoring lightly through his nose.

Sadie's mouth froze, and the tears that had been collecting in her eyes spilled. Her mind groped for his meaning, and she pictured Robert's face. A balloon of guilt expanded in her gut. Of course Robert had to know, even years ago, that Sadie could only offer so much. Taylor deserved a family. And Sadie had no real family. She had never met her father, and her mother had died of a heart attack while Sadie was pregnant with Taylor. She remembered standing at the funeral with her hand on her stomach, looking into the oversized casket that accommodated her mother's huge form, and feeling relieved that Taylor would never meet her. At the time, she was glad Taylor wouldn't associate her grandmother with cigarettes and television and boxed ears. Sadie thought her death meant she could invent whatever kind of mother she wanted, lie away the vicious woman she had been and forge a new history. But now she realized she could never lie away the hole, the gaping chasm in Taylor's life that should've been filled by family.

Robert was a father before anything else. He would've wanted them to return not for himself, not for Marcus, but for Taylor. He was giving her another chance at family, she was sure of it.

Sadie returned Marcus' hands to his sides and retreated to bed, where she lay beside Taylor and fell into a restless sleep. She dreamt of Robert, only what she saw didn't match what she heard. His mouth was moving, but there was only Marcus' voice intermingling with her own.

In the morning, Valerie came to the door. "Sadie, are you up?" she called.

Sadie and Taylor both sat up in bed, just as Valerie pushed through the door. They simultaneously saw her stricken look. Marcus had died during the night.

# PART 2

## Chapter 4

### Taylor

It wasn't until the day of the funeral that Taylor fully realized Marcus was dead. She had heard Valerie say it, she had seen the empty bed in the living room, and watched the black car pull out of the driveway. But it wasn't until they all slid into a pew at the very front of the church—first Taylor, then Sadie, then Valerie, then Seth and Addie—that his death, his gone-ness, became real to her.

Earlier that morning, Sadie told her that Grandpa Marcus had “gone to a better place,” as if he was walking to heaven on his own two feet. But Taylor could see the shiny, black toes of his shoes poking from the top of the casket, and they weren't taking him anywhere. The church was smaller than the one where Robert's funeral had been held, Taylor noticed immediately, and the crowd was older. There were more than a few crying old ladies, gray hair tucked into black hats, pantihosed legs crossed underneath the pews. And old men too, wearing suits that didn't fit, hair greased back with something like bacon fat, but they weren't crying as much.

Taylor wore an outfit that once belonged to Addie, though Taylor found it hard to believe that Addie had ever been small enough to fit it. It was a black jumper and some old Mary Janes. Though Valerie had washed the dress the night before, Taylor could still smell dust embedded in

the fabric. It tickled her nose as she periodically glanced at Addie down the pew. Addie was tall, with wide shoulders and arms that showed the outline of muscles through her sleeves. It seemed unlikely that Taylor would ever look like Addie, but she hoped anyway. They were related, after all. Staring at the stony-faced girl, Taylor realized that she admired Addie with nearly ferocious jealousy.

Taylor turned forward again and stared at her fuzzy knees, which emerged from under the hem of her skirt, and tried not to sneeze. She thought of Marcus' hands wrapped around hers the way a pillow wraps around one's head, and felt tears forming in her eyes. She hadn't known Grandpa Marcus well, but she felt sad anyway. Sadie took Taylor's hand then, and Taylor decided in that moment to let her, even though she was technically too old for such a thing.

The priest went to the podium. A cross-section of his robe tightened around his middle as he drew in a long breath and began to speak. His voice was gravelly and didn't match his rounded shape. He did not look up at the audience, just kept his gaze directed at the book from which he read. Taylor listened at first, but slowly her eyes began to wander to the floor, tracing the seams between tiles and counting how many there were between the coffin and the doors. She imagined Marcus rising, climbing down from the skirted table on which his coffin sat, and calculated how many steps it would take for him to walk out the door.

Then, she noticed a small white mouse scampering across the floor.

"Mom!" she said, squeezing Sadie's hand.

"Shhh." Sadie did not turn her head.

Taylor's eyes followed the mouse as it neared the table. "Mom, there's a—"

"Taylor, I said be quiet. Wait 'til after the service."

Sadie leaned down and kissed the top of Taylor's head lightly, barely brushing her hair with her lips, as if she hadn't wanted to kiss her at all. The mouse disappeared underneath the table's skirt. Taylor pictured it crawling up the leg of the table and into the coffin where her grandfather lay. She gripped the top of her thigh with her free hand, feeling off balance and a little dizzy. She imagined it curling up next to Marcus' hand and nibbling on his fingers. She looked past her mother, down the row at Addie, Seth, and Valerie. None of them seemed to have noticed the mouse either. Addie cocked her head in Taylor's direction. Their eyes met. Addie frowned, and Taylor quickly faced forward again.

When the priest finished, Valerie rose to deliver the eulogy. She walked unsteadily, the thin heel on her left shoe turning inward as she climbed the steps towards the podium. Valerie's dark hair was pulled back tight against her scalp so when she turned to face the church, her head looked very small. She adjusted the microphone and cleared her throat.

"I am so lucky to have had Marcus Wilson as my father," she said. "He was a hard-working farmer, a dedicated member of the church, and an incredible father. Every Sunday, for my entire childhood, we came to this church. The drive was long, so each week he would tell us a story, and each one ended with a moral or life lesson. He showed me that honesty is the greatest form of protection, through the story of a lying mouse. He showed me that gratitude is rewarded through the story of a thankful hedgehog. He showed me me that humility leads to wisdom through the story of a humble dog. And he taught me to always remember that we are lucky. For that one, he used our own story. He said, 'you have a roof over your head and a family that loves you. Family,' he said, 'is everything.'

A sliver of Marcus' face was visible over the edge of the coffin, and Taylor traced her eyes up and down his silhouette as Valerie continued.

"Those of you who knew my father well know that he had an unshakable moral compass. He often suspended his own wants and desires to stay true to his vision of right and wrong. He used that time, each week on the way to church, to instill some of those morals in my brothers and me. I think I am the woman I am today because of those lessons. And now, during this hard time, I strive to remember the most important one: Family and community are everything."

*He didn't seem to care much about us, Taylor thought then. We're family, too. Her face reddened with guilt for allowing the sentiment to surface, but she couldn't push it away. He didn't care for us at all.*

Once Valerie was finished, she returned to the end of their pew, and the priest took her place. As he droned on again, Taylor heard the sound of the heavy door opening in the back of the church. She turned and saw a broad shouldered man with tan, freckled skin enter from the rear. He wasn't wearing a suit like the other men, but was instead clad in boots, jeans, and a red, plaid button down. He looked familiar.

"Mom?"

Sadie ignored Taylor again, and Taylor dropped Sadie's hand, resisting the urge to stomp her foot. She kept waching over her shoulder as the man walked down the center aisle, his boots like a drum-beat on the tile floor. His uncombed hair stood out from his head.

"Taylor, face forward," Sadie said.

"There's a man," Taylor whispered loud enough for the whole row to hear. Valerie turned then, and her sharp intake of breath triggered the rest of the family to follow suit.

The man slid into the pew at the end where Seth and Addie sat.

“Dad!” Seth cried, reaching up to wrap his arms around the man’s thick neck as he lowered himself into the pew. Addie’s fingers balled into fists and, for the first time, Taylor saw her eyes grow shiny. She said nothing.

Whispers rose among the mourners, and Sadie moved to block Taylor’s view of the interaction. Taylor twisted her neck so she could see around her. Valerie’s fingers danced on her lips.

“You came,” Taylor heard her whisper.

The man faced straight ahead and kept his eyes glued on the priest, though he wrapped his arm around Seth. “Quite a surprise, considering nobody told me about Dad.”

“I didn’t know where to find you,” Valerie said. Sadie rested a hand on her back.

“Must not have tried very hard,” he hissed.

“You never came back. We wondered how to—”

“Shouldn’t leave anything to wondering when a man’s father dies.”

“Leo, I’m—”

“Let me watch the rest of the service.”

Valerie kept her hand at her mouth and Sadie kept her hand on Valerie’s back. They fell silent and turned straight ahead, though no one seemed to care what the priest was saying anymore. Taylor rested her wrist on her knees and looked at her watch, the second hand snapping from one tick mark to the next.

Sadie glanced down at Taylor. Sadie had given her the watch years ago for “anxiety reduction.” It was steady, consistent, and dependable. It helped Taylor slow down and control her mind and body, but she wished Sadie couldn’t see her looking at it now. Taylor was sure Sadie could hear her heartbeat, too. Or if not hear it, she could feel it beating through the bench

they shared. Sadie always seemed to feel Taylor's panic before she was aware of it herself. She was ready at any moment, always listening to Taylor's drumming heart, choking sobs, fidgeting hands, but rarely her voice.

Taylor kept her eyes glued to the watch for the rest of the service.

After the funeral, they all filed out of the pew, and Valerie tried—and failed—to detach Seth from his father. They stood in the center aisle of the church, which quickly emptied as mourners made their way to the reception.

"I need to talk to your dad privately," she said, pulling lightly on Seth's shoulders. "Go downstairs and get some food with Aunt Sadie."

Sadie led a reluctant Taylor towards a set of double doors at the side of the room then waited for the cousins to join. Addie followed, but Seth refused, his arms linked tightly behind Leo's back.

Finally, Valerie gave up. She leaned in towards Leo, but the high vaulted ceiling seemed to cast her voice to all sides of the room. "We need to talk about some things."

"I'm taking the farm," Leo said, not bothering to lower his voice. "Nothing to talk about."

"You shouldn't have come here like this."

"He's my father, too."

"I mean," she glanced around, as if to ensure no one was listening. Virtually everyone had exited to the basement aside from the family. "In this state."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“You think I can’t tell? After all these years.” Valerie pressed a hand to her forehead then she turned to look at Taylor, Sadie, and Addie. “Go get something to eat. We’ll be down in a minute.”

“Seth, come on,” Sadie called.

“It’s okay,” Valerie waved them away. Taylor felt Sadie’s hand clamp over her upper arm, as if she might try to stay too, and together they walked through the doors, and down a small stairwell to the church basement.

“What state?” Taylor asked.

“Nothing,” Sadie replied, not looking at her.

The room was filled with round tables and plastic chairs. While Sadie steered Taylor towards the line for the buffet, Addie went straight for a chair at the edge of the room. She sat with her arms crossed and stared at the tile floor.

“Is she okay?” Taylor asked.

“We’ll go sit with her in a minute,” Sadie said, handing Taylor a paper plate. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, I am," Sadie said, pulling Taylor into the line for the buffet.

"Let's bring a plate for Addie."

“I don’t think she wants us to sit with her,” Taylor said.

“Well then we won’t, okay?” Sadie snapped.

Taylor furrowed her brow.

“I’m sorry.” Sadie sighed.

Taylor didn't reply. She scooped fruit salad onto her plate, and then she and Sadie sat on the opposite side of Addie's table. Taylor nibbled on a large cube of honeydew in silence, chewing it to mush in her mouth then moving it to the tops of her cheeks like a squirrel. She didn't look at her mother.

When Valerie finally appeared, she was accompanied by a tearful Seth, and no Leo.

"I'm exhausted," she said. "Let's go."

"Don't you want some food?" Sadie asked, glancing down at the half eaten mound of pasta salad on her plate.

"No. I want to be home."

"Okay." Sadie dumped her remaining food in the trash then they followed Valerie from the church. Taylor was relieved to go.

## Chapter 5

### Taylor

“Can I go with Addie and Seth?” Taylor asked Sadie, who was seated at the kitchen table. Taylor clasped her hands together and bounced up and down on her heels, trying to beg with her eyes. It would be just like Sadie say no, to tell her to stay in and rest after a day of sitting. But Taylor didn’t want to stay inside. She wanted to go play outside with her cousins.

“You don’t know them very well.”

“We’re just going to have a catch in the field. We’ll be right outside.”

“It’s been a long day.” Sadie was still wearing her funeral attire, and when she clicked her heel against the tile floor, her skirt rippled like a sheet hung in the wind. Taylor had discarded her jumper in favor of blue shorts that swished when she walked and lime green sneakers. She loved those sneakers. They were almost new, and she couldn’t wait to smear them with mud and grass.

“I just want to play a little.”

Addie and Seth were in the living room, tying their shoes and calling each other names. They hadn’t exactly invited Taylor to come, but they had talked about playing catch in front of her. Almost as if they wanted her to tag along. Taylor envisioned herself running with them,

spitting in the grass, and throwing dirt. That's what farm kids did, she thought. Maybe she'd fit in better here than she did at school. She considered voicing this thought to Sadie, but then stopped herself. It would only make her more concerned, then Taylor would never be allowed to play.

Addie and Seth marched into the kitchen and made straight for the front door, barely glancing at Taylor as they swung it open and banged down the porch steps.

