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## Sadie Jane

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SADIE JANE

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty in the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky


In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

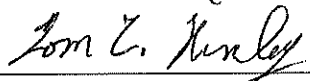
By  
Esther G. French

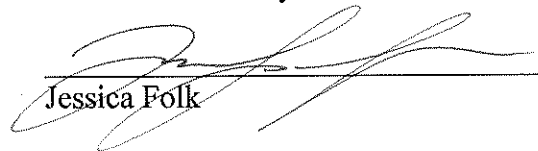
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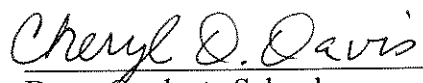
SADIE JANE

Date Recommended 11-12-19

  
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11/19/19  
Date

I dedicate this thesis to the mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, and friends who have inspired me; to the fathers, grandfathers, and brothers who have believed in me; and to my husband.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all who read, advised, and endured: Dr. David Bell, Dr. Tom Hunley, Professor Jessica Folk, Rachel Taylor, Tina Oates, Dr. Sharon Blevins, Kathryne LeFevre, and Guy and Dorothy Haddock.

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SADIE JANE

Esther French

December 2019

89 Pages

Directed by: Dr. David Bell, Dr. Tom Hunley, and Jessica Folk

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

*Sadie Jane* is a novella set in the town of Gypsum, a fictional location in rural Kentucky. The introduction covers the inspiration for the novella, which is based on Southern storytelling traditions and features the adventures of Sadie Jane, an independent octogenarian who returns to her hometown after many years. Sadie experiences the internal challenges of regrets and grief as well as the external challenges of busybodies and car thieves before finding her place in the community.

## Introduction

*Sadie Jane* is a story about a spunky, independent widow in her eighties who returns to her hometown after she inherits the family farm from her younger sister Luella. She quickly makes friends with her neighbor Trish, a young mother, and with another free spirit, Bill, the local doctor's estranged son. In the process of settling the estate, Sadie has to sort through her feelings about her sister and deal with the consequences of some of her past decisions in order to finally come home and to find peace in a new relationship with a local pastor, Holland, who is seven years her junior.

The inspiration for this story comes from the grandmothers and grandfathers I know and have known. My own grandmothers are in their nineties and still going strong, and there have been other friends, like Ruby, who could outwalk and outwork people forty years her junior as long as she had her morning coffee, a solid breakfast, and an afternoon nap. My grandfathers were hard-working, down-to-earth men who had the ability to make things grow, almost out of nothing. Sadie's character is a composite of the women who have inspired me and is not based on any particular person. One reader asked me, "Is Mamaw real?" No, she is not real, but she is true.

Holland is based on pastors who have influenced me by their genuine faith and love of people demonstrated in their care of others and their non-judgmental acceptance of their own and others' failings with a gentle influence toward making gracious choices. I wanted to show that older folks have adventures and fall in love and do stupid things. I also wanted to show the value their life experiences add to friendships and family groups that form in unusual ways.



The setting of the story is Gypsum, a rural community in southcentral Kentucky located in karst landscape with rolling hills, streams, sinkholes, and cedar tree-lined farms. The rich soil produces an abundance of crops, but mismanagement, erosion, and hidden sinks can mar the fecundity. It is a place some people escape for the same reasons other people stay for generations, where folks are in each other's business yet rely on each other to survive and thrive, where the word "folks" is part of the dialect, and where food is a form of therapy. Although fictional, Gypsum is similar to the sloping fields in which I grew up and the streambeds along which I played and imagined.

*Sadie Jane* started as a series of slightly-cartoonish, loosely-linear, episodic phone conversations between two characters who gossiped about Sadie's escapades. These dialogues then developed into a longer piece about Sadie with a whole town of characters whose subplots intertwined: the glum sheriff, the narcissistic realtor, the longing-for-retirement pastor, the doctor on the verge of a nervous breakdown, the mother carrying twins, the injured mechanic, the shy hydrogeologist, and the list goes on. The original manuscript was an attempt to capture these stories in novel form by switching points of view between chapters, but it was hard to manage such a cast of characters without losing the protagonist's story. Not being Charles Dickens, the consummate serial writer, I whittled the manuscript down to the current novella, which focuses on a slice of Sadie's life and includes undercurrents of side stories while staying focused on her point of view and how she deals with the loss of her sister and returning to her hometown.

At first, in the longer piece, I used a more structured scene sequence to keep track of what was happening, the "conscious" structure, but I was losing the main character and the overall theme of the novel in trying to stay on a plot line that did not fit the story and

became cumbersome. As I had to restructure for a shorter form, I relied on more of the “unconscious” structure or sense of what parts I wanted to keep and what new scenes needed to be written (Bell 25-26).

My personality and birth order as oldest child make me tend toward perfectionism, so writing the initial drafts of the manuscript was a slimy snail trail because my built-in editor would kick in too early, and it was difficult to turn it off. As Anne Lamott points out in *Bird by Bird*, I was paralyzed by trying to produce the best version the first time around. “Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft” (28). I had to consciously turn off the editor and allow myself to put something down on paper that I hated, but once I did, then I had something I could consider, observe, revise, and revision, which was better than a blank page, and much more enjoyable. The revision of *Sadie Jane*, although a challenge, was a more positive experience. Imperfection built character, then, as delayed gratification, and the work was better for it.

Being a holistic thinker also made it difficult to break the work into sections, to finish one piece or one scene at a time, to compose “bird by bird” (Lamott 20). It was a challenge to leave a side character’s story line unexplored when I wanted it to be in the picture. I had to be willing to leave some questions unanswered or simply imply an outcome. When the sections lacked cohesion, I rushed to make the puzzle pieces fit like I had a predefined solution for the tangram of my story instead of exploring how the shapes might go together in new or different ways. Madeleine L’Engle wrote that “when

the work takes over, then the artist listens” (17). Essentially, I had to begin listening to the work instead of trying to make the work fit my expectations.

It is important to me as a writer that what I put down on paper have a positive impact. This is not to say that the stories will shy away from heartache or negative experiences but that they will provide, as L’Engle put it, “new possibilities” and “illumination” (133). In *Sadie Jane*, characters make mistakes, experience regret, and shed tears, but they also discover that their common ground and their humanity can overcome the negativity and hurt. Carrie Brown gives a lecture, highlighted in the *Glimmer Train Bulletin*, in which she explains why using intense conflict and negativity is not always necessary for building tension into a story because even positive stories imply difficulties:

The answer has everything to do with capturing the *complexity* of happiness, the contradictions it contains...Happiness is not a sterile, undifferentiated state like the glare of a sunlamp. It is made up of light, but also of shadow. In happiness there are losses and fears; it is those—the experience and the memory of them—that make happiness so sweet. (Par. 3)

In *Lamb in Love*, Brown’s main character, Norris Lamb, sees his love interest, the enigmatic Vida Stephen, sitting on a bench. A simple moment in a small village turns into a surreal mystery as he imagines the interior Vida having “claws retracted inside the soft pad of her foot, her teeth buried within her still and watchful face” (6). Likewise, just because *Sadie Jane* is a positive story does not mean it is free from the internal conflict of regret and the external conflict of busybodies and thieves, from the surprising act of an extended, or retracted, claw.