“Mom?”

“Okay fine, fine.”

Taylor hurried after her cousins, nearly tripping down the porch steps in her struggle to catch up. The grass sunk underneath her feet, and wind tugged at her hair as she bounded after them. Finally, they stopped at the far side of the field before the corn began, and Taylor caught up.

“Can I—” Taylor put her hands on her knees and struggled for breath. “Can I play?” The sky was robin's egg blue, with not a cloud to interrupt its silky texture. It met the fringed tops of the corn in a jagged parallel plane. Taylor felt as if she was in a dome, and when she straightened up again she could nearly see the edges where the sky met the earth.

“We're not playing,” Addie said, burying her right hand in the leather baseball glove she wore on her left and pulling out a muddy ball. She reeled back and chucked it at Seth. It snapped when it hit his mit. “We're just throwing. And you don't even have a glove.” Seth threw the ball back, and Addie caught it with ease.

“You can throw it to me lightly,” Taylor said. “And I can throw it back.”

“Okay,” Addie rolled her eyes. “Catch this.”

Taylor bent her knees and held her hands out in front of her. She watched as Addie brought her arm down and around in a wide circle then let the ball fly. Taylor followed it with her eyes, white against the blue sky, and squinted as it traversed the sun. But it was too high. Her hands shot above her head, and she stumbled backwards. Then she lost sight of the ball and, covering her head with her arms, fell onto her backside.

A moment later, she heard the snap. She looked over her shoulder and there was Seth, sinking his hand into the palm of his mit and pulling out the ball. The throw hadn't been for her at all. Seth snickered and sent it back to Addie.

"Come on," Taylor said, her voice shaking as she pulled herself back to her feet and rubbed her tail bone. "I can throw."

"With those scrawny arms?" Addie said, sending another ball in an arc so high it soared ten feet over Taylor's head. Taylor glanced at the house, but she didn't want to go back to face her mother. Sadie would know what had happened.

"I'm stronger than I look," Taylor said. She didn't sound convincing, even to herself. Her frustration grew as she heard her cousins laugh.

"But are you fast?" Addie asked.

"I'm fast."

"Come on." Addie and Seth looked at each other then plunged into the cornfield at a run, still throwing the baseball back and forth with a lead. Taylor hesitated for only an instant then took off after them.

The stalks were nearly to Taylor's chin, slapping at her arms and cheeks as she ran. Seth and Addie bobbed in and out of view, and after a few moments she followed only the sound of their laughter and the swishing stalks they swatted from their paths.

“Guys, wait up!” Taylor cried, but they did not slow. Her chest ached. She pumped her arms and kept running, then jogging, then walking through the dense foliage. Finally, she doubled over, pressing her hands into her knee caps and heaving with each breath. Tears pricked in her eyes. She felt small and stupid. Of course she wouldn’t fit in with her cousins. Of course they’d be no different than everyone else. Her forehead and chin wrinkled painfully as she swallowed the lump in her throat and tried not to cry.

When she straightened up and looked about, there was nothing but a sea of corn rippling around her. “Guys!” she called. “Guys?” She wanted to go back, only she couldn’t see the farm house. She looked down at her watch and made her breath match the movement of the second hand, in for five and out for five. She pretended her heart was the second hand, her breath the minute, and her mind the hour. *Slow down*, she told herself. And kept breathing in and out.

After a while, when she felt calm again, she began to walk.

“Addie,” she called. “Seth!” After a few minutes of walking through the corn, she noticed a break in the rows up ahead. She jogged toward it. Spilling out onto flat grass, she felt like she could breathe again. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, relieved to be rid of the constant stroking and scratching of leaves. There was a white farmhouse up ahead atop a grassy hill, Taylor could see, but it was not the farmhouse she just came from. Near where she stood grew a gnarled tree with branches like an umbrella. At its base, a girl leaned up against the trunk. Her hair was long and wavy, shiny brown at the roots and light as tree bark at the tips, curling in on itself like a horse’s mane. Her legs were bent into triangles underneath her flowered dress and a book rested on her knees.

“Hi, there,” she called.

“Hi,” Taylor said, so quietly the girl probably couldn’t hear.

“Come here.”

Taylor pointed to her chest.

“Yes, you. Who else?”

Taylor took an uneasy step toward the girl. Addie and Seth were nowhere to be found, and there was only corn behind her. But the girl smiled, and Taylor realized she wasn't afraid. She walked over and stopped a few feet in front of the girl, who was still leaned against the tree.

“What's your name?” the girl asked.

“Taylor.”

“Hi, Taylor.” She plucked a few blades of grass from the ground and slid them into her book before closing the cover. It was *The Secret Garden*, a book Robert had read to Taylor years before. It was on her shelf at home, next to *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Little Princess*, but she hardly remembered what it was about. The girl extended her hand up towards Taylor. “I'm Charlotte.”

Taylor took her hand and shook it. It was soft and warm and small. She watched their hands move up and down together, in rhythm. When they let go, Charlotte patted the grass beside her.

“Want to sit down?”

Taylor did want to sit, but she paused. She didn't feel nervous around Charlotte. She didn't feel the racing heart, tightening chest, or tingling fingertips that she experienced with most strangers, but her mind knew that the situation was no different than any other.

“Unless you have somewhere to be.”

“Have you seen my cousins?” Taylor asked.

“I’ve seen nobody but my grandparents all summer. And now you. I’m so bored.” She gave Taylor a smile and despite her bold speech there was a shyness in her eyes. As if she expected rejection.

Taylor lowered herself to the grass and sat pretzel style. “I was playing with my cousins,” Taylor said, “but then I lost them.”

“You’re lucky you have other kids to hang out with. I just have my grandparents and they’re no fun.”

“I guess,” Taylor said, taking a handful of grass and twisting it between her fingers. “I think they ran away from me.” Her face reddened. She didn’t usually talk to other kids, and Charlotte was older than her. There was just something different about her. She was tall and pretty.

“Why’d they run away from you?”

“I don’t think they like me.”

“Why not? You seem like a cool person.”

Taylor grinned.

“Do you live here all the time?” Charlotte asked.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“Where do you normally live?”

Charlotte snorted. “Who knows anymore. First, I was at my aunt’s, then back to my mom’s, then boarding school, then to my other aunt’s, and now my grandparents’. I can’t wait until I can just go wherever I want.”

“Where would you go?”

“I don’t know, but once I got there I’d stay.”

Charlotte’s face was serious, but Taylor cracked a smile, and suddenly they were both laughing.

“I know it sounds a little whiny, but I’m so tired of getting shipped all over the place.”

“That makes sense,” Taylor said, “although I’ve only been in one place forever, and it’s not that great.”

“But at least you have friends.”

“Yeah.” Taylor’s smile faltered.

“What? Don’t you have friends?”

Taylor looked at her watch.

“Don’t you?”

“Yeah, it’s just I’m not really good at talking to people.”

“You’re talking to me.”

Taylor looked up. Charlotte’s eyes were dark brown. “Yeah, but I get nervous.”

“Are you nervous now?”

“No. But I am most of the time.”

Charlotte laughed. “That’s silly,” she said, as if they had known each other forever. “You don’t have to be nervous.”

“I know, but—”

“I mean,” Charlotte lowered her head and looked up at Taylor the way a teacher might look over her spectacles. “You can overcome that.”

Taylor felt full all the sudden, as if she had just eaten a hot meal. Only it extended into her chest, so she felt full all the way through. “Do you think so?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You don’t really know me, though.”

Charlotte wagged her finger in the air. “I know people. And I know nervous girls.”

“How?”

“Because I used to be one.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

Taylor grinned again.

“So what are you doing in good ol’ Pennsylvania Dutch country?”

“My Grandpa died.” As soon as the words formed, Taylor clapped a hand to her mouth and imagined how Sadie might react. *Taylor, be polite.* She was getting too comfortable—a problem she did not encounter often.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Charlotte said. Her brow furrowed, but she didn’t look shocked like Sadie might.

“It’s okay,” Taylor said, and it actually felt true. She had never said the word “died,” or “dead” ever. Sadie was her only confidant, and she treated “death” like a swear word. But saying it out loud reduced it in a way, made it clear. He was very old, then he died. Her sadness felt sensical. “He was old,” Taylor said. “My dad died, too. But that was a long time ago.”

“You poor thing.” Charlotte rested her hand on Taylor’s shoulder.

“It’s okay. I’m not sad all the time like I used to be.”

“That’s good. I don’t have a dad either.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but mine didn’t die. I just never met him.”

“Oh.”

Charlotte set her jaw and thought for a moment, then she said, “I have something that might cheer you up. Stay here.” She rose and her hair fell down her back like vines from a tree.

“Promise you won’t go anywhere?”

“I promise.”

“I’ll be right back.” Charlotte took off at a run, her bare feet barely touching the grass before popping up again, yellow dress whipping around her legs. She traversed the field then ran around the back of the farmhouse. Taylor leaned up against the tree where Charlotte had been just a moment before. It felt rough and warm against her back. She gazed out over the cornfield and breathed in the fresh, sweet smelling air. The air wasn’t like that back home, where every yard was a little yellow and surrounded by a chain link fence. You couldn’t drink it like iced tea and feel refreshed and awake. New Hausheld was a different world entirely.

In a few minutes, Charlotte reappeared. She was walking this time, her arms gathered in front of her, her face bent down towards the bundle against her chest. Taylor could see her lips moving. She rose.

“What is it?” she asked when Charlotte was close enough.

Charlotte raised her head. Pressed against her chest was a fluffy gray rabbit with big ears laid against his back. “Chippy,” Charlotte said, “Or Chip for short. Because he likes to eat the wood chips in his pen. Even though you’re not supposed to, are you Chippy?” She kissed him lightly on the top of the head before settling back down onto the grass. Taylor fell onto her knees.

“Can I pet him?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Taylor leaned forward and ran her index finger over the top of his head and down his back. His fur was soft and cool like water. He blinked.

“Oh, he likes you,” Charlotte said.

“Really?”

“Definitely. I can tell when he likes someone, and he likes you a lot.”

“I can’t believe it,” Taylor breathed.

“You want to hold him?”

“Are you sure?”

“Only if you want to.”

“I do.”

Charlotte leaned toward Taylor and carefully transferred the tame animal into her arms. Chippy curled into her chest and she nearly cried with joy. She could feel his little heart beating against her hand. He was warm and smelled like soil and tree bark. She pressed her cheek against his soft back.

“I told you he liked you.”

“Where’d you get him?”

“He’s the reason my aunt wanted me out,” Charlotte laughed. “She didn’t like it when I brought animals home, but I couldn’t help myself. I got him from a friend.” She gently scratched his fluffy behind. “I don’t want to live with someone who would turn this little guy out anyway.”

“He’s wonderful,” Taylor said, feeling warmed from head to toe.

“He’s good company.”

Taylor nodded. Charlotte was good company, too. Taylor stayed there as long as she could, playing with the rabbit and making easy conversation with her new friend. But once the

sun turned from yellow to gold she knew she should return, or Sadie would be worried, then mad.

“I should probably get home,” Taylor said. She remembered then that she was lost, and was shocked that she had been able to push that fact from her mind. “Only, I’m not sure how to get back.”

“I think I know where to take you. There aren’t a lot of neighbors.”

Taylor waited while Charlotte returned Chippy to his pen, still feeling the warmth of his body against her chest. Then Charlotte took her hand and led her through the corn. Taylor walked a step behind her as she navigated the field, nudging aside leaves and avoiding spider webs. Every few minutes Charlotte threw a smile over her shoulder, as if to make sure Taylor was okay. By the time they reached the edge of the field and the little white farmhouse appeared before them, Taylor’s sneakers were coated in a nice layer of dirt. She beamed.

“Do you remember which way we came from?” Charlotte asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then come back and visit sometime, okay?”

On an impulse, Taylor leaned towards Charlotte and hugged her arm. Charlotte laughed and gave her a real hug, then Taylor took off running across the field up to the farm house. She turned around when she reached the porch, and could see Charlotte, dark hair covering her back, wading home through the corn.

When Taylor entered the kitchen, Sadie and Valerie were playing cards at the table.

“Hey, sweetie.”

Taylor walked over and let Sadie put her arm around her shoulders and squeeze her.

“Where are your cousins?” she asked.

“Um...” Taylor thought of Addie and Seth throwing the ball over her head, of them running, and she didn’t want Sadie to know. “They’re still playing. But I got tired.”

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Valerie said, and smiled over her fan of cards.

Taylor’s stomach growled. All she’d had to eat since morning was a couple grapes and a slice of honeydew. She was starving and hadn’t even realized.

## Chapter 6

### Taylor

The next morning, Taylor accompanied Sadie and Valerie to see Marcus' lawyer. She was thankful no one suggested she stay home with Addie and Seth. She had been avoiding them as much as possible since the previous afternoon.

Sadie drove the car, with Aunt Valerie in the passenger seat. Valerie's eyes were red and puffy, but no one pointed it out. Taylor tried not to look at her in the side-view mirror, feeling when she did like she was violating Valerie's privacy, like she knew something she shouldn't. She wasn't used to seeing adults cry.

Instead, Taylor looked out the window and let her eyes slide over the ragged line between sky and crops. She could feel the heat of the sun against her face. She lowered her window and rested her chin on the door, closing her eyes and letting the air bombard her face and shoulders. It smelled like newly turned soil and manure. The backs of her eyelids were spotted with orange and the wind whooshed in her ears. She felt transported for a moment, until Sadie spoke.

"Taylor, put that up," Sadie said, "it's too loud." When Taylor made no move, Sadie did it herself herself, the glass rising into Taylor's chin until she jerked back. Sadie flipped the lock switch so Taylor no longer had control of her window.

“You don’t need to lock it.”

Sadie’s eyes moved into the rearview mirror.

“Seriously,” Taylor said.

Sadie sighed and unlocked the window. Taylor rested her finger on the button but didn’t press it again.

“Thank you for coming,” Valerie said to Sadie. “Leo is not going to be pleasant to deal with.”

“Just remember you did nothing wrong. It was his fault that he wasn’t around.”

“He’s going to take everything.”

“How can he? It's not fair.”

“It’s not. But things aren’t always fair.” She sat up straight and paused for a minute. “I really appreciate you coming, but...I just thought I should tell you, Dad and Robert didn’t have a very good relationship in the end. Just in case you expected anything.” She trailed off.

Sadie raised her chin and Taylor leaned forward so she could hear everything.

“I’m not saying it wouldn’t be nice,” Sadie said. “But I’m not *expecting* anything.”

“Like what?” Taylor asked.

Sadie gave her a sharp look in the mirror. “Nothing, Taylor. We’re almost there.”

When Sadie pulled into a parking lot, Taylor gazed out the window at an unremarkable square, brick building. “Is this it?” she asked. It was hardly what she imagined a lawyer’s office would look like, brown with two glass doors in the front, in a lot by itself. “I thought lawyers were fancy.”

Sadie tapped the screen of her iPhone. “It’s the right address.”

“This is it,” Valerie said, opening her door.

The engine quieted and Taylor clicked off her seatbelt. When she climbed out, a wave of heat overcame her, radiating from the sky above and the black asphalt below. She stared down at her green sneakers and wondered if the rubber soles could melt into the pavement.

“Come on, Tay,” Sadie called, hoisting her purse onto her shoulder.

Taylor followed Sadie and Valerie into the building, and when they entered, the air conditioning was disappointingly inadequate. Taylor could feel sweat prickling her scalp. The gray carpet was spotted with coffee drips, and the windows had no blinds. A receptionist sat at a large wooden desk and did not look up when they entered.

“Excuse me,” Valerie said, approaching her timidly. They spoke for a moment in hushed tones, the receptionist pointing down the hallway. Valerie motioned for Sadie and Taylor to follow her.

Sadie reached for Taylor’s hand, but Taylor pretended to scratch her cheek. She was only a little annoyed about the window, but didn’t want to hold Sadie’s hand. They passed a few grim looking portraits hanging in the hallway that looked more like photographs with filters than actual paintings. They all had gray hair, pale skin, and lumpy faces.

They stopped when Valerie pointed to a door with a metal name plate.

“Here,” she said. A chair sat a few more feet down the hallway and Sadie dragged it until it was directly outside the office.

“Taylor, you're going to sit out here,” she said.

“But I want to come in,” Taylor replied indignantly.

“Val, why don’t you go ahead?” Sadie said, looking at Valerie over Taylor’s head.

Valerie nodded and reached for the doorknob. “We won’t be long,” she said, offering a smile. She disappeared behind the door and Sadie put her hands on her hips. Taylor crossed her arms.

“You need to be patient,” Sadie said.

“I want to come.”

“This is an adult situation.”

With no warning, a burst of energy shot through Taylor’s body. She ground her teeth together and stomped one foot, resisting the urge to jump up and down and wave her fists.

“Don’t do that.” Sadie extended her finger and pointed at Taylor’s foot. “Now is not the time.”

“You never let me do anything.” Taylor knew that she was whining, but every muscle in her body was tense and it took effort not to yell. She felt that if she were to yell in that moment, it would be loud enough to echo throughout the entire building. It would make Sadie mad. It would make her ashamed, as she often was. Taylor almost wanted to embarrass her. “You never let me do anything.”

“You know that’s not true.” Sadie’s eyes moved beyond Taylor. She wasn’t taking her seriously. She wasn’t even looking at her.

“Mom,” Taylor moaned, but Sadie just put her hand on Taylor’s shoulder and stepped around her. Taylor turned and saw Leo walking fast down the hallway. His mouth was pulled tightly closed and his nostrils were flared as he approached them. Taylor’s frustration immediately mingled with nervousness at the sight of him.

“Hello, Sadie,” he said, when he had reached them.

“Hi, Leo. It’s been a while,” she replied, clamping her hand on Taylor’s shoulder.

“It has.” He let out a breath through his nose, like a bull. “Not sure why you felt the need to come today.”

“I’m supporting Valerie. Which is something we should all be doing.”

Leo leaned towards Sadie, whose hand tightened around Taylor’s shoulder. Taylor didn’t like the way he was looking at her mother, as if he might suddenly bite.

“After today it’ll be a lot easier,” he said, then he turned his eyes down to Taylor. She felt cold, and squirmed under his gaze. “Hello, there,” he said in a different tone than he used for Sadie. Taylor placed one of her hands on her heart and swallowed. One corner of his mouth turned just slightly and she realized his eyes were laughing. Then he looked at Sadie and said, “we don’t want to be late.” When he glanced at Taylor again, the laughter was gone and his eyes were hard. He entered the lawyer’s office and slammed the door behind him.

Now Taylor did take Sadie’s hand, removing it from her shoulder and holding it to her heart. “Mom, let’s go.”

“Taylor, we have to—”

“But mom,” she said. She did not want Sadie going into that room, not with him. She had a feeling that something bad might happen.

“Sit here.” Sadie pointed to the chair.

Before she could protest, Sadie grabbed her shoulders and maneuvered her into the seat with more force than Taylor expected. Taylor met her eyes. Sadie’s pupils were dilated, small black dots in wide irises. “We can’t make Valerie do this on her own,” she said. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Okay.”

“Do you promise?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be right in this office. Just, don’t move.”

“I told you I wouldn’t.”

Sadie turned and entered the lawyer’s office, easing the door shut behind her. Taylor crossed her arms and swung her feet under the chair. Her mind buzzed. She looked to her watch, but she couldn’t concentrate on the ticking long enough to see the second hand move from one number to the next, much less to match her body to its rhythm. It didn’t calm her.

When Robert was sick, Taylor had spent countless afternoons sitting behind closed doors while adults discussed adult things. She was left to piece together the details of his sickness on her own, patching bits of overheard conversation to whatever scraps Sadie felt her old enough to handle. She struggled to translate every half-truth told to her by nurses and family members into what was really happening. She was wracked with so much uncertainty and anxiety, knowing things were bad, but having no conception of just how bad. In the end, she had misjudged things. She never expected him to die.

Now she was even older. And still, she stared at a closed door. With every passing second, her body temperature rose. Suddenly, she stood.

“I won’t just sit here,” she said aloud, as if her mother might hear or at least sense what she was feeling through the wooden barrier. Once the words left her lips, her feet began to move. She turned and marched down the hall, imagining Sadie’s fear when she discovered that Taylor was gone. But she hadn’t gone more than a couple steps before a loud shout snapped her attention back to the door.

It was a man’s voice.

She paused. The shout was followed by raised voices, male and female. Taylor's skin chilled. She shuffled back to the door and tried to hear what was being said. She could understand nothing, but the voices were angry, scared, maybe even violent. She leaned forward and detected a familiar tone in the mix. Her breathing became shallow and images of skin meeting skin, of spit flying from mouths, of tears spilling down cheeks, flashed through her mind like a film reel. Her anger was gone, replaced by an irresistible compulsion. She had to see Sadie. She had to know she was safe. Taylor's hand rose to the doorknob, but it trembled so violently that she stopped herself.

What could she do to help? She was small and afraid. She took a step back.

But then, with no prompting, Charlotte's voice returned to her.

*You can overcome that.*

Suddenly, Taylor's hand was back on the knob, warm and round against her palm. Her fingers closed and, at the sound of another shout, she twisted it and swung the door open.

Taylor stumbled into the room, which was consumed by chaos. Leo and the lawyer were both on their feet, shouting and waving their arms. Valerie was doubled over, her hair and hands blocking her face. Only Sadie noticed Taylor standing in the open doorway.

"Taylor!" she cried, her face twisting. She surged forward. "Get out." Taylor careened back and Sadie slammed the door in her face with a bang.

Taylor stared at the closed door, feeling like her throat had been wrenched from her neck. She listened to Sadie's voice repeat in her head again. *Get out.*

# PART 3

## Chapter 7

### Sadie

Sadie sat beside Valerie and Leo in front of the lawyer's wide mahogany desk. It was a ridiculous desk, Sadie realized, fit only for a lawyer who desired substantial separation between himself and his clients. The lawyer had a rounded belly and a mustache like a long, yellow toothbrush. He wore a suit jacket, but no tie, and introduced himself as Mr. Walker, offering no first name to lessen the distance. His last name was fitting, Sadie thought. He didn't appear to be the type to rush anywhere.

Walker spent a few minutes shuffling through a manila folder on his desk before speaking again. Leo's heavy nose breathing made Sadie nervous and, as if that wasn't enough, Valerie's hand tapped rapidly against her knee.

"Ah, here it is," Mr. Walker said, shifting a form to the top of the stack. "I was just looking over the papers this morning."

*Sure, you were,* Sadie thought.

"There aren't a lot of specifics. Valerie, you are named as the executor. Assets are to be distributed equally between three names."

"Three?" Sadie asked before anyone else spoke. She felt the eyes of Valerie and Leo turn on her, but she ignored them. "Sorry. You said three names?"

Walker's mustache twitched. "Yes, three. There are three names in the will."

Sadie's limbs grew weak. *Could it be me?* She imagined Walker's lips forming her name, offering her the first break since Robert died. She could almost feel Robert's hand on her shoulder. He hadn't given up on her.

"Why are there three?" Leo interjected.

"I guess Marcus saw fit to—"

"Robert's dead, you know. And I deserve that farm. I ran it with my dad, for my whole life."

Both Sadie and Valerie flinched when he spoke of Robert. Sadie mouthed the word *sorry* automatically, as if Robert was in the room. She couldn't help herself. She felt him there.

Then Walker spoke. "The third name is not Robert's."

Sadie grasped Valerie's hand to stop her tapping.

"Who is it?" Valerie asked.

Walker ran his finger down the page, his eyes darting back and forth as he read. "Okay, we have Leo Wilson."

Leo grunted.

"Valerie Wilson."

Sadie held her breath.

"And lastly—"

"Who?" The word burst forth from her mouth, eliciting looks from both men and a whimper from Valerie.

"Rosalie Baker."

Sadie's muscles released. She felt immediately drained, a puddle melting into the chair's contours. Her disappointment was unexpected. She had no right to feel it. But that only made it worse. Some part of her that had never broken the surface, that she had never given a voice, had hoped that Marcus might have thought of her, his son's widow. She hated the word widow.

"What?" Leo rose from his chair. "What did you say?"

"Rosalie Baker," the man repeated, his brow pulling tight over his eyes, shoulders sinking down under Leo's shadow.

"Baker?" Leo bellowed. "I'm his son. I grew that farm by his side." He leaned over Walker's desk, pressing his sweating palms into the mahogany and leaving streaked hand prints as he slid forward. Walker recoiled. "That's my farm."

"Leo," Valerie reached for him but faltered.

"I have nothing else."

"Sir, please calm down," Walker stammered, leaning back as far as he could without tipping over.

"I need that farm. I need my livelihood."

"It's a legal document. There's nothing we—"

"I don't care. I planted the seeds. I drove the tractor. It's my right as a man. So if you think I'm going to give an inch of it to that slut's—"

"Leo!" Valerie sprang to her feet and grabbed his shoulder. As he spun to face her, the back of his hand made sharp contact with her face. Skin cracked against skin and Valerie stumbled to the side, clutching her cheek. Sadie caught her from falling.

"Jesus, Leo!" Sadie cried.

He looked shocked for a moment, then he puffed up his chest again. “I was the one with my hands in the dirt,” he said. “What would women do with a farm anyway? I earned it.”