Using familiar settings, a taste of regional dialect, food culture, and a bit of humor in *Sadie Jane* are ways of staying true to my Southern roots and making the story something my own family and community might enjoy. Rick Bragg explains his reasons for doing the same in *My Southern Journey*:

I have loved writing about our food, our ways, our proclivities...you write a story about a good pan of cornbread dressing, or a good dog, or football of any kind, well, you have got what we here in the business call a reader. Loving this part of the world requires a sense of humor, and if you made it this far, you obviously are equipped with one. (251)

Using these Southern elements in *Sadie Jane*, including the quirky humor that at times may border on the hyperbolic, is part of the Southern tradition of storytelling, of telling and retelling so as to examine, process, and hopefully gain understanding in a non-threatening manner.

Alexander McCall Smith also uses everyday scenarios set in small communities with a dose of dry humor and a dash of the surreal to cook up a story that keeps the reader coming back for just one more bite and wondering why the simple dish is so delectable and addictive. Only in his case, he uses whisky instead of cornbread: "While oenophiles resorted to recondite adjectives, whisky nosers spoke the language of everyday life, detecting hints of *stale seaweed*, or even *diesel fuel*. Isabel saw the merit in this" (196). Finding a story in the everyday, in one's own back yard, in the squeak of a floorboard, the crunch of an apple, or the notes written in the margins of a book, is what I am striving for in *Sadie Jane*. Not that I have obtained it, but I press on take hold of that which has taken hold of me, which is, the story.

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SADIE JANE

Map of Gypsum



### Alive and Kicking

Sadie Jane Palmer	<i>interfering octogenarian, Luella's sister</i>
Bill Martin	<i>tattooed hydrogeologist, Dr. Martin's son</i>
Dr. Cynthia Martin	<i>town doctor, overbearing mother, Sadie's rival</i>
Holland Stubbs	<i>single pastor, gardener, keeper of secrets</i>
Trish Daniels	<i>animal scientist, mother, Sadie's neighbor</i>
Joe Daniels	<i>mechanic, Trish's husband</i>
Matt and Matilda Daniels	<i>twins, soon to be delivered</i>
Tommy Washburn	<i>real estate agent, Trish's brother</i>
Rick Moore	<i>square-jawed sheriff, peacekeeper with no peace</i>

### Far and Away

George Martin	<i>Bill's father</i>
Claudette and Sissy Petry	<i>thieves, fitness enthusiasts, sisters</i>

### Dead and Gone

Finch Palmer	<i>Sadie's charismatic husband of thirty-eight years</i>
Christopher Palmer	<i>Sadie's son, killed in a car accident</i>
Hannah Palmer	<i>Finch's first wife of eleven years</i>
Luella Hinton	<i>legendary cook, Holland's friend, Sadie's sister</i>
Melanie Hinton	<i>Luella's daughter</i>
Jimmy Hinton	<i>Luella's husband, Sadie's best friend, killed in Vietnam</i>

## SADIE JANE

### Chapter 1 - The Octogenarian Bladder and Other Road Hazards

Stillbirths, stock market crashes, and tsunamis could send Sadie spinning until she came full circle and wobbled to a stop. But the niggling tick of broken machinery or a full, burning bladder could wear her down to a sullen nub. She had ignored the demands of her octogenarian body, and now it would take its revenge on this stretch of Kentucky highway edged with bristly stumps and midge-filled ditches.

Through the windshield of her '67 Dusk Rose Mustang, she peered up at the rusty, pockmarked sign for King's Fork Grocery warning this was the last stop until Gypsum, thirty miles away. She tugged at the seatbelt squeezing her stomach and repented the double espresso and chicken biscuit she had purchased at her last interstate stop.

Inside, King's Fork Grocery smelled like old ice. She did a double shuffle to the restrooms tucked into a back corner. The ladies' side was locked, a note taped to the door that read, "Out of order." She hesitated and grabbed a tissue out of her purse before venturing into the men's restroom.

Floor splattered with multicolored soap. Stained sink. Cracked toilet seat. There was a smell of sour mop layered with pineapple air freshener and used baby diapers. Sadie eased the door closed and backed away like she had just discovered the mouth of hell.

Bladder still burning, she shuffled past the counter and out the door, pushing it open with her elbow and tossing her crumpled tissue into a trashcan. She felt no obligation to purchase even a stick of gum. Forget convenience store etiquette. King's



Fork was an inconvenience store. She had a better chance with a tree or bush along the side of the road.

At the edge of the parking lot, she revved the engine and tapped her freshly polished fingernails on the steering wheel as she waited, foot poised above the accelerator, for a tractor piled high with hay to pass. Before she could press the gas pedal, a mud-spattered pickup swerved into the parking lot, cutting her off and stopping inches from a barrier bar next to a battered gas pump.

Sadie sat, hand to her chest, her aching foot pressed to the brake pedal she had instinctively stomped. At least her reflexes were in working order even if she did not trust her bladder muscles to cooperate. A large woman in her late forties sat on the passenger's side, one beefy bare arm resting on the rolled-down window, her hand twirling a lazy circle in the tangled end of a ponytail hanging over her shoulder. She was sucking on a lollipop and rolling it around in her mouth.

A slender woman in her mid-thirties climbed out of the driver's side of the truck. She was wearing an exercise outfit and started punching buttons on the gas pump as if that were a continuation of her workout. Sadie was tempted to go over and get a workout of her own pounding some sense into the driver with her well-stocked pocketbook, but there was no time.

Nature was calling.

Sadie sped down the highway, hoping not to meet a patrol car, and scanned for any trees close to the road but far enough from driveways. She had just passed the Karst County line when she spotted the perfect clump of cedars and pulled over. Despite her

strappy sandals and cream-colored slacks, she grabbed her keys and purse and minced her way through ankle-high grass to a makeshift restroom behind a scraggly tree.

Five minutes later, she congratulated herself on not peeing on her foot or falling into a patch of poison ivy. She was tucking in her blouse and slathering gardenia-scented hand sanitizer on her hands and arms when she heard the rattle of a truck slowing down and stopping on the road. With a final tug at her panties, which had somehow worked their way up one buttock, she swung her pocketbook over her shoulder and around to the small of her back, where its solid weight made her feel like a seasoned hiker on an outback trail.

Keys in hand, Sadie hustled back to the Mustang hoping no one would ask her why she had been traipsing through the woods.

When she emerged from the trees, she saw the same pickup that had cut her off at King's Fork Grocery parked a little up the highway with the engine still running. The woman with the sucker in her mouth had her cheek pressed against Sadie's passenger window eyeing the lock. She was wearing leggings, ballet flats, and a billowing flowered tunic that made her look like an emergency beacon. The driver was prowling around the Mustang, kicking the tires with her tennis shoes and rubbing her hand along the fender.

In Sadie's yearly self-defense course, she had learned to make weapons out of keys. She fumbled with her tasseled keyring, trying to arrange the cold points between each of her trembling fingers. As Sadie reached the asphalt, both women turned and examined her with narrowed eyes that took in every detail of her rumpled clothes, muddy shoes, and her lack of pepper spray.

“May I help you?” Sadie said, smiling but clutching the strap of her purse and squeezing the keys in her sweaty palm.

## Chapter 2 - A Foot in the Belly, a Key in the Eye

“This your car, Granny?” said the driver, standing with her legs shoulder-width apart, hands on her hips, like a gunslinger with twitchy fingers.

“Yes.” Sadie straightened her shoulders, easing into her own fighting stance and raising her chin. Being called Granny did not usually make her want to slap someone into the next county, but the way this woman used the word carried all the condescension of pert breasts, smooth thighs, and a well-slung bladder.