Ensuring Valerie was steady on her feet, Sadie released her and stepped toward Leo. Fury rose to her throat and adrenaline poured through her veins. She felt strength born from fear. But before she could speak, the door swung open and there was Taylor, a look of fear frozen on her face. “Taylor!” Sadie screamed, the name ripping at her throat and growing her fear tenfold. “Get out!” her body moved of its own accord, lunging forward. Sadie grasped the door and flung it shut with all her strength. It banged loudly. Taylor would be scared, hurt even, but that was a matter for later. She turned back to the conflict.

“Leo, you are out of line.” He wasn’t listening to her. He was facing Walker and fighting a battle for volume. Walker didn’t stand a chance.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” he said, “but...but I have children. I need this for them as much as me.”

Finally the lawyer rose to his fullest height, cheeks turning a violent shade of purple, and yelled, “Leave my office now. All of you.” He pointed towards the door.

“But—”

“I’m calling the police.” Walker set his hand on the telephone.

Leo fell silent for a moment, before stomping towards the door and wrenching it open. Sadie flew after him, knowing Taylor would be on the other side. She stood in the center of the hallway, eyes as wide as saucers.

Leo shoved her out of the way said, “Bitches won’t be in my house for long.”

To Sadie’s incredible surprise, Taylor caught her balance, rose onto her toes and screeched at his back, “It’s not your house!”

Sadie pressed her hand to her mouth as Leo disappeared down the hallway. Taylor sank back onto her heels, then turned to Sadie. She bit her bottom lip, cheeks turning pink. Sadie fell to her knees and wrapped her arms around Taylor, pulling her in tight.

“You reckless little thing,” Sadie said, a hint of pride sneaking into her voice. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry he shoved you.”

Sadie gave her another squeeze then turned back to Valerie, whose eyes were wide with shock. Walker had closed the office door behind them. Valerie still held her crimson cheek with one hand. She shook her head and moved her mouth a few times before words emerged. “I can’t believe he shoved her,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Valerie,” Sadie stood and grasped Valerie’s shoulders tightly in her hands. “He’s a bastard. He...he’s a bastard.”

Valerie shook her head. “I can’t believe he touched her.” She took one more look at Taylor then burst into tears, sobs shaking her entire body. Sadie took her into an embrace.

“He’s a bastard. He’s a bastard,” she kept repeating, until Valerie protested.

“He wasn’t himself. He got worked up.”

“Don’t defend him, Val.” Sadie pulled away to look her in the face. “What did he just do to you?”

Valerie sniffed. "It's nothing."

“Come on.”

“He hit me.” She swallowed.

“That’s not okay.”

“I can’t believe he hit me.” Valerie’s face contorted suddenly into something between disbelief and fury.

Their eyes met.

“He will not do that again,” Valerie said.

## Chapter 8

### Sadie

As soon as Sadie, Taylor, and Valerie stepped through the front door into the kitchen, they heard pounding steps echo above their heads followed by voices. Addie and Seth banged down the stairs. Seth flew into the room and flung himself onto Valerie.

“Did you see Dad?” Seth asked.

Valerie met Sadie’s eyes.

“Is he coming home?” He whined, tugging at her sleeve and looking younger than he was. Sadie could see Valerie struggling to respond, to tell him no. They had just witnessed the worst side of Leo, but Valerie’s pained expression made Sadie wonder what his best side looked like.

“No,” Sadie said, sparing Valerie the hurt. “He’s not.”

Seth released Valerie and turned to stare imploringly at Sadie. Guilt set her hands fidgeting. “Addie said you were going to the lawyer and that dad might come home.”

Sadie and Valerie shot simultaneous looks at Addie, who was leaned in the doorway. She raised her hands above her head, feigning innocence. “I said *might*.”

“We should make lunch,” Valerie said. Addie walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table as Valerie turned to the refrigerator, but Seth’s gaze stayed fixed on Sadie, as if she was the one keeping his father away.

“I’m sorry,” she said. His expression didn’t change. “Are you hungry? Why don’t you sit down?”

He sat, but shook his head.

Sadie frowned at Addie. “You shouldn’t have told him that,” she said.

“It’s not my fault he got his hopes up.”

Sadie pursed her lips and turned to look at Taylor, crouched by the front door untying her sneakers. “We should clean those off,” Sadie said, brushing Taylor’s shoulder with the tips of her fingers. “They’re dirty.”

“I like them that way,” Taylor said, pulling them off her feet one at a time.

“That’s silly.”

“Well, I do,” she said, setting her jaw. Sadie offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet. Taylor padded to the table, socks quiet on the floor, and sat down. She didn’t greet either of her cousins, scooting her chair as far away from their chairs as possible.

“I’ll make coffee,” Sadie said for something to do, reaching into the cabinet and wrapping her hands around a large tin of coffee. Her hands trembled as she spooned the grinds from the tin into the coffee maker, sprinkling a thin layer across the tile counter like dirt.

Whether from nerves or hunger, she was weak and uneasy.

Valerie emerged from the fridge with raw chicken and a plastic bag of large carrots.

“What can we make with this?”

“Nothing good,” Addie said.

“I don’t want carrots,” Seth said.

Taylor didn’t speak.

Sadie rested her hand atop the coffee maker and felt heat build underneath it. She remembered the lawyer, mustache bobbing, bottom lip wet with saliva. *Rosalie Baker*, he had read. This name, she realized, was the source of her unease. “Val?” The coffee maker began to vibrate beneath her hand.

“Yes?”

“Who is Rosalie Baker? Why is she on his will?”

There was a long silence.

Valerie’s arms hung at her sides. She looked weak and limp, as if her body was held up by strings attached to her shoulders. All three kids watched her.

“I can’t do this now,” she said, her voice high and reedy, turning up at the end like a question. “I just can’t.” She shook her head slowly, her shoulders and upper body moving in conjunction. Sadie’s eyes moved from Valerie to the kids. They didn’t understand, but everyone could sense Valerie was nearing a breakdown. Valerie raised a hand to her cheek, which was still a shade pinker than it should have been, and her fingers moved slowly over the bone.

“Please tell me,” Sadie pressed, selfishly, she knew.

Valerie’s lips tightened. She looked at Sadie with sudden resolve, then at Taylor.

“Chicken,” she said.

“What?”

“Rotisserie chicken.”

“What are you talking about?”

“For lunch. I don’t feel like cooking. I think I’ll go to the store and get a rotisserie chicken. Addie, Seth, you’re coming with me.” She snatched her keys off the counter and abruptly turned to the door. “Come on.”

“We can just stay home,” Addie said.

“No, I want you to come with me.”

The change in her tone was obvious. Seth and Addie followed.

“We can talk when I get back.” Valerie said to Sadie before stepping outside and locking the storm door behind her. Soon Sadie could hear the car rumbling as they pulled out of the drive. She replaced the discarded lunch ingredients and turned to Taylor, who was craning her neck to see out the window from her seat.

“Well,” Sadie said, placing her hands on her hips. “I guess it’s just us.”

“Is Aunt Valerie okay?”

Sadie closed her eyes and rubbed her palm against her forehead. “Yes, she’s fine. I’m sorry if this morning has been scary for you.” Taylor didn’t respond. When Sadie opened her eyes again, Taylor’s back was rigid and she had one hand clamped around the watch on her wrist.

“Mom,” she said.

“What?” No sooner had she spoken then Sadie heard footsteps on the porch.

“Did you forget something?” she called to Valerie as she turned around.

Leo stood on the other side of the door, staring through the glass with bloodshot eyes. Sadie’s insides tightened.

“Taylor, I need you to go into the bedroom right now,” Sadie said, keeping her eyes fixed on Leo, but gesturing behind her with her hands.

“Mom—”

“Taylor, now.”

She heard the patter of footsteps.

“And close the door behind you.”

It clicked shut.

“Hello, Leo,” Sadie said, raising her voice so he could hear her through the glass and reaching to the counter, which was adjacent to the door and out of his sight. She slid a knife up her sleeve then swung her arm behind her back, not sure if she had the gumption to use it but hoping she did just in case.

“Sadie,” he barked. His face was just an inch from the single pane of glass that separated them. “Unlock the door.”

“No.”

“This is my house.”

“You’re very worked up,” she echoed Valerie’s words from earlier.

“This is my house. Let me in.” He banged his palms against the glass. Sadie jumped as the door shook. He could break it with ease.

“No.”

He removed his hands from the glass, leaving behind large prints, and covered his face. The tips of his nails were the dark brown color of soil. He was built like Marcus, tall and wide and thick, unlike Robert who had always been slender. When he lowered his hands again, he was smiling sheepishly, pleadingly.

“Sadie, listen,” he said. “This isn’t what it looks like. I want the farm for my kids. Not me. Don’t you understand that? I’ve been an idiot, but this is my chance to be a father, to be the

man of the house like I should've been these past years. I could care for Seth and..." he paused, as if stifling tears. His eyes, though rimmed in red, were the same shade of brown as Robert's. "Little Seth and Addie. I could work the land again, like I used to." He rested his scarred knuckles against the glass. "You gotta help me. Please?"

Sadie swallowed back the lump in her throat and squeezed the handle of the knife. She might have considered it. She might have let him in, sat across from him at the kitchen table and tried to have a conversation. It seemed like the brave thing to do. But Taylor was in the next room, likely huddled in fear, staring at her watch, counting seconds. One door was not enough separation between Taylor and Leo.

"I can't," she said hoarsely. "I'm sorry."

"Open the door," he repeated.

"No."

"Open it! This is my house and my farm." His palms turned and he banged on the door again. This time, Sadie saw the vertical row of puncture wounds that stretched from his wrist to his elbow. There were fresh holes, pink and surrounded by light purple bruising. She looked at his bloodshot eyes, his rotted teeth, and shook her head.

"You need help, Leo. But not from me. If you care about your kids, you'll get help."

He followed her gaze to his arm and pressed his thumb into a pink wound near the inside of his elbow. "This farm is what I need. It's only fair."

"That," Sadie jabbed her finger into the glass door, pointing at his forearm and feeling a burst of furious energy tighten her muscles. "That isn't fair to them. You should've thought of them before."

"Can't a man make a mistake?"

“Not when it comes to family.”

“Hypocrite,” he growled, moving so close to the door that his breath fogged the glass.

“You forgave Robert.”

She jerked back. “For what?”

“For abandoning a family.”

“It wasn't his choice to abandon us.”

“I wasn't talking about you.” Leo cocked his head to the side.

“Marcus turned his back on Robert.”

“Don't you ever wonder why?” His voice was cold and low.

Sadie stared at him, wondering whether she could trust anything he said.

“Who do you think was on that will?”

Sadie felt the blade press against her lower back. Her hands shook.

“You think Robert was such a family man?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, but her voice trembled like her hands.

“Maybe no one is as honest as you think.”

“What are you saying?” she mouthed, the sound not coming.

“I'm saying, who do you think was on that will?”

Sadie knew confusion and fear flickered across her face, despite all her efforts to conceal it. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

His lips pulled back to reveal his teeth. They were yellow and spotted with brown where they met his inflamed gums. “Oh, I think you do.”

She shook her head. He got ready to speak again but Sadie could not stand to hear another word.

“Go away!” she screamed. She didn’t dare take a step closer to the door, but her whole body pushed the sound from her lungs.

He paused, laughing at her, then left, walking down the porch steps slowly, as if to tell her he was doing it of his own accord. He wasn’t intimidated. Sadie took a few heavy breaths, before returning the knife to the counter. When she released her grip, the insides of her fingers were white, burning. She felt a pressure at her throat and chest. Her skin seemed near to splitting.

She walked to the bedroom, closing the door lightly behind her. Taylor was huddled on the bed, eyes wide, hair thrown to one side. Sadie eased onto the mattress and took Taylor into her arms.

“Did you hear anything?” Sadie pressed her mouth to Taylor’s hair, which smelled like soap and honey.

Taylor was still and quiet.

“Did you hear?”

“No.”

Sadie nodded. She closed her eyes and tried again to feel Robert’s presence. She tried to imagine his hand on her shoulder, his lips on her cheek, but found she couldn’t even conjure his still image. She forced herself to remember the day Taylor was born. He cried. He held her tiny, swaddled form close to his chest and whispered her name between placing kisses on her nose. He glowed like a man in love, and Sadie saw Taylor instantly becoming his purpose, his reason for living. And he fell into that role like slipping into a warm bath. Where his transition had been an effortless dive, smooth and graceful, Sadie’s had been a flailing, screaming flop. She desperately watched him feel everything he should and everything she never did: that magical connection

that was supposed to be inherent, but to Sadie remained elusive. He was the perfect father. He should never have died.

“Am I a good mother?” Sadie asked into Taylor’s hair.

“What?”

“Do you think I’m a good mother?”

“Yes.”

The answer did not bring the relief she hoped it would. “Not as good as—” Sadie stopped herself, but Taylor must’ve known what she was going to say. *Not as good as Valerie would be.* It was obvious.

“Mom—”

“It’s okay,” Sadie pulled her in tighter. They lay there together for a long time in the wake of Leo’s receding storm, unmoving, but Sadie’s mind returned to the kitchen where she had faced Leo only moments before. His rotten teeth and dried lips continued to move behind her eyelids. And his voice followed.

“I wasn’t talking about you,” he said.

*Then who?*

# PART 4

## Chapter 9

### Taylor

Taylor closed the door like Sadie had asked, but she remained beside it, pressing her hands and ear against the crack between the door and the wall. Leo sounded angry, yelling and banging on the kitchen door. To Taylor's surprise, she didn't feel the compulsion to hide or run. She felt detached from her body, unafraid for her physical safety but riveted by the strum of emotion that vibrated through her. It was for Sadie that she feared, and oddly for Leo as well. She unhooked her watch from her wrist and squeezed it in her palm.

"I could take my kids back," she heard, voice muffled by the double barriers of glass and wood. "Little Seth and Addie." His voice, though hoarse, sounded like Robert's, Taylor thought, trying to catch as many words as possible. The way Leo paused between some words gave Taylor the impression that he could be crying. A gathering silence, a moment of collection. And in those seconds, Taylor's heart opened to him.

So often she had craved one more conversation with her father. Just a few more words back and forth, the comfort of his voice. She ached for it. She could not fathom the thought of her father still existing in the world, walking and breathing and talking to others, but not to her. Not being able to speak to him every day. Addie and Seth deserved a father.

Taylor held her breath so she could better hear their voices through the crack. “You gotta help me,” Leo said, but it seemed Sadie dismissed him, cruelly even.

Their words grew indistinct and Taylor pressed her body harder into the door, her ear throbbing in its effort to hear.

“It wasn’t his choice to abandon us.”

“You think Robert was such a family man?” Marcus said. Just her father’s name, “Robert” in the air, set Taylor’s heart beating.

Her first thought was to defend Robert at all costs. *It wasn’t his fault!* she wanted to scream. *Nothing was his fault. He loved us.* But the more she parsed Leo’s words, the more her confusion grew until she wasn’t sure she understood anything at all. She separated her ear from the door, and searched the room with her eyes.

“Get out!” Sadie screeched for the second time that day.

Taylor’s eyes darted to the window. She watched Leo stalk down the drive towards the road, then glance back at the house and make a sharp turn. He pumped his arms, breaking into a slow jog across the field. When he reached the barn, he disappeared through its double doors, restoring the image to what it had been without him. His existence on the property felt uncomfortable, but she swallowed her unease. There was nothing she could do. And if there was, she wasn’t sure if she would do it.

At the sound of Sadie’s footsteps, Taylor hurried from the window and flung herself onto the bed, hair flying to one side of her face, and tossed her watch onto the nightstand.

Sadie entered the room and closed the door behind her. She was so pale, even her lips were white. Taylor’s eyes flicked to the trash can where Sadie had vomited before, but Sadie

kept hers locked on Taylor. She surged forward and gathered Taylor clumsily into her arms, hugging her so her collar bone pushed into Taylor's neck.

"Mom," Taylor said, wishing to pierce the surface of silence and allow sound to spill into the room. But her words only caused the silence to tremble, meniscus holding firm. Sadie squeezed her for what felt like an eternity, Taylor allowing her body to go limp, fighting her discomfort.

Finally, Sadie pulled back. "Did you hear anything?" she asked.

Taylor's first thought was, *of course*. It was a small house and they had been yelling. Even if she had not been trying to listen, she would have heard. But Sadie's expression searched for "no," and Taylor felt compelled to give her the answer she wanted, if only to assuage the desperation in her eyes.

"Did you hear?"

"No," Taylor said. It didn't sound like her voice. She waited for Sadie to elaborate, to reduce her and Leo's conversation to a series of clear explanations that would shed light on his accusations. But instead, Taylor felt a heavy drop of water land on her head and run down the strands of her hair, clinging like water to a window.

"Am I a good mother?" Sadie asked.

The very question squeezed Taylor's heart.

"What?" she said, struggling to impress that the question was ridiculous and badly timed. That the answer should be obvious.

"Am I a good mother?"

"Yes," the word burst through her like wind. Maybe this was what Sadie needed, she needed the confidence to speak.

“Not as good as—”

She stopped herself, but Taylor knew the end of the sentence. *Not as good as dad*, she realized, hating Sadie for giving her the thought. It was wrong, but just its existence in her mind made her feel sick with guilt. It turned her love into a betrayal.

“Mom—”

“It’s okay.” Sadie squeezed her painfully.

Taylor’s throat ached. She shut her eyes and let the pain of Sadie’s words dissipate. She remembered Leo disappearing into the barn, the doors closing behind him. She wanted to tell Sadie that Leo didn’t leave, but she couldn’t be the next to speak. She needed Sadie to tell her what she had learned, to say “Robert” without spitting. They needed to talk about what had been said, about abandonment and family, about the confusion they must’ve both felt. With each moment that Sadie declined to speak, Taylor’s impatience grew until the quiet of the house was interrupted by the sound of the car in the drive. Taylor was momentarily distracted by the sound of the door opening, then voices in the kitchen. Valerie and the cousins were coming through the kitchen door.

“I need to speak to Val,” Sadie said, disentangling herself from Taylor. She stood up.

“You stay here. Door shut.”

“What?” Taylor asked, feeling suddenly out of control, as if she had waited and waited and then waited too long. She had been confident that the conversation was coming. But now she realized it wasn’t to be with her. She felt disregarded, like a pile of laundry in the corner.

“Please listen to me.”

“No,” Taylor cried. “I want to hear, too.” Even as the words left her mouth, she knew she didn’t just want to hear. She needed to be part of the conversation. She needed to speak and listen.

“It’s an adult conversation.”

“It’s always an adult conversation,” Taylor cried, anxiety lifting her voice an octave and making her sound even younger.

“It’s not a discussion.”

Sadie closed the door behind her. Taylor stood still for a moment, until her shock turned to anger. Once again, she was being left out when she deserved a place. She was in this family, too. Taylor listened to Sadie’s footsteps through the living and into the kitchen. Taylor began to pace. The feeling swelled, until she felt she could scream loud enough to shake the house. And so a sudden impulse overcame her.

She eased the bedroom door open and slipped into the hallway. She tiptoed through the living room, past the bed where Marcus had died, taking the opposite path as her mother, towards the back door. She flipped the lock. The door squeaked as she pried it open. Taylor stepped outside and closed the door behind her. As soon as the fresh air surged around her, she stood taller, turning her face towards the sky and letting her hair fall down her back. Her muscles tingled.

She snuck around the house and paused for a moment along the side. It was late afternoon and the sun was no longer straight overhead. It sat low above the fields, casting rich golden rays across the corn and grass. Taylor looked to the barn, which, backlit, was inky black. The grass was warm beneath her feet, snaking up between her bare toes, and a gust of wind blew her hair off her shoulders. Taking a deep breath of air, she took off, running in a wide perimeter

around the front yard so Sadie and Valerie would not see her. Her arms pumped at her sides, hands squeezed into tight balls, and her strides lengthened. She could feel the sun in her eyes as she ran into it, dilating her pupils and turning her irises copper. She inhaled deeply, and the smell of grass and soil revived her. She felt she could run forever. But she had a destination.

As soon as she entered the corn field, Taylor bent low to conceal herself. She began to run, arms pumping tight against her sides, weaving in and out of corn stalks like she had been doing it her entire life. Her feet bounced from the ground with such energy, the soil felt elastic. Clean air flowed in and out of her lungs in natural rhythm with the rest of her body. For a few minutes, she did not even realize she had left her watch laying on the nightstand.

## Chapter 10

### Taylor

Leaves whipped at Taylor's arms as she ran through the field, pausing only when the silhouette of Charlotte's house became visible against the sky. She grew still, her legs tingling. There was the tree, with its gnarled trunk and umbrella branches, its leaves dark green in the afternoon sunlight. She blinked, then felt the weight of disappointment press upon her. Charlotte wasn't there.

Taylor turned and gazed back the direction she had come, looking over the endless sea of swaying greenery, bathed in golden light. She felt tears pricking in her eyes from a raw, unspecific emotion. It was as if everything had been stripped from her body and replaced with soggy towels, slumped against the inside of her rib cage. She looked at her bare wrist.

Taylor's heart quickened. Everything felt like a test. Every moment since they swung open the barn doors only a few nights before felt like a test. She clutched her hands together and fought the deep craving inside her. She wanted her father. She wanted him so badly, it rolled over her like ocean waves. She surrendered to it and her knees buckled, bumping against the hard soil. A few tears rolled down her cheeks, but when she thought of Sadie she whisked them away again. Heat spread over her face and her jaw clenched. Sadie always brushed her away like she

was nothing, like she couldn't say or do or feel anything of consequence. Taylor stared at the back of her wrist and imagined sinking her nails into her skin, digging parallel gashes into her flesh. What would Sadie say then? The impulse nearly overcame her, but battling in equal proportion was her desire for her father. And with him, tenderness. She wanted a whole family.

After an agonizing moment, she forced herself to look up, eyes wandering the soil, weaving in and out of stalks where they extended from the ground like green pillars. She saw a tiny brown figure clinging to a leaf near the base of one shaft. Its body was round, curved in on itself, with bent legs latching onto the leaf. She moved closer to examine the infantile creature, every other thought temporarily cast from her mind, tears pausing on the round ball of her cheek. It was a shell.

She took it between her thumb and middle finger and lifted it from the leaf. It was as light as air. She feared if she looked away she might crush it, unaware of the small pressure it exerted in defense. She brought it to her face and traced her eyes up its ribbed behind, over the wide, paneled armor of its back, to its small, bulbous head and spindly legs. It was preserved, maintaining every ridge and feature of the insect that had once lived inside, deprived only of his color, which had been drained to a dull brown. She marveled at the beautiful, delicate creature, and set it on the inside of her palm so she could see how he might've sat in life. She could feel her tears once again.

“Taylor?”

She turned her head, heart lifting, and saw Charlotte peering through the curtain of foliage. She wore baggy jeans and a white t shirt, and clutched a book to her chest.

“What are you doing?”

“Charlotte,” Taylor cried, returning the cicada to the base of the plant before spilling from the corn field and rushing into the older girl’s arms. Charlotte embraced her, the corner of her book pressing into Taylor’s chest. Taylor felt such an immense relief, she nearly laughed.

“What’s the matter?”

“I needed to talk to someone,” Taylor said, the tips of Charlotte’s hair tickling her cheek.

“Okay. Sit down.”

They settled on the ground by the base of the tree, facing each other. Charlotte’s feet were bare, the soles caked in mud. She held Taylor’s hand over her knee. Her palm was rough but warm, her grip gentle but firm enough to reassure Taylor that she had made the right decision.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” she said, her brows pulled up in the center. Taylor looked into her eyes, which were dark brown and familiar beyond their single meeting. She felt confident Charlotte would make everything better.

“I overheard my mom and my uncle talking,” she said, “from the bedroom. I wasn’t supposed to listen, but I did.”

“What were they talking about?”

“My dad, I think.”

Charlotte squeezed her hand and nodded for her to continue.

“Since my Grandpa died, they’re all trying to figure out who gets to keep the farm. My Uncle Leo wants it, but he’s never around, and my Aunt Val takes care of his kids because he was in prison. Then he came by when Aunt Val wasn’t home and he yelled at my mom.”

“Oh, no.”

“That’s not the bad part.”

“What’s the bad part?”

Taylor paused. No one had ever really listened to her like this. She relished the moment and felt a small amount of guilt for enjoying it. “Uncle Leo said that he knows stuff about my dad that me and my mom don’t know.”

“Like what?”

“Like...” Taylor furrowed her brow, thinking back over his words. “I don’t know, it’s confusing.”

“Maybe I can help you figure it out. Do you remember what he said exactly?”

“He said my dad abandoned his family.”

"But he died, right?" Charlotte asked. "That's not abandoning you."

"I don't think that's what he was talking about."

“What then?” Charlotte looked startled.

Taylor shrugged. “Maybe it was someone else. He said my dad's not really a family man because of it.”

“Oh,” Charlotte said, dropping Taylor’s hand. Her cheeks filled with color.

“He’s not a bad person,” Taylor said hastily, reaching for Charlotte’s hand again. “He’s the best dad. Uncle Leo’s wrong.”

Charlotte nodded and yanked at the tips of her hair, evading Taylor’s grasp.

“And Uncle Leo’s hiding in the barn,” Taylor added.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t tell my mom,” she said, wondering if she had made the wrong choice. “But she doesn’t tell me anything either. I saw Leo go into the barn from my window.”

Charlotte looked down at the grass, still pulling at her hair.