“Nice.” The driver leaned over and tapped a headlight with her index finger.

“I’ve always wanted a car like this, Sissy,” said the other woman.

“Happy Birthday,” said the driver.

Sadie and the driver eyed each other like mountain lions in a public television special with an announcer in the background whispering in a low voice about the range of the females’ peripheral vision.

The driver’s sister kicked the front tire of the Mustang with a ballet flat and yelped. The sucker popped out of her mouth and landed on the ground. She frowned down at it and then looked up at Sadie like she was personally responsible for this tragedy.

Sadie felt her chest tighten as she noticed the driver give her sister a small lift of the chin.

“My sister likes your car,” said the driver.

“It’s not for sale,” said Sadie as she flicked her eyes back and forth between the driver and the other woman, who was easing around Sadie’s left side.

“That’s too bad,” said the driver. “She gets upset when she doesn’t get what she wants.”

Sadie could feel the bulk of the sister somewhere to the back and left of her, could hear her short, sharp breathing, as if stalking little old women were the last leg of a triathlon. Sadie resisted looking over her shoulder and kept her eyes on the driver, who seemed to have moved a few feet closer.

An arm closed around Sadie from behind, and a hand clamped over her mouth and cut off her scream.

Sadie gagged at the taste of sweat, perfumed lotion, and strawberry candy on the woman’s hand. She twisted and wriggled, but the arms tightened around her until her purse strap bit into her shoulder blade.

“Get her keys,” said the driver.

“You get them,” said a voice in Sadie’s ear. “She’s strong for an old lady.”

The driver stepped toward them, and Sadie went limp and slid to the ground between her assailant’s arms. Curled in a ball, Sadie held tightly to her purse strap and keys and waited as the driver leaned over her. Then she kicked up and out with all her strength. One shoe landed in the middle of the driver’s gut. The other shoe flew off and sailed over their heads.

Sadie was glad to see the driver double over and clutch her stomach. She loved her Mustang, and she was not going to let it go easily. With the last of her energy, Sadie swung her hand holding the keys toward the woman’s face and scraped her across the eye with the key points.

The woman swore and pressed her hand to her left eye.

“I told you she’s strong,” said the sister from somewhere overhead.

“Shut up and get the keys,” said the driver, rubbing at her eye and cheek. “And don’t say I never did anything for you.”

Sadie had no more energy to fight. She could only lie in the prickly grass and submit as the large woman pried the keys from her grasp.

“What about her purse?” The sister pointed to Sadie.

“Leave it,” said the driver over her shoulder as she jogged back to the idling truck.

Sadie kept her head down as the sister folded herself into the Mustang and started the engine. Exhaust fumes filled Sadie’s mouth and gravel hit her face as the car squealed away. She lifted her head in time to see her small pink suitcase sail out the window, bounce down the road a few times, and land in the swampy ditch before her car swerved around a curve in the highway and was gone.

Sadie flexed her toes and felt a sting in the tendons running up the back of her legs. That kick-boxing water aerobics class for seniors had paid off. She moaned and winced when the muscles in her side twinged. She knew she had to move. To collect herself and assess the damage. Find her suitcase. Find her shoe. A Band-Aid. Maybe another chicken biscuit.

They might come back, but Sadie could not get up. The asphalt beneath her was solid, reassuring, as she waited for her heartbeat to slow and the world to stop spinning.

### Chapter 3 - Lingerie and Tattoos

Sadie pushed up to her knees and stood, one hand on her hip, the other shading her eyes as she looked up and down the steaming highway. There were no cars in sight, just woods, cow-dotted fields, and scrubby trees along twisted fences. A curtain of grey rain hung in the distance. She could not see her little pink suitcase, but her underwear, blouses, and sundries were strewn up one side of the highway like little flags in a battle reenactment.

She wished Finch were here. The way he could turn a situation. The way he had always seemed to know how to make her laugh. He would probably chide her for taking her Mustang cross-country and then turn it into a joke about how she could show a little leg to get a ride seeing as how she had such incredible legs for a woman her age. She had never understood how he could turn almost any situation into a trip to the bedroom. The thought made her lips twitch, and her worry eased a little. She took a deep breath of hay-scented air and stretched.

Gravel pricked her bare foot as she limped to where her other sandal lay on its side in the middle of the road. Her self-defense instructor would be proud.

She found her small pink suitcase busted open and turned upside down in a clump of weeds. Grabbing a long silk scarf that had escaped damage, she tied her silver-white hair back from her face. There was no Finch now. She was on her own, and she could take care of herself.

She was stuffing damp lingerie into ruined hosiery and slinging them over her shoulders like makeshift Santa sacks when she heard a truck engine and froze, bra in hand, heart pounding. It sounded like it was coming from King's Fork, but she could not

be sure. There was no time to hide. She grabbed a large stick and held it out in front of her. She doubted she could do much damage with its rough knobby length, but she could try to make the two sisters regret a second run-in with her.

A white work truck with ladders and gear and an emblem for a government agency on its door pulled to the side of the road just up from her. Sadie relaxed her stance but did not lower the stick she held. A man in his mid-thirties wearing khakis, a work shirt, and boots climbed out and walked back to her. He had broad shoulders and a slight thickness through the middle that reminded her of Finch.

He blinked as he got closer as if Sadie were an apparition that was fading in and out of sight, a sort of highway haunt that waylaid travelers and tied them to trees with pantyhose. He looked down at her hands and slowly raised his own in a calming motion.

“Ma’am?” he said, his voice a bit gruff, as if he were not used to conversation.

Sadie did not move but stared at the snake tattoo that ran up his forearm and under his sleeve. Her sharp blue eyes moved up to his scruffy beard and wrinkled collar, and finally to his face, where they met cautious brown eyes.

“It’s a black rat snake, *elaphe obsoleta*. It’s harmless. See the round eye?” The man said, as if that bit of information would reassure her. His face was kind, and Sadie liked the way his eyes twinkled and his mouth quirked in a smile like he was getting ready to tell her the best joke.

Sadie looked down at her suitcase balanced on top of a pile of rocks. “My suitcase,” was all she could say, suddenly exhausted, and lowered her branch to point at it as if that would explain everything.

He lowered his hands.



She hesitated, then throwing her stick into the ditch, she rubbed her free hand on her slacks and offered it to him.

“Sadie. Sadie Jane.”

“Bill Martin.” He shook her hand just as several large raindrops landed on Sadie’s nose and trickled down her cheek.

“Hop in the truck,” he said, motioning toward the pickup.

When she hesitated, he smiled a little and said, “Don’t worry. I’ll get your stuff.”

Sadie was too tired to argue, too tired to assert her independence, and she was grateful for the solidity of his tattooed arm as she stumbled toward the truck. He held his hand above her head as if he could shield her from the steady drizzle with his palm.

The inside of his truck smelled like fresh coffee, cinnamon, and a hint of motor oil. A cinnamon roll perched on a paper towel on the dashboard made her stomach grumble. She shivered and adjusted the defrost buttons as the windshield fogged. Glancing down at her manicure, she frowned at the chipped polish and dirty nails. Checking her wrist, she realized she must have lost her watch in the struggle.

She hugged her purse and felt tears start up, her hands shaking as she fiddled with the latch. It was her favorite bag, the one with all the pockets and zippers, and a place to hide valuables in the lining. At least the thieves had not had time to find the cash. It was a stupid thing to do, carry cash, but she had been in a hurry. Her cell phone was somewhere in the bottom of her purse, battery dead and buried under a layer of mail she had grabbed on the way out the door.

She was considering stealing a pinch off the edge of the tantalizing pastry when the driver's door opened and she saw Bill, soaked through, carrying her battered but intact suitcase. He shoved the suitcase into the crew seat and climbed into the truck.

"Yours?" he said, pulling a gold wristwatch with a broken fob out of his jacket pocket and dangling it in front of her.

"Yes!" Sadie snatched the watch out of his hand. "Where'd you find it?"

She felt silly for getting so emotional over an accessory, but Finch had given her that watch on their twentieth anniversary.

"It was next to a set of tire marks on the highway." Bill reached behind the seat and pulled out a blanket, which he handed to her. "Here, put this around you."

Sadie nodded and tucked the fuzzy blanket around her as Bill rubbed his hair with a scrap of towel.

The tears came, and Sadie was embarrassed to find herself being gently patted on the back and handed a roll of paper towels, with apologies for not having tissues. Bill's kindness sent her into another fit of sniffles as he busied himself adjusting his seatbelt and checking mirrors.

She wondered if he was thinking about his coffee and cinnamon roll. She knew she was. And he was probably wondering what to do with the strange old creature beside him.

"Half of a cinnamon roll?" Bill held out part of the pastry to her as she patted at her eyes and blew her nose. "I promise I only took a bite off this side." He smiled, and she nodded and took the piece.

Sadie almost laughed when he paused with his half of the cinnamon roll inches from his face, mouth open and eyebrows up, as she quickly and expertly finished off her piece without getting any sticky bits on her mouth and cheeks.

He reached under the seat and pulled out a bottle of water and handed it to her. She twisted off the lid and emptied it in several long gulps.

“Where’re you headed?” he asked as she wiped the back of her mouth with her hand and took a deep breath.

Sadie smiled at his polite refusal to suggest Hillside Manor, the local psychiatric hospital, even though she knew, in her current state, she looked like a strong candidate for treatment.

“Gypsum,” she replied.

“I’m headed that direction. I can drop you...anywhere.”

“The police station,” she said as she buckled her seat belt. “I need to report a carjacking.”

Bill nodded as if that explained everything, and Sadie laughed. Her first laugh in several days. And it felt good.

#### Chapter 4 - Stale Chips and the Stubby Arm of the Law

Like a child waiting to be lectured by the principal, Sadie sat tall and straight in a battered plastic chair just inside Sheriff Rick Moore's office. It had been years since she had been in a police station, or a principal's office, but there was the same sick sense in the stomach and unease at the outcome. She could feel the static cling generated by her shifting weight on the hair on her arm and pulled it forward. Contracting a disease from the curved back of the chair was almost a certainty.

Sheriff Moore was stocky, with a tuft of unruly hair he had tried to slick down, and lips in a straight line over his jutting square jaw. He would have looked much better with a smile, but Sadie doubted there was one in him. There was a picture of him on the shelf behind his desk. He was standing next to a blonde, slender woman in a sundress, he in his uniform. She was smiling without showing her teeth. He was squinting at the camera. Maybe it was genetic, the perpetual frown. Maybe it was environmental. Maybe he had never been tickled as a child.

She hoped that by sitting up and looking him in the eye, she could increase the chances of being taken seriously. She had noted how he raised his eyebrows when she said she had fought her attackers. Sadie could hardly blame him as he took in her slacks covered in mud, the grass stains on her torn blouse, and a slight scratch across her right cheek. She had tackled the nest of tangles in her hair and combed it out into a neat bob in the cracked restroom mirror, but the rain had frizzed it, and she looked less than her usual put-together self. Her shoes were caked with mud, and her toes were swollen, grimy, and numb.

If she could just keep it together until she could take a hot shower and a nap, and figure out what to do next. Yes, keep it together. She wondered what the sheriff would think if she were to lie down on the row of chairs and use the shoulder bag on her lap as a pillow.

The half of a cinnamon roll had only dented her hunger, and her stomach felt tight. What she really needed was a stack of biscuits, bacon, and two eggs over easy with a side of fried apples. Her stomach growled as she stared at an ad for the Alley Cat Cafe pinned to a cork board on the wall beside her. It boasted the best breakfast this side of the Mississippi. The photos featured a steaming cup of black coffee nestled beside the breakfast special. The address listed was only a block away.

She glanced down the hall to the reception desk. The sheriff was talking to Bill, who was standing with his head turned slightly, like he had trouble hearing, one boot toe pointing toward the door.

She pressed her ankle against the pink suitcase at her feet and was comforted by its solid smooth side and the knowledge that it contained one pair of clean underwear that had not sailed into the ditch. Her late younger sister Luella had given her the suitcase years ago when Sadie first completed her nurse midwife training. It was battered but had never fallen apart, no matter how roughly she had handled it. Being tossed into a ravine was nothing. Just another set of dents to add to the well-earned scratches.

She had taken the suitcase everywhere in her younger days. Thrown into the back of a jeep at two o'clock in the morning to attend an emergency birth. Finch had made fun of it and bought multiple travel sets until she had given in and stored it away. She had felt a sense of adventure pulling it out of the top of the closet and packing for this trip.

Sheriff Moore returned with a legal notepad and several pages of a printout. Sadie wondered what he saw that made him frown. His eyes flicked over her suitcase, torn blouse, and muddy feet.

“Just a few more questions,” he said.

“Did you know the perpetrators?” The sheriff held his pen above the paper and waited for Sadie to respond without looking at her.

“The wha...oh...no.” Sadie shook her head.

“Why did you stop on the highway?” He jotted down notes as if Sadie had said something vital to the investigation.

Sadie frowned. “I already told you,” she said sharply. “To tinkle.”

The sheriff glanced up and stopped scratching notes for a moment. His frown said he thought she might be acting smart with him. Sadie looked at him, chin up, and smiled stiffly.

“Bladder’s not what it used to be,” she said and patted her purse. Then she leaned forward and tapped his desk. “What about my car, Detective?”

“Sheriff,” he said, glancing down at where she had touched his desk.

“Sheriff,” Sadie corrected. “What about my Mustang?”

“Are you on any medication?” He ignored her question.

“Just my vitamins and probiotics.”

“Is there a close relative that we can contact for you?”

Sadie hesitated and shook her head. “There’s no one.”

“Are you staying in town?”

“Combs Farm.”

“Luella Hinton’s place?”

“Yes.” Sadie felt tears building at the back of her throat.

“My condolences on your loss,” the sheriff grunted and glanced down at his papers.

Too tired to resist gravity, to try to make herself understood, to press for anything, Sadie slumped a little in her chair.

She could feel the tension building in her head, neck, and stomach. The last time she had been in a police station was more than thirty years ago. Finch had been her prop, holding onto her shoulders as they numbly shuffled down the long corridor and into a cold, sterile room to identify the body of their son, Christopher, killed in a car accident. After that, Sadie had been hysterical, one minute sobbing, the next almost comatose, paralyzed by guilt over a fight she had had with her son earlier that week. Something trivial. Career choices or living arrangements.

When she would not, could not, eat or sleep for days, Finch had admitted her to a hospital out of desperation. When she came home, Finch and she had retreated to the far corners of the house, shredded by grief. It had taken her months to recover, to see any light, and Finch had tiptoed around, trying to shield her.

She had promised herself she would never go down that road again, and she meant to keep it.