“Are you okay?” Taylor asked, noticing Charlotte wouldn’t meet her eyes, no matter how much Taylor struggled to regain the connection.

“Yeah.” Charlotte forced a little smile, but it looked unnatural. It was a movement of muscle, not an expression of emotion. Finally, Charlotte took Taylor's hand again. “It’s okay, Taylor. Nobody's perfect.”

“Should I listen to Uncle Leo?”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you love your father, and you know he loved you. And you still have your mother.”

“I’m mad at her.”

“This is hard for her, too. Keep that in mind.” Charlotte dropped Taylor’s hand again and rose to her feet, digging her toes into the dirt. “I need to go.”

“Can’t we talk for a little? Can I see Chippy?” asked Taylor quickly.

“I’m sorry,” Charlotte said.

“But... Char.”

Her eyes snapped to Taylor.

“Should I not call you that?”

“It’s okay,” she whispered, and Taylor saw her eyes were shiny. She rubbed the top of Taylor’s head, then turned and started towards the farm house.

“Charlotte—”

“You’re okay, Taylor. I have to go,” she called back, but her pace quickened. Taylor covered her face with her hands and leaned over her knees, trying to keep her sobs inside. She felt so alone, her heart beating in her chest. She kept her head down until she heard rustling

footsteps. When she looked up, Addie and Seth emerged from the corn, feet pounding against the soil.

“What are you doing here?” Addie asked.

“She’s crying,” Seth said, peering at her as if she was a bug.

“I’m not crying,” Taylor sniffed.

“If you’re not crying now, you’ll be crying soon,” Seth yelled, his face turning pink.

“Your mom won’t let dad come home.”

“That’s not true.” Taylor wiped the back of her hand against her nose and blinked the remaining tears from her eyes.

“Yes, it is.” They stepped towards her in unison.

“Leave me alone.”

“You and your mom need to go home,” Addie said then. She leaned down and poked Taylor’s shoulder. Hard. Taylor leaned away and rubbed it rapidly. She rose to her feet.

“Your dad is... mean,” Taylor said, surprised by the steadiness of her voice.

“Don’t say that about him,” Seth said, stepping forward and shoving her.

Taylor stumbled back and fell onto her backside with a thump. Pain shot from her tailbone up her spine. She sat there for a moment, in shock, before climbing back to her feet.

“Don’t touch me,” she said. No one had ever pushed her like that before.

“What are you going to do about it?” Addie shoved her again. She tumbled back, this time twisting her body and landing on her hip.

“You gonna go tell your mommy?”

“I said, don’t touch me,” Taylor said, louder this time, as adrenaline propelled her to her feet.

“Your mom's a bitch,” Addie said. Taylor sprung forward and shoved her. Addie, though twice the size of Taylor, was caught off guard. She stepped back and tripped over a tree root, her body thumping when it met the earth.

“Don’t call her that!” Taylor screamed, her hands tingling where they had met Addie’s stomach. Addie scrambled to her feet and lunged at Taylor, but Taylor sprang out of the way, taking off into the cornfield. It seemed like she was flying and although she could hear Addie and Seth panting behind her, she wasn’t afraid they would catch up. She bent low so they could hardly see her, and when she finally put enough distance between herself and her cousins, she swiveled into a right turn and threw herself to the ground. They raced right past.

After the sound of their footsteps faded, Taylor finally felt returned to herself. Cool dirt pressed against one cheek and yellow sunlight met the other. She rolled onto her back and grinned at the sky. She had fought off Addie. She had fought off big, strong Addie.

She thought of Charlotte again, and her parting words washed over Taylor anew: “You’re okay,” she said. It wasn’t offhanded; it was true. Taylor could take care of herself.

# PART 5

## Chapter 11

### Sadie

Sadie clicked the door shut behind her as she exited the bedroom, leaving Taylor safe and alone on the other side. She took a moment to collect herself, brushing wrinkles from her shirt and running her fingers through her hair, then walked into kitchen where Valerie, Seth, and Addie had just returned.

Everyone seemed to be moving quickly and loudly. Valerie dropped plastic plates onto the table, clanging one after another in a circle around a shiny, plastic-covered rotisserie chicken. Addie and Seth bickered over a spilled glass of juice, which was dripping from the side of the table into a purple puddle on the tile floor.

“Clean it up,” Addie said, “now.”

“It wasn’t me,” Seth said.

“It doesn't matter,” Valerie chimed in. “Both of you clean it up.” When neither of them moved, she sighed and threw a towel down herself, swishing it back and forth with her toe.

Sadie felt buffeted by sound, though muted like an old radio with a blanket thrown over it. She didn’t feel herself. When she spoke, her voice seemed to break the surface, as if she finally found air thin enough to breath.

“Can I talk to you?” Sadie asked Valerie.

“The kids are hungry. Can we just—”

“Before lunch,” Sadie interrupted.

Valerie gathered a handful of metal forks from a drawer into a fist. She was either unaware of Sadie’s distress, or she was ignoring it.

Sadie looked to Addie and tried to appear apologetic. “Can you two go upstairs for a few minutes?” Sadie asked feebly. “I need a word with your aunt.”

Seth opened his mouth to complain, but Addie clamped a large hand around his bicep and yanked him towards the stairwell. “Come on,” she grumbled.

When Sadie could hear their steps overhead, she sat down and motioned for Valerie to do the same. She felt as if she’d guzzled an entire pot of coffee on an empty stomach. She thought of Taylor behind the closed door of the bedroom and hoped she couldn’t hear. Valerie sighed deeply and collapsed into the chair across from her.

Sadie’s hands worked under the table, digging nonexistent dirt from under each of her nails. She didn’t know how to begin.

“You wanted to talk,” Valerie said after a moment of silence. “So, go ahead and talk.” The abrasiveness of her words didn’t match her tone, as if she wanted to be harsh but couldn’t quite manifest a meanness she didn’t naturally possess.

“Leo came by while you were gone.”

Valerie pressed her palm into the tabletop and sat up. The extent of her alarm was evident, and Sadie could feel again where the handle of the knife had dug into her hand. She pressed her thumb into the top of her opposite palm, massaging it roughly.

“It’s okay,” Sadie said. “I didn’t let him in.”

“He must’ve known I was gone. I’m so sorry.”

Sadie shrugged.

“I don’t think he would do anything.” Valerie’s eyes darted from plate to plate. “But still, I shouldn’t have left you two here alone. I just needed to get out for a few minutes.”

Sadie leaned forward. It wasn’t Leo she wanted to discuss. “I need to know who Rosalie Baker is.”

Valerie stiffened, the tendons on her neck protruding as if she was in pain. Sadie thought she could see a sheen of sweat below Valerie’s hairline. “A distant relative,” she said.

Sadie cringed. Something snagged in her heart when Valerie spoke. “Why are you hiding things from me?”

“What did Leo tell you?” Valerie asked, her tone hardening.

“Why? So you know just how much you can lie?”

“Sadie—”

“How about this? He didn’t tell me anything. But I want you to tell me.”

“I’ve never even met her.”

“So why did your father leave her an even third? Why was she just as important as his own children? More important than Taylor and me.”

“I don’t know.”

“You do.”

“Okay. It wasn’t about importance. It was about owing...”

“Owing what?” Sadie’s knee jerked up and banged into the bottom of the table. She rubbed it, feeling stupid and clumsy. When she looked up, Valerie’s expression of pity only made it worse. “Val, can you just tell me? We’re friends, okay? Help me make sense of this.”

Valerie's eyes flicked to the corner of the ceiling. Her lips trembled, until she forced her face into a look of perplexity, trying not to cry. "Robert was a good man," her voice cracked.

"I know."

"But everyone makes mistakes."

"I know," Sadie said. The words stuck in her throat.

"You need to understand—"

"Who is she, Val?"

Valerie's eyes stayed fixed on the ceiling, even as tears formed and clung to her bottom lashes. "She's his..." Her voice was quiet.

"What?"

"His child."

"His child," Sadie repeated.

Valerie gave a tiny nod. Sadie dug her nails into her palm, deep enough to hurt.

"He was very very young. Seventeen, I think. He's already been punished enough for it."

"What do you mean?"

"Dad is a Christian," Valerie said. "Was a Christian. We all are. Dad thought Robert should take responsibility for his actions."

Sadie shook her head, overcome with a sudden, animal vigilance. She could not imagine Robert disagreeing. She could not imagine Robert denying his fatherhood. But at the same time, she felt protective. He was *Taylor's* father. He was *her* husband.

"He was just seventeen," Valerie continued, not seeing Sadie's expression.

"What happened?"

"He tried to convince Sophie, his girlfriend at the time, to get an abortion."

An abortion. Sadie tried to keep her mind on the present, tried to keep the concept from shutting her down.

“But before he could convince her to go through with it, her parents sent her away to have the baby. They lost contact.”

“I see.”

“I don’t blame him, not completely. But Dad couldn’t ever forgive him.”

“But why,” Sadie choked back a sob and forced the words through her throat. “I told him...”

Sadie's head bent forward, feverish heat radiating over her skin. She told Robert everything one night, as they lay together in her bed. She'd broken down in front of him like her mother taught her never to do in front of a man—or anyone for that matter. She cried loudly, tears heavy and thick, snot dripping from her nose.

She told him about the white walls, the hospital gown, the nice doctor. How it felt to lean back in what looked like a dentist’s chair, knowing what was about to happen. And wanting it to happen, but feeling afraid. Like she had lost herself completely. Like she was just a body waiting for things to be inflicted upon her, and afterwards Sadie would come back and be appalled at what she had allowed to happen.

“Miss, you have to take your socks off, too,” the young, female doctor had said, smiling slightly. “It’s just protocol.”

Sadie remembered nodding, and feeling a lump form in her throat as she peeled off the last piece of her own clothing. Cold and bare. The hospital gown was thin and blue and tied in the front like a bathrobe. They kept her awake for the procedure, but sedated, so the lines between the tiles on the ceiling blurred. They talked to her, both the nurse and doctor, telling her

each step they were taking, using metaphors to explain unfamiliar words like laminaria, speculum, curette. They had calm voices, kind voices, but Sadie kept hearing one word repeated over and over in her mind. Her brain obsessing, not allowing it to slip away for even a moment.

*Suck, suck, suck*, it repeated. They would suck it out. Suck it all away.

It took only five minutes. Then they placed a heated pad on her stomach, and the doctor gave her hand a tiny squeeze. The nurse stuck a huge maxi pad in her underwear, and slid them up her legs. When she returned to her full state of consciousness, she could feel it pressing against the inside of her thighs. There was no pain.

She wished it had hurt. At least a little.

She tried to return to her normal life, and at first things were okay. But as time went on, it became harder rather than easier. Years later, when she met Robert and started thinking about having a family, even the consideration felt like a transgression. She had given up her right to motherhood. She had made herself unfit. When she and Robert fantasized about houses and children, she felt like a fraud. She had destroyed the Sadie that could be a mother. Her guilt battled her love, her desire for a child.

She told Robert all of this that night. And he took her into his arms, rubbed her back, kissed her neck. He listened to her. He comforted her. He was so kind. She loved him for it. Later, he married her. They had a child. Because he was a man, it never occurred to Sadie that he might have had his own story to share, his own traumatic brush with parenthood. And he didn't offer it up.

"Why didn't he tell me?" Sadie whispered again.

"It tore our family apart," Valerie said. "You couldn't imagine all the yelling, all the tears. I suppose he didn't want it to infiltrate his life with you."

Her words did nothing to assuage Sadie's pain. "I told him because I felt guilty," she cried, tears pouring down her cheeks. "Didn't he feel the least bit guilty?"

"He did," Valerie leaned across the table and took her hand. "She came back."

"Who?"

"Sophie. Robert's girlfriend."

Sadie cringed, jealousy mingling with anguish. Now she buried the nails of her free hand into her knee.

"Dad called Robert. They spoke about...everything. But by then Robert was too sick. He was too sick to come back and meet his daughter."

"Taylor is his daughter," Sadie said, but the sobs that overcame her were so intense it was unlikely Valerie could even hear her.

*He was such a good man, a loving father,* Sadie thought. *This can't be true. Where are you Robert? Where are you?* She wanted to feel him there. She wanted to see him. But instead, he came to her as a memory, the night before he died. His face was thin and blue, his lips white. In the hospital. He told her to go to his family. He told her to make things right. Could this have been triggered by a phone call? *Was this what he was telling me?* She had been too distraught to ask any questions.

Sadie remembered again Robert as a father. *Perfect*, she thought when he learned baby origami and kissed Taylor's nose after changing her diaper. *Perfect*, when he read *Redwall* to her before bed and did all the voices just right, even the moles. *Perfect*, when he taught her how to throw a baseball and wrap her glove around the ball with three rubber bands. *Perfect*. So unlike herself, whose every uncertain and clumsy movement was driven by one awful chapter in her life.