Sadie rubbed her temples and the back of her neck. Rolling her shoulders and stretching her arms in front of her, she breathed in deeply and lowered her arms as she let out a slow, controlled breath.

“Are you hungry?” the sheriff said as if he hoped she would say no.

Sadie nodded. She doubted the police department had anything much to offer, but it would be something.

He grunted, and his triple-shined shoes squeaked down the hall toward what looked like a break room.

Bill came to the door and stood, hands shoved in his pockets, as if he did not know quite what to do with them.

“The sheriff said the carjackers were probably Claudette and Sissy Petry from the next county,” he said. “He’s never been able to pin anything on them. Their property goes way back into the woods, so they have plenty of places to hide loot.”

“So, goodbye Mustang?” said Sadie.

Bill nodded, and for a moment, Sadie felt as if a line had snapped and left her in deep water, a whole part of her life with Finch floating away from her.

Bill gave her a worried look. She had filled him in on the details of the carjacking on their way to town, and he had gone into full protector mode. She sat up straight and smiled a little, trying to look as if they had met at a business meeting over *hors d'oeuvres* and cocktails.

“I’m fine,” she said.

Bill raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “As soon as I get something to eat.”

Then the sheriff was back with a half-eaten bag of potato chips and a juice box.

“I have a better idea,” said Sadie, pointing at the ad for the Alley Cat Café. She felt a surge of energy and pushed herself up out of the chair. Slung her purse over her



arm, she grabbed the handle of her suitcase and started down the hall. She stopped and looked over her shoulder at Bill.

“Coming?” she said.

## Chapter 5 - Two Creams and Keep the Coffee Coming

Gypsum was still waking up and stretching its limbs as Sadie and Bill pulled into a parking space near the café. The place was packed, but Sadie quickly found a table in the corner although she had to knock elbows with a few highway construction workers in bright yellow shirts.

The smell of bacon and the clink of forks filled the café, and Sadie took a deep breath and almost clapped her hands as she checked out the menu options.

Halfway through the full breakfast special, she was sipping her second cup of coffee, and Bill was working his way through a stack of pecan pancakes smothered in syrup when a man pushed through the door and scanned the place. He was mid-thirties, dressed in business casuals, his hair already thinning at the temples. He looked desperate for caffeine.

Sadie was surprised when the man wove his way through the customers and plopped down at the extra chair at their table.

“This seat taken?” he said, slapping Bill on the shoulder.

Bill choked on a piece of pancake as the man caught the waitress’s eye and gestured toward the pot of coffee she was holding.

“Tommy Washburn,” he said to Sadie, holding out his hand, which she cautiously shook.

“Sadie Jane,” she said. There was something about Tommy Washburn that made Sadie pull her hand free as soon as possible. Maybe it was the way Bill stopped eating and sat with his arms crossed, hunched over his coffee mug. Maybe it was the way

Tommy cradled her hand or the way he winked at everyone. Sadie wondered if he could control his winks or if it was a kind of in-born twitch.

“Are you going to finish that?” Tommy eyed the plates Bill had pushed to the center of the cramped table.

Bill shook his head as Tommy pulled the plates to him and began creating a tower of leftover pancakes, sausage, and eggs.

“This guy’s a genius, Ms. Sadie.” Tommy jerked his thumb at Bill. “His mother never let him out of the house. He was always tinkering away at something. Basement Bill, we call him.”

Bill grimaced, and Sadie wanted to smack Tommy.

“What’re you doing out at the Combs Farm?” Tommy said to Bill between bites. “I saw your truck over there yesterday.”

“A hydrogeological study of the karst topography,” Bill said, shrugging as if he had a twitch in his shoulder. “There’s a sinkhole on the back side of the property.”

Tommy whistled and scratched behind one ear. “Hell, I thought you had disappeared into a sinkhole.” Tommy squeezed Bill’s shoulder and laughed.

Sadie thought Bill looked like he might punch Tommy in the face, but Tommy seemed not to notice Bill’s frown or the way the muscle in his right cheek was twitching.

“That’s a sweet piece of property. It won’t be hard to list it, even with a sinkhole.” Tommy said as he stuffed a huge bite into his mouth and chewed as if he had spent the last two weeks on a low-carb diet.

“I don’t plan on selling,” interjected Sadie, adding another cream to her coffee and calmly stirring it with a spoon. She did not know what she planned to do with the

property Luella had left her. She had not seen her childhood home in years. Who knew what kind of shape it was in, but she was determined that Tommy was the last person she would consult when and if she decided to sell.

Tommy looked up, mid-bite, with a puzzled expression, as syrup dripped off the end of his fork onto his tie.

“Granny Luella left her the property,” Bill said, taking a large sip of his coffee, as if a magic wand had just reanimated him.

Tommy leaned over and put his hand on Sadie’s arm and said, “You let me know when you want to sell, Ms. Sadie. I’m sure we can find somebody who’s dying to raise sheep or organic vegetables or something. My sister would probably take it off your hands. She lives right next door.”

Sadie smiled and shook her head. “I’ll let you know,” she said in a firm tone parents use when they are trying to get her kids to put on their pajamas and brush their teeth. Tommy grinned at her.

Bill met her eyes and shook his head as if to say, “Don’t even bother.” Sadie laughed at his expression, and he relaxed his shoulders.

She stopped mid-laugh, coffee cup raised to her lips, and stared as the familiar outline of a rose-colored Mustang flashed by the café window.

“What is it?” Bill said, turning and looking out the window.

“I thought I saw the Mustang,” Sadie said.

Bill jumped up, almost tripping on his chair leg, and hurried to the door. Tommy continued finishing the leftovers on the table as Sadie watched Bill scan the street to the right and left and then return to the table.

“Nothing,” Bill shook his head.

As they left the café, Sadie looked down Main Street in the direction she had seen the Mustang going. The sun was high, and the warmth of the pavement seeped up through her soles as salty sweat beaded on her top lip. Her whole body ached from defending herself and traipsing along the highway, but her stomach was happy and her mind clear.

She was sure she had seen the Mustang, but the sheriff would probably think was she was crazy and any pursuit a waste of his time. Maybe he even thought she had made up the whole carjacking.

“You’re not crazy,” Bill said from beside her, as if reading her thoughts. It was just what Finch would have said, even if he thought she was stark raving mad.

## Chapter 6 - Hugs for Trees

Bill drove slowly down the driveway lined with large maples, oaks, and magnolias as Sadie leaned forward to stare out the passenger window. They pulled up beside in front of a two-story white colonial farmhouse with blue shutters, a gabled roof, and a wrap-around porch.

The house was so like Sadie's memories of growing up there as a little girl that she felt momentarily displaced, as if she were just coming home from a trip to town, and any moment Luella would come around the house with a basket of freshly cut zinnias on one arm and scold Sadie for forgetting to check the mail.

Sadie scrambled out of the truck and stumbled to a giant maple that shaded the front yard and part of the porch.

Pressing her cheek to the rough bark, she closed her eyes and whispered, "You've gotten bigger."

Sadie turned to Bill and smiled, throwing her arms wide and taking a deep breath as if she were a new-born that had just started breathing. She kicked off her shoes and wiggled her toes.

While Bill searched for the spare front door key under the stones lining the flowerbed, Sadie grabbed her pink suitcase from where he had set it at the edge of the drive and propped it sideways against the trunk of the maple tree.

She knew all the footholds and handholds, and with a little boost from her suitcase, she was soon up in the tree and sitting in the crook of a large branch, her scratched bare feet dangling in the air like they belonged to an aging Peter Pan.