But he was hiding his own shadow all along.

She remembered him as a ghost, standing in the corner of her room, trying to speak. He didn't tell her his story while he was alive, but he was trying to tell her now. He was trying to tell her every night that he grew like a cloud out of the shadows of her bedroom. He still had an opportunity to make amends.

“Rosalie...” Sadie said, the name like water on her lips. Slippery. Elusive. Not quite real.

Suddenly, like a thirst, she needed Taylor. She needed the comfort of her own body, the comfort of Robert's eyes. The daughter they conceived. She stumbled out of the kitchen, grasped the cold knob on the bedroom door, and twisted.

## Chapter 12

### Sadie

Sadie leaned into the door. It swung forward and she stumbled into the center of the room, looking from the floor to the bed to the closet. A jolt of electricity shot through her body, stinging the tips of her fingers. Taylor wasn't there.

As Sadie's eyes searched the empty room, like walking from the clinic to her car, papers clutched tightly between her fingers, maxi pad stiff between her legs, eyes stinging in the sunlight, she felt fear. Fear that if someone found out, she'd be called a baby killer, a murderer, a slut. Now, she felt that same terror, only her culpability was real.

The window was shut, but it was near enough to the ground that a man could have opened and closed it again. A man could have climbed through. She imagined Leo wrapping his arm around Taylor's torso, clamping his grimy hand over her mouth. Taylor was small, no match for the huge, imposing Leo. He could have snatched her from the room. It would not have been without motivation. Sadie had kept his children from him, deprived him of his paternal craving. Then left her daughter alone and unprotected.

Not only that, but she had left Taylor angry. Sadie had brushed her daughter aside and left her to fend for herself, thinking of her own needs and desires. It was not how a real mother acted. It was selfish.

Sadie clutched the wall. “Valerie,” she said, but her mouth was so dry it came out as barely a croak. She rubbed her tongue over the ridges along the top of her mouth. “Valerie?”

“What’s the matter?” Valerie emerged behind her.

Sadie pointed to the bed.

Valerie stepped into the room. When she turned back, she was made vigilant by fear, not rendered dumb like Sadie. “Was she here?” She swept past Sadie and called up the stairs to the attic. “Taylor? Taylor?”

“She’s not up here,” Addie’s voice echoed back.

“Taylor?” Valerie yelled again, running through the kitchen and onto the porch. Sadie finally regained control of her muscles and followed.

“How would she have gotten out? We were here the whole time,” Valerie said.

“It must’ve been Leo.”

“I don’t believe it,” Valerie said, but her tone indicated otherwise. He was capable.

“How else—”

“There’s a back door.” Valerie tore through the house once again and Sadie followed her to the door in the back of the living room. “It’s unlocked,” Valerie said. “We never use this door.”

“Does Leo have a key?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does he, or doesn’t he?”

“I don’t know!” Valerie snapped, raising her voice for the first time since Sadie and Taylor had arrived. “I’m going to see if Addie knows where she is.” She hustled up the stairs.

Sadie returned to the kitchen. She walked to the counter and put her hand on the phone. She knew she should call the police. But to pick up that phone, to dial and speak, to admit that she had personally endangered her child and lost her as a result, seemed the ultimate failure. She lifted the phone to her cheek. She closed her eyes and listened to the dial tone, running the fingers of her other hand over the raised number keys on the base.

She remembered what it was like when her stomach swelled with pregnancy, so different the second time than the first. She allowed herself to use the word “baby,” not “fetus” or “thing.” She allowed herself to cradle her midsection, to feel for the warmth radiating from the center of her taut stomach. All that time, part of her feared she had no right to feel the joy of pregnancy, that she wouldn’t be good at it anyway.

Suddenly, a swishing noise drew Sadie’s attention to the door. She opened her eyes and there was Taylor, walking into the kitchen on her own. Sadie dropped the phone. It slid off the counter and bounced on its curled cord.

“Where have you been?”

“I went for a walk.”

“You went for a walk?” Sadie stepped towards her. “I told you to stay in the bedroom.”

Taylor shrugged, and Sadie’s fear fled as anger tore through her body. Taylor had always been quiet and obedient, a well behaved child, but now she met Sadie’s gaze with something like smugness. She knew what she had done. She just didn’t care.

In one motion, Sadie grasped her around the stomach, turned her around, and smacked her hard on her backside.

Taylor cried out and jerked away. When she turned back, her eyes were red-rimmed slits.

Sadie pointed her finger at Taylor. She felt suddenly helpless and weak, but needed to maintain her appearance of conviction. "I thought somebody was hurting you."

"You hurt me," Taylor shot back, rubbing her backside.

"I was just about to call the police." The phone still hung from the counter, the dial tone audible.

"Nobody told you to do that."

"Don't talk back to me."

Suddenly, Valerie appeared in the doorway. "Taylor!" she cried, running to her niece and falling to her knees. She gathered Taylor into her arms. "We didn't know where you'd gone. Thank god you're okay."

Taylor stared at Sadie over Valerie's shoulder, her eyes livid. Sadie felt all the more helpless, like she had no sway over the world or even her family anymore. Robert would have done as Valerie did. He would have hugged and kissed Taylor, and forgiven her for her childish rashness. But just as the thought entered her mind, Sadie remembered that Robert made a mistake once, too. A big one. Suddenly, she felt redeemable.

"Valerie, please," Sadie said, her voice steady. Valerie rose to her feet and only then seemed to notice the tension between them.

"Go to your room," Sadie said. And Taylor, with a set jaw, stomped away. The bedroom door slammed.

# PART 6

“I have learned that the consequences of our past actions are always interesting; I have learned to view the present with a forward-looking eye.”

— John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

## Chapter 13

### Taylor

Taylor made sure to slam the door behind her. Loud. She wanted Sadie to know how angry she was, how frustrated at being misunderstood and mistreated. She stomped to the window and pressed her forehead against the cold glass.

“It’s not fair,” she said aloud, her quick breathing fogging and clearing the window pane in rhythm with her heart. She clenched her fists and pushed her forehead so hard into the glass that it throbbed. An image of her body plummeting freely from a cliff appeared in her mind. She pictured her bloody face behind the shattered windshield of a car. She replayed her head bashing into the side of a locker. She wanted Sadie to cry at her funeral, like she hadn’t cried at Robert’s. She hoped that bruises would form where Sadie had hit her.

Charlotte, a perfect stranger, thought Taylor could be strong, but her own mother never even gave her a chance. How many times had Sadie’s doubt pushed Taylor down? Made her feel small and dependent? It was constant, ever since her father had left them alone together. And they were alone together, never together-together. Not once, it seemed.

As she stared out the window, her eyes landed on the barn. A brief surge of triumph filled her for a moment. She was glad she hadn’t told Sadie where Leo was hiding. Sadie had no right

to tell anyone what to do, to keep anyone from anyone, to judge the way she did like it was breathing. Maybe Sadie was wrong about Leo, just as she was wrong about Taylor.

Taylor went to the nightstand where she had laid her watch earlier that day. She picked it up, stared into its pale face, and studied the second hand as it ticked. It had always looked slow, slower than her heart and her breathing, so she might calm herself by matching its pace. Only now it appeared quick, like it knew what she was thinking and had suddenly surged with desperate energy. She dropped it to the floor and brought her bare heel down upon its glass surface. It busted, cracked, and her foot ached with the impact. When she leaned down to inspect the damage, it was no longer ticking. Her heart swelled with a feeling between panic and excitement, and she realized that the light had faded around her. It was nearly night.

She could hear Sadie and Valerie talking in hushed voices, too low to decipher until Sadie called a clear “goodnight.” Taylor kicked the remnants of the watch underneath the bed then flung herself onto the mattress and pulled the quilt up to her shoulder. She turned to the wall and did not look up when Sadie entered. Sadie changed quietly and climbed into the bed. Still, neither spoke. Taylor pretended to be asleep, but she was sure Sadie could hear her pounding heart.

As they lay side by side, Taylor struggled to keep her breathing slow and quiet. It grew more difficult as she became short of breath. Her anger seemed to drain from her body the longer she laid frozen, rationing air. She felt the distance between her and her mother, a canyon of guilt and misunderstanding, and realized they might never close that gap. Her face twisted, eyes squeezed shut, lips pressed together, until her muscles hurt the way her throat did. Finally, she heard Sadie’s familiar, light snore through her nose.

Taylor turned to watch her mother's silhouette then. Her nose pointed towards the ceiling, hair splayed across the pillow, and lips parted. She wanted to crawl into her arms, but knew she couldn't because she could never explain how she was feeling. Sadie wasn't interested in how she was really feeling.

As she lay still, something in the corner of the room caught her attention. The dim light seemed to change, displaced and trembling. It was as if a breeze moved all the dust particles in the air, so they surged together into a single light cloud, moving in such accord with Taylor's body that she wondered if it had come from her. They swirled, so faintly that Taylor wasn't sure if she had seen anything at all or if they were within her more than out.

But then, beside the window, she saw her father. He stood with his back to her, wearing a t-shirt and long pants, with a leather belt around his waist. He was hardly there at all, like a Polaroid left out in the sun, faded and indistinct, but visible. Not quite solid. Taylor wanted to speak to him, but she was afraid. It seemed even the air from her mouth might blow him away. She sat up slowly. Still, his gaze remained fixed. He was watching something out the window. His hands hovered above the sill, shaking. There was a tension within him, a nervousness in the way he stared.

Taylor slid off the end of the bed as carefully and quietly as possible, so as not to wake Sadie. She lowered her bare feet onto the wood floor. It was cold on her heels, one of which still ached from its collision with the watch. She walked toward Robert slowly. As she moved closer, a thread of doubt pulled at her navel. It couldn't be him, she thought, but it was. *Somehow.*

"Daddy," she breathed, looking back at the bed to make sure her mother didn't wake up. He still did not turn to her, but he frowned. His brow wrinkled. She stood beside him, chin

arched up, and studied his face. *Look at me.* He shifted on his feet, his hands clasped together, and she willed him to turn. When he didn't, she traced the line of his gaze out the window.

There was a light in the barn, illuminating the glossy grass before it. Creeping towards the patch of light was another ghost. Moving, but unsolid, its legs shifting together in one mass. It grasped at shape. The figure approached the door, nearing the light source. Taylor blinked.

It wasn't a ghost. It was Charlotte.

Charlotte glanced up towards the farm house, then moved her hands to the wooden barn door. When she pulled it open, for a moment her body was bathed in a bright, golden glow. She wore a dress to her ankles, russet curls loose down her back. She was beautiful and delicate, light against dark like an angel. Then she disappeared again, the door swinging shut behind her.

*What is she doing?* Taylor wondered. *Uncle Leo is in the barn!* A jolt of fear shot through her body and she jerked to face Robert. For the first time, he looked at her. Their eyes met. One corner of his lip turned up in a smile as he raised his hand and brushed a lock of hair from her forehead, touching her so lightly he felt like wind. Then his smile disappeared and he looked sad again. Almost pleading. Taylor glanced out the window, at the looming outline of the barn. She knew that Robert had come for a reason. And now he was waiting to see what she might do.

Taylor nodded. She walked to the door of the bedroom and opened it quietly, but before she started into the hall, a bubble of fear expanded within her. She groped at her empty wrist, instantly wishing she had not made the rash decision to destroy her watch earlier, then turned back to face Robert again. She could barely see him in the dark, but he seemed to urge her on with a wave of his hands.

He had woken *her*, Taylor realized. Not Sadie. Not Valerie. Her resolve grew, doubt fading into insignificance. Sadie continued to snore as she eased the door shut as quietly as possible. Taylor scampered through the house barefoot.

When she broke outside, the air was chilly on her skin. But soon she was running. Running, running, running, with the cool, wet, grass snatching at her toes.

## Chapter 14

Taylor

The barn rushed forward, towering over her even before her lungs began to strain. It looked huge, its rooftop fading into the blackness of the sky so it appeared unending. Crouching onto her toes by the front doors, she felt as small as a bug, easily squashed. She glanced at her bare wrist before straining her ears towards the door. They were in there together, Charlotte and Leo, talking. Charlotte's voice was soft and easily overpowered by Leo's, whose words slurred together into a wet, gravelly mush, as if he was speaking through mud.

“It’s my land, and you know it. My land, you hear me?”

“No, sir. It’s nothing like that—”

“What game are you playing?”

Taylor could hear his shuffling footsteps, kicking up the dirt that had grown dry in the heat of the past few days.

“No game. I just wanted to talk to you,” Charlotte said.

“Who are you?”

“I live on the next farm over.”

Taylor pressed her eye to the glowing crack between the doors. She could feel heat on the exposed sliver of her forehead from two oil lamps that lit up the inside of the barn, their flames hot pillars inside their glass casings. Leo's things were strewn across the floor: clothes, boxes of cereal, a radio, empty tin cans, and bottles of booze. The smell of cigarettes and urine wafted through the crack. He stood with his back to Taylor, holding a bottle in one hand and a streaming cigarette in the other. A long stain of sweat stretched down the length of his back, saturating his shirt.