It was quiet under the curtain of leaves, except for a distant tractor mowing a field and small insects calling to each other in the long grass. The air smelled of sweet grass and wild onions.

Sadie smothered a laugh when Bill came back down the steps and stood looking around for her, down the long drive, and around one side of the house and the other. He came toward the tree and looked down at her shoes for moment and then at her suitcase, which had fallen over next to the trunk.

Finally, he looked up, straight into her eyes.

Sadie laughed as his mouth fell open and he said, "How?"

"This tree and I go way back." She shrugged and gave him a sideways smile.

"How are you planning on getting down?" he said, crossing his arms.

"Your shoulders?" Sadie said.

Bill shook his head and positioned himself under the branch.

As Sadie's feet pressed into his right, then left shoulder, she regretted roping him into this circus act, and she was glad when her feet touched cool grass and soil.

"It's further to the ground than I remember," she said, brushing twigs out of her mussed hair and smoothing her slacks.

"Oh, where's my purse?" she said and turned in a circle, trying to remember if she had taken it up the tree with her.

"In the truck," Bill said, gesturing with one hand and rubbing his shoulder with the other.

Sadie wondered if he was miffed about her climbing the tree. She was meekly retrieving her purse and shoes when she heard a cell phone buzz nearby and a songbird tone trilled across the yard.

Bill set her suitcase on the porch steps and fumbled in his pocket to pull out his phone. Sadie was surprised to see him tense when he saw who was calling.

“What’s the matter?” she said, coming up the steps behind him.

“It’s my mother,” he said. “She wants to meet for lunch.”

“That sounds terrible,” Sadie was about to quip but held her tongue when she saw how miserable Bill looked, like a trapped animal. She gently laid her hand on his arm and squeezed.

Bill gave her a wry smile. “Look at me, a grown man. Scared of his mother.”

“Go.” Sadie gently taking the house key and pushing him toward the truck. “I’ll be fine. I’m home now.”



## Chapter 7 - A Strange, Familiar Place

The house was quiet, cool. Sadie stood in the front hallway, her purse propped on her suitcase, and surveyed the living room, her eyes adjusting to the shadows and seeking the familiar.

She drew the dusty, faded curtains back from the front windows, letting in muted light from the porch, where a rocking chair with a hand-crocheted blue cushion sat, empty, and waiting.

Watercolor paintings of the local landscape hung in random groups down the hallway, as if the artist could not bear to leave any tucked away in a closet between layers of tissue paper. Sadie recognized a painting of a path through the woods behind the house, and squinted at the colors, blurred and bleeding into the edges of the paper. It was her favorite, one Luella had painted at sixteen.

In the large, open kitchen at the back of the house, Sadie felt Luella's presence in the sun catchers in the windows making tiny rainbows across the well-worn table and mismatched wooden chairs. A checked apron and seasoned iron frying pan hung from hooks next to the pantry, as if the cook had just stepped out and would be back any minute to start the next meal.

Sadie ducked through the doorway under the hall stairs and into a bedroom that smelled of dried lavender. It had white bead-board wainscoting and a large picture window with low bookshelves on each side stacked with books and magazines. She brushed her hand along the marriage-ring quilt that covered the four-poster bed feeling Luella's careful stitching with her fingertips.

Sadie was not sure where to put her things, which bedroom to use, and she hesitated to hang even her meager supply of clothing in the closet, especially next to Luella's flowered sundresses and patched overalls. Even though she had grown up in the house, had slid in her socks down the hardwood floor in the hall and pounded up the stairs to the loft she and Luella had shared, she felt like a stranger in what was so clearly her sister's space.

When the doorbell rang, she jumped and wondered if Bill had changed his mind about meeting with his mother. Sadie opened the door to a woman in her mid-thirties with dark blonde curly hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. She had rosy cheeks, a pug nose, and sparkling green eyes. She was cradling a bowl full of fat, red-green speckled apples in her arms, propping it up on her pregnant belly.

"I'm Trish Daniels," she said in a rush. "From next door. I hope you like apples." She held out the bowl with a smile that dimpled one cheek.

Sadie opened the screen door quickly and stepped out onto the porch, taking the bowl and leaning over to breathe in the sweet-tart scent. "They smell delicious," she said.

"They're Combs apples," Trish said, wiping her forehead and shifting her weight from one foot to the other, one hand under her belly and the other on the small of her back. "Granny Luella gave me a cutting from her trees years ago."

"Why don't you rest a minute?" said Sadie, gesturing toward Luella's rocking chair.

"No, ma'am," Trish said, glancing at the rocking chair and shaking her head. "If I sit down, I don't think I'll be able to get up."

"Boy or girl?" said Sadie.

“Both,” laughed Trish. “Matt and Matilda. Twins run in the family.”

Sadie snapped her fingers. “I met your brother today. In the café. He’s got your dimple.”

“I’m sorry,” said Trish with a laugh that started in her toes and shook all the way up her frame to her shoulders. “Tommy says I bullied him in the womb and that’s why he’s so fragile.”

“He eats enough,” said Sadie before she could bite her tongue.

“Yes, Granny Luella was the only one who seemed to be able to feed him, to feed anyone, enough. And now that she’s gone.” Trish shrugged, her eyes tearing up.

Sadie pulled a stack of folded tissues out of her sleeve and handed a few to Trish. “They’re clean. I promise.”

Trish laughed through tears and blew her nose. “That’s so Luella.”

Sadie tucked the remaining tissues back into her sleeve. She knew she would use a few tissues herself when Trish was well down the path and out of sight.

“Come to supper on Saturday,” Trish said, her voice still a little shaky. “The whole neighborhood will be there, and we’ve got plenty. My husband Joe is barbecuing, and that man doesn’t know how to cook on a small scale.”

“What can I bring?” said Sadie.

“Anything, really,” said Trish. “Potato salad? Luella’s recipe is always a big hit.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Sadie promised, hoping she would be able to find Luella’s recipe box. She had never been the best of cooks, and Finch had loved to tease her. She could not blame him since she burnt toast on a regular basis and somehow destroyed even macaroni and cheese out of a box.

## Chapter 8 - Queen of the Tortoiseshell Comb

Sadie was so tired her skin ached, her scalp twitched with salty dried sweat, and her feet felt bruised, as if she had walked back to town instead of catching a ride. She sat on the edge of the bed in Luella's room and wished for Finch, who used to pull her shoes off for her and tug her knee highs loose.

After a short struggle, she managed to maneuver one sock off with her big toe and step on the other to loosen it. Tossing her discarded clothes on the bed, she turned on the hot water in the shower and gingerly stepped into the tub, holding onto the soap dish for support. No need to fall on her butt or break her leg and have to call 911 and greet the EMTs and the glum sheriff in nothing but a shower curtain or her birthday suit.

After a hot shower, the universe was slowly righting itself, but it still tilted and wobbled a bit.

She sat on the cedar chest at the end of the bed and stared at her wrinkles and mussed hair in the dresser mirror. With two fingertips, she pushed her cheeks up into a fake clown smile and marveled at the crepe-like thinness of her skin. There were one or two more age spots than she remembered on her arms to go with the scratches and bruises.

She worked her brush from the ends of her hair to the crown of her head, one section at a time, until it hung in a smooth layer, almost dry. It was good to feel the tug of the comb through the tiny snarls and the astringent tingle of her shampoo. Her head felt light, cool, and her mind clear. On impulse, she grabbed her hair and wound it into a loose French twist, turning her head to check the effect in the mirror, like a teenage girl dressing for a date.

Finch had always liked her hair swept up in a smooth Audrey-Hepburn style when they went out. Said it made her look mysterious. Said he would be the envy of every man in the room. So she wore it up and pinned it with the tortoiseshell comb her mama had given her on her wedding day. She would put on the pearl-drop earrings Finch had given her for their thirtieth wedding anniversary, and he would fasten the matching necklace around her neck and stroke her bare arms until she shivered.

Sadie laughed and released her hair, letting it fall around her face and over one eye. Putting her hands up like a fan, she peeked through her fingers at herself in the mirror. She smiled at her reflection and blew herself a kiss.

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*Sadie held the tortoiseshell comb up and slowly spun around the room in her nightgown, her hair loose, letting the lamplight flick the pearly sheen and glint the polished silver. Luella held her arms up in a floppy “O” and twirled after her sister like a second to the prima donna. Her fuzzy socks slid across the hardwood floor of their bedroom until she bumped into the dresser and then into Sadie. They teetered a moment and then fell into a sweaty heap, and the comb dropped, bounced, and flipped into a dark corner.*

*Sadie pressed her finger to her lips in a silent shush and crawled to retrieve the comb, which she examined for breaks. Scowling at Luella, she crept back into the pool of light from the lamp and held the comb in front of Luella’s nose.*

*“You almost broke the talisman,” said Sadie. “Only the true queen can possess its power and rule the land.”*

*Luella sniffed and wiped at the little beads of sweat at her hair line.*

*“Isn’t Mama the queen?”*

*“True. But I’ll be one day.”*

*Luella reached out and ran her fingertip along the teeth of the comb. “When you get married?”*

*“Who said anything about getting married?”*

*“Mama said--”*

*Sadie jerked the comb away from Luella, swept her hair up into a twist, and shoved the comb into the side of the snarled mess.*

*Luella looked down and dropped her hand into her lap, picking at the lace on the hem of her nightgown. “Mama said she’d give the comb to whoever got married first.”*

*“You’re such a baby.” Sadie grabbed the side of the bed and pushed up until she was standing over Luella, who looked up at her with dark, shining eyes, like a little girl ghost, her expression calm. “Go put it back then.” Sadie yanked the comb out of her hair and held it out to Luella, who took it and slowly pulled a few of her sister’s long hairs from its teeth.*

*Sadie flung back the covers and climbed into bed, her back to Luella. She pretended to be asleep a few minutes later when she felt her sister tugging at the blankets. Then Luella’s cool, thin arm crept around her waist in a half hug, and she stiffened as she felt the pressure of her sister’s face between her shoulders and her short breaths on the back of her neck. All her irritation vanished as if Luella had broken a spell, and she squeezed her sister’s arm and pulled her close.*

## Chapter 9 - Free Range Aging

That night, Sadie slept under the cedar-scented quilt without midnight trips to the bathroom, slept so hard one arm was numb in the morning, her knuckles grazing the headboard of the bed. She woke to roosters crowing from the top of the fence row and opened her eyes in a slit to watch the sun bite into the day through filmy curtains.

When her stomach rumbled, she stretched and sat up, shaking her arm and feeling for her slippers on the floor. She rummaged in the kitchen and made a breakfast of instant coffee, canned milk, bread from the freezer, and globs of Luella's apple butter from a jar hidden behind the flour canister, where she also found Luella's recipe box. Sadie savored the sweet tang of the apple butter and strategized over how to get to town without a car. The rental car would not be ready until later in the week, and she did not want to bother Bill again.

Wrapped in Luella's plush purple robe, Sadie was sitting on the front porch in the rocker when she decided the John Deere Gator™ four-wheeler parked under a tarp beside the barn was the answer to her dilemma.

Dressed in slacks, hair pulled back in a scarf, and full of caffeine, she found the keys to the Gator on a hook in the kitchen and grabbed her purse, leaving a note for Trish taped to the front door. The noise of the engine and rough ride gave Sadie a sense of purpose and mobility. She waved at an open-mouthed Trish, who was out feeding her chickens, as she rumbled down the driveway and out onto the main road.

No one stopped her, and other drivers just gave her a wave as they eased around her and buzzed on about their business. She made it all the way into town to the Plumtree

Farm and Feed, where she turned onto Church Street and inched along until she saw the Bridgeway Church and pulled up in front of the cemetery.

Hands on her hips, Sadie surveyed the sign on the cemetery gate, which did not open until 9:00 AM. She considered her options. The church's office opened at 9:00 as well, but she had wanted to visit her sister's grave before she went to the grocery store. She needed a solution before she chickened out and headed home whimpering like a timid lapdog.

Cemeteries were on her avoid-at-all-cost list. It had been over ten years since she had stepped foot in one, not since the blur of Finch's funeral. The well-meaning handshakes and cheek-presses of friends and neighbors had done nothing to ease her pain. It had taken months to reach a tenuous equilibrium. She had shuffled through the house in her bedroom slippers like a zombie, clutching the black-and-white obituary announcement, a coupon clipping for death. Now, only decisive action kept her from sinking into the void in her chest.

A waist-high stone wall surrounded the grounds, and a row of shrubs and crepe myrtle extended above the wall on the inside of the cemetery and shielded the graves from public view.

Sadie paced back and forth in front of the gate and wondered if she dared ring the bell of the parsonage. No. She would probably give the reverend a heart attack as he warbled in the shower or cause him to burn his upper lip on his coffee or choke on his buttered toast.

And she would not be able to tend to his burns or prevent his choking because the gate was locked. Sadie grabbed the iron bars of the gate and rattled them in frustration.



As a few cars drove by, she dropped her hands to her sides and climbed up into the seat of the Gator to wait. The four cups of coffee from breakfast were buzzing through her system, and toward her bladder, she realized a moment later.

Maybe she could climb over the wall. It was not that high.

She soon kicked off her pumps. They bounced and landed upside down in the gutter. She shimmied her way from the seat and onto the top of the wall, where she stood and teetered for a few moments as she looked for a place to climb down the other side. When she spotted a gap in the crepe myrtles a few feet away, she inched toward it, gripping the rough stones with her toes, and leaned forward to peer into the cemetery, one hand clutching the closest branches for balance.

With a sway, a crack, and a crash, she tumbled forward and fell into a row of knock-out rose bushes. Rolling off, she landed with a small thud on a thick, well-kept expanse of grass.

Sadie lay on her back on the spongy turf with her legs splayed and hazarded opening one eye. Even that small movement took some effort, so she waited a few moments before attempting to open the other one, until her heart stopped thudding. Branches swayed above her, making her dizzy, and she closed her eyes and rested in the bit of coolness they provided from the morning sun warming her bare feet.

“I know, Lu, I know,” she said with her eyes still closed. “I could have waited for the cemetery to open.”