"So, what then?" Leo staggered back a few steps, as if someone had pushed him, though Charlotte had not come close, and puffed rapidly on his cigarette. There was something off about his movements, the way the cigarette flew to and from his mouth and his free hand scratched aggressively at his side.

Charlotte's cheeks were pink from the heat of the lamp, her eyes wide like saucers. The hem of her pale blue dress was browned with dry dirt. Taylor did not know why she had come, but whatever the reason, this could not have been what she expected to find. An ex-convict, yes. A man living in his own urine-soaked filth, unable to stand straight or speak a full sentence, no. Taylor ran her hand along the door and felt a splinter lodge in her palm. She needed to get Charlotte out of there.

"I thought you might have some information," Charlotte said.

"Information?"

"Yes."

Leo took a swig from the bottle.

"I never knew my father. But I know he grew up nearby."

"If you think I'm your father, I'm not."

“I don't think that.” Charlotte chewed on her lip, and Taylor could see her mustering something, searching for words, or courage, or both. “My family won't tell me anything, so I thought... If you know who he is, please tell me. I won't bother you anymore.”

“What's his name?”

“I don't know.”

“How am I supposed to—”

“My mother grew up right there,” Charlotte gestured vaguely towards the wall, in the direction of her grandparents' farm, desperation growing in her voice. “You were here. Your family... you must've known her.”

For a moment, Leo did not move. Silence swept through the barn, but during that silence Taylor's mind grew loud. *I never knew my father.* A tingling cold passed through her veins, her body growing stiff and heavy as it spread. Her cheekbone pressed heavily into the door, pain numbing her face, but she hardly registered any feeling at all. Her one eye was fixed on Charlotte, Charlotte whose eyes were the same brown as hers. Robert had come. He had watched from the bedroom. He had sent Taylor to her, to Charlotte. *Father.* He had come not for Taylor, but for *them. Both of them.* Her body realized before her mind allowed conscious thought.

“What is your name?” Leo asked, his voice a low growl.

“Charlotte.”

“No.” He flicked his cigarette to the side and it began to smoke in the straw.

“Your full name. What is your full name?”

She swallowed. “Rosalie Charlotte Baker.”

As she said it, Taylor's body released. She had heard that name before, in Sadie's voice. She grew hot in patches, a feeling like being splashed with boiling water. Then her insides

warmed and she felt light, a sudden excitement tingling through her like butterflies. Rosalie Charlotte Baker. Something she had felt in her heart suddenly became real, tangible, and surer than anything had ever been before.

Charlotte was her sister.

Taylor's euphoria was interrupted by an animal roar. She watched through the crack as Leo reeled back and kicked one of the boxes at his feet. Charlotte squeaked, her hand going to her mouth.

"You think you can take my farm?" Leo cried.

"What? No!"

He approached her. She stumbled away, until her back pressed against the ladder to the loft overhead.

"Where's your mother?"

"She's still in Baltimore."

"She went to boarding school. Like anyone was fooled by that."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I know it's no coincidence you show up now. Right after my father dies."

"I don't—"

"I'm not going to let you take it. I love this farm. I need it for my kids." His voice devolved into sobs and growls, anguish and anger. He stomped on the floor like a child.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I only wanted to know who—"

"Don't lie to me!" He lunged at her.

Charlotte dodged out of his way, then with nowhere else to go, scrambled up the ladder into the loft. He grabbed at her feet, and she kicked him, hard, in the face. He whirled away from

the ladder. Blood spurted from his nose and dotted the dusty floor, shiny black in the oil lamps' glow. Taylor pulled back from the crack in the door so he wouldn't see her, but returned a moment later. He clutched his face.

"You," he cried, wiping his nose with the inside of his elbow. Blood continued to run down his chin. He turned back to the ladder. Charlotte had made it to the platform and stood, looking down at him. He grabbed a rung and Charlotte let out a cry, retreating to the back of the platform where she was no longer visible to Taylor.

Leo lifted one foot and struggled to position it on a lower rung. He was too unsteady to climb without effort, but he would get there eventually. If Leo reached the top, Taylor realized, he could throw Charlotte off the platform with barely a flick of his massive wrist.

He climbed up another rung. Without a thought, Taylor shoved both her hands into the rough wood of the door and flung it open with a loud creak and a bang. Leo stepped off the ladder and jerked around to see her.

"Get out of here," he yelled, dark spit flying from his mouth and landing in the dust.

"No," Taylor yelled back, surprised at the vehemence in her voice. She had to give Charlotte a chance to get down. "Get away from that ladder."

Leo looked up. Charlotte's eyes met Taylor's from where she stood in the loft. Matching shades of brown. Leo grasped the ladder in his huge hands and pulled it away from where it rested by Charlotte's feet. He pivoted it on one leg then let it lean again, this time against the wall out of Charlotte's reach. She wouldn't be able to get down without someone moving it back. But he also wouldn't be able to get up.

Leo grabbed at Taylor, but he was so unsteady that he lost his balance and tumbled onto his stomach, landing in a dusty, bloody heap. Taylor stood underneath the loft facing him,

breathing so hard her chest rose and fell visibly each time. Leo turned his face to see her. Dust clung to the red that still poured from his nose, covering his lips and dripping from his chin. His eyes rested on her, then he jerked forward onto his hands and knees and reached for the oil lamp which rested nearby. He grasped its heavy metal base. Its flame waved wildly.

“No—” Taylor cried, but he lifted it anyway, and flung it at her. She screamed and leapt out of the way, its hot glass top grazing her shoulder. It shattered against the wooden wall underneath the loft and sunk into a hay bale below. Flames ignited the dry straw in an instant. Taylor's body froze, as they spread like spilled water, until she felt a hand land heavily on her shoulder. She turned and Leo's blood covered face was mere inches from hers. He grasped both of her shoulders and shook her hard, back and forth.

“You,” he spat, through his rotten teeth. Her brain rattled in her skull as he flung her body to and fro, heat prickling her back. “You probably think you deserve this farm, too.”

Leo's blood dotted her face, mingling with the sweat that formed on her scalp in the rising heat from the flames.

“Taylor,” Charlotte yelled from the loft.

Smoke billowed around them, just beginning to swirl in the loft, and Taylor squeezed her eyes shut, allowing her body to be shook like a ragdoll. Leo's fingers sunk into her arms and her body went limp.

Then suddenly, she heard a shriek that sounded like her own, and her body was flung to the floor. There was a loud metallic crack, then the thud of body collapsing into the dirt. Taylor drew a desperate breath then opened her eyes and squinted through the smoke. She saw Sadie above her, holding a shovel, mouth agape. Leo lay at her feet, limp.

Taylor coughed violently, the blaze licking up the walls around her, devouring the dry wood and straw. It was burning the underside of the loft. Sadie collapsed around Taylor and gathered her into her arms. She lifted her from the ground. As she rose, Taylor felt herself enter a cloud of smoke. Painful tears poured down her cheeks and heat enveloped their bodies. She could not see, but she could scream.

“No!” she yelled through her seared throat. “Let me go! Let me go!” She struggled furiously, one thought dominating her mind. *Charlotte*. *Charlotte* was in the loft.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Sadie cried, clamping her tightly against her chest despite Taylor’s thrashing and screaming. Sadie forced them towards the door, a mass of swinging limbs and fists. Finally, Sadie pushed her way out of the barn, dragging Taylor behind, and the immense black sky opened up above them. Sadie dumped her onto the grass.

Without taking even a breath, Taylor lurched to her feet and took off running back towards the building. *Charlotte*, her mind throbbed. *Charlotte*. She ran back through the doors into the blaze, her mother screaming her name behind her. Yellow and orange flames spat smoke on all sides. She squinted through the dust and heat, which emanated from every surface like a shaking mirage. Leo was on his hands and knees, shaking his head, trying to get to his feet. Taylor ran to the ladder, still leaned against the wall of the barn. It burned her hands as she grabbed the wood, but she used all her strength to wrench it from the wall and shift it to the platform above.

“Taylor,” Sadie was behind her, arm over her forehead protecting her face. “What are you doing?”

The ladder banged against the platform.

“Char—” Taylor tried to scream, but her voice came out as barely a wheeze. She sunk to the floor and tried to take a breath of air. “Charlotte!” she screamed, the word like a knife, leaving her throat raw. The platform was entirely engulfed in smoke. Taylor felt Sadie’s hand on the back of her shirt, but she jerked forward, scrambling up the ladder. She climbed into the smoke until she could no longer see. When she pulled herself up, she reached blindly with her arms and felt skin.

“Charlotte,” she said. They linked hands and Charlotte squeezed. They pulled their bodies together and Taylor felt Charlotte’s hair on her head as she embraced. Strength flowed through them, through their sweating hands and weak bodies.

Taylor led Charlotte to the ladder and helped her turn around and maneuver her feet onto the top rung. Their hands parted from one another as Charlotte descended, climbing quickly. As Charlotte neared the bottom, Taylor turned and lowered her feet onto the top rung, but as she shifted her weight onto the ladder, it lurched beneath her. She grabbed at the platform and glanced over her shoulder in time to see Leo wrench the ladder out from under her, leaving her feet dangling in the air, and send it flying into the flames. She dug her nails into the wooden platform, kicking frantically for one terrifying moment, before catching her toe on the edge and rolling back onto the loft. She stood and watched in horror as fire consumed the ladder.

It was too far to jump. She was stuck, and the flames moved closer and closer. The heat grew more intense, almost too intense to bear. Black dots formed over her vision, floating through the barn as it became encased in red and yellow. As she struggled to take in the scene around her, she realized with incredible clarity that in mere moments she would die.

Sadie and Charlotte clutched one another below, but now Sadie detached herself, pushing Charlotte towards the door. She extended her arms above her head. Taylor saw her lips moving.

“Jump,” she said.

“It’s too far,” Taylor mouthed.

"I'll catch you."

"Too far," Taylor repeated.

Sadie shook her head. Their eyes were locked. “I’ve got you.” Sadie looked so sure, not an ounce of doubt shaking her hands or knees. But Taylor’s body seemed rooted to the spot.

“I can’t.”

Suddenly, Sadie’s voice rang through the barn, through the smoke and through the heat. “Taylor, you can do this. Jump!”

Taylor leaned forward. Her feet sprang from the wood and suddenly she was in the air, falling, falling forever. Her body was consumed by both heat and a deathly chill. Her stomach dropped and goosebumps spread over her entire body. And then they collided. Her body slammed into her mother’s, hitting Sadie like a meteor. But Sadie held on. Taylor’s feet were on the floor.

When they finally emerged into the night, the cool air washed over them like water. Taylor fell to the wet grass, sucking in the clean oxygen, the blistered soles of her feet throbbing. The sound of fire trucks pierced the night, and red and blue lights sped down the street in the distance. She looked around for Sadie and Charlotte, and panicked for an instant when she couldn’t immediately see them. But they were there, by her side on the grass.

Taylor squeezed her eyes shut, and the stinging subsided enough for her to open them fully. She saw her mother and sister then, both of their gazes fixed in the direction of the house. She followed their line of sight and, atop the hill, framed by the light of the stars, stood Robert.

Watching them all. Taylor reached out and took Sadie's hand in one of hers, and Charlotte's in the other. Robert smiled, ever so slightly she thought, and Sadie's hand tightened around hers.

The front door snapped open and their attention was diverted by Valerie running across the grass, yelling behind her for Addie and Seth to stay in the house. "Oh god, oh god," she cried, stopping before them, her eyes moving from Sadie, to Taylor, to Charlotte. "What happened? Is everyone okay?"

"I smelled something and saw the fire out the window," Sadie said. "We all got out together."

"But how did it happen? How did it start?"

"Leo," Sadie said, but the sound of sirens had grown so loud that the name was nearly swallowed.

Still, Valerie understood. Her face was grave. She looked to the barn, half eaten by flames, and ever so slightly shook her head.

A police car sped into the driveway then, and a fire truck swerved onto the grass, stopping beside the barn. The field was soon overrun by uniformed men and women. Valerie went to speak with the officers. Taylor, Sadie, and Charlotte remained in place for a minute longer before they were herded to the back of a truck where oxygen masks were pressed to their mouths.

Despite the commotion around them, all three kept hold of each other's hands and looked back to the house. They were looking for something, though nobody said what.

Robert was gone, Taylor realized. As the fire hoses erupted behind them, filling the air with warm mist, Taylor was seized with the thought that he was probably never coming back. But this realization did not press upon her heart the way it might have on another night. His

absence was replaced by the two hands in her hands, the firm, familiar grasps of Sadie and Charlotte, which made her feel like she could leap again.