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*Sadie was just winding the ends of the rope of sheets and blankets around the thick oak bedposts when Luella tiptoed into the bedroom, a bath towel around her head*

*and jar of cold cream clutched in her right hand. She let out a small yelp and dropped the cold cream, which thudded on the floor and rolled under the bed. They both froze and counted to ten before taking another breath.*

*“Shut the door,” hissed Sadie, as Luella stared wide-eyed at her.*

*“I thought you were asleep,” Luella said, pulling the door closed behind her with exaggerated movements.*

*“I thought you were taking a bath,” whispered Sadie, yanking and tying the bed sheet rope as she fumed at Luella. “Never mind. Hold this.” She handed one end of the makeshift rope to Luella and backed toward the open window, where her small pink suitcase was propped on its side, providing a step onto the wide sill.*

*“Not out the window, Sadie.” Luella shook her head but held tightly onto the rope wound around her wrist and planted her bare feet on the hardwood floor.*

*“You want me to go out the front door?” Sadie laughed and turned to wave at Jimmy’s dark figure standing just inside the shadow of the maple in the front yard below with his face turned up. The moon was just bright enough to see that he was grinning at her. Tossing a pair of pink pumps out onto the grass, she swung one leg out the window and straddled the sill, glancing back at Luella, who was frowning at her.*

*“I’ll be careful,” Sadie said with a toss of her hair, which bounced and glinted in the moonlight. “We’re just going to the bridge to watch the moon. I’ll be back before you wake up. Keep the bed warm.” She smiled reassuringly and inched out the window, clutching the rope and easing her way down, balancing on the side of the house with bare toes.*

*Sadie was almost to the bottom when she felt the rope of blankets pull apart, heard a squeal from the window above, and fell onto a row of boxwoods and tumbled onto the dew-covered lawn.*

*“Sadie!” Jimmy ran forward and picked her up, helping her brush the grass off her skirt and checking for broken bones.*

*“I’m fine. I’m fine.” She pushed his hands away and looked up at the window, where Luella stood. Her dark hair, loose from the towel, framed her small, white face. She was rubbing one elbow. Sadie straightened her skirt and gave her two thumbs up. Luella gave her a small wave but did not smile as her eyes flicked from Sadie to Jimmy.*

*“Come on,” Sadie said, stooping to pick up her pumps and tugging at Jimmy’s sleeve.*

*Jimmy gave a small salute to Luella, who backed away from the window. Sadie giggled as she pulled him along, and they snuck down the long gravel driveway and climbed into his truck.*

## Chapter 10 - An Angel and a Garden Gnome

Sadie clicked her teeth together to see if her partial plate was still in place. Nothing was broken, as far as she could tell, but she still winced at the sting of scratches on her legs, arms, and face when she rolled onto her side and pushed up on her knees. She wished she had thought to throw her shoes over the wall as well.

She picked her way through the tombstones, sticking to the sides of the well-cared-for grass and avoiding the gravel paths. There were names she recognized, too many, ones he had helped birth during her years as a midwife, and she felt disoriented as the world, and time, flipped around her. Reaching out, she grabbed the sculpture on the top of a nearby stone, a small angel with folded wings, and tried to push down a feeling of panic as she searched for the Combs family plot.

Sadie scanned the rows of headstones around her and sifted through memories for clues. She remembered a prickly holly tree and a row of azaleas planted along the edge, but there was nothing that seemed familiar now. She rolled her eyes heavenward and took a deep breath. Feeling more clearheaded, she decided to walk through the tombs in a systematic sweep, like a detective in a crime investigation, until she found her Luella's grave.

As the panic subsided, she noticed the morning rustles and chitter of birds all around her, the muted traffic outside the gate, and the gurgle of a fountain in the center of the cemetery. Her breathing slowed as she meandered, brushing off leaves and bits of grass from the rough tops of headstones and letting the spicy scent of warm pine needles clear her mind. She turned her head at one row, and her eye caught the name Combs all the way at the end under a tall holly tree elbowing its space in a row of magnolias.

The sight of Luella's grave, with its bundles of flower arrangements, already withering and smelling like sweet death, squeezed at Sadie's chest. She sat down on the ground beside the fresh mound of dirt, not caring if she added to the growing number of stains on her slacks, and placed her hand on the top of the grave as if she were giving a belated blessing.

"Oh, Lu." No tears came, just a heaviness, a sense of loss, and a tightness in her throat at the wasted time. "I know you're not in there. But you're not here to slap me or hug me either."

Sadie patted the dirt and then folded her hands in her lap and studied the inscription on the headstone: *Beloved Friend and Grandmother*. And sister. How many moments of Luella's life had she missed, how many celebrations and trials, because of stupid pride and stubborn independence? A breeze cooled the sweat at her hair line, and she sighed, feeling crumbly and moss-covered, like one of the statues dotting the tombs.

"I'm sorry I didn't come. Didn't say goodbye."

Digging into her purse, Sadie pulled out a tortoiseshell comb and rubbed it with a clean section of her shirt.

"You were always the queen," she said, brushing away a few crinkly leaves that had dropped from the flower arrangements and gently laying the comb in front of the headstone.

Behind her, Sadie heard the jing-a-ling of a bell and looked over her shoulder. A balding man in baggy shorts, a misbuttoned shirt, and untied boots was rapidly approaching. He was gripping a pitchfork and pointing it in front of him like a weapon.

His thick grey eyebrows bunched together in a scowl above his glasses. Sadie raised her own thin eyebrows but did not shift her position beside Luella's grave.

He stopped and lowered the pitchfork. His eyes slowly took in her bare feet, ruffled clothes, and paused at her hand on the grave. When he looked up at her, Sadie noticed his eyes were a slate grey behind his glasses. His eyebrows still bunched, but in confusion, and concern.

“Who?” He paused and looked around the cemetery before meeting her eyes.

She kept her expression neutral, like it was perfectly natural for her to be there, and tried not to laugh at the thought that he reminded her a little of a garden gnome.

“I'm Sadie.” She held up her hand to him, smiling. “I'd get up, but I'm a little tired from my trip.”

He still seemed confused but had lowered the pitchfork and was leaning on it, studying her. He reached out and shook her hand.

“Luella's sister,” she finished and saw comprehension in his eyes, which widened and then narrowed.

“You damaged the roses,” he said, his voice deep, and a little stern. But she thought she heard a hint of laughter in his tone.

## Chapter 11 - The One Who Climbs In

The kitchen of the Reverend Holland Stubbs was comfortable, with potted plants stacked on a baker's rack in front of the window and bowls of veggies and fruit on the counter. Pots and pans hung from a rack overhead, and there was something already simmering in a crockpot. The smell of fresh coffee, pinched herbs, and toast filled the room.

Soon Sadie was settled with a steaming cup of black coffee in one hand, a plate of buttered toast and a jar of local honey in easy reach. She watched as Holland dabbed at the cuts on her other arm with a level of concentration that made her wonder if he got out much. When he suddenly blew on one of the cuts as if she were a toddler who had fallen off her bike and skinned her elbow, Sadie blinked.

"Do you give all the cuts and bruises of your parishioners such undivided attention, Reverend Stubbs?" Sadie said, smiling through a bite of toast, which had such a hearty texture and flavor it had to be homemade sourdough.

Holland started and colored a little, right to the top of his bald spot, but he continued dabbing. "It's Holland," he said, not taking his eyes off the task.

"This bread is amazing. Did you make it? It tastes familiar."

"Luella gave me some of her bread starter." Holland had finished dabbing and was gathering up his first aid supplies.

Sadie thought she heard a question in his voice, as if he were testing the waters of the conversation to see how far he might go.

"I'm sorry for damaging the roses. Do you think they'll recover?" she said.

He nodded and stirred his crockpot concoction, spooning something that looked like chicken soup into several Pyrex containers set out on the counter.

“It’s hard to kill knockout roses,” he said in a tone that implied that if anyone could, it would probably be her.

“I’d be happy to replace--,” she began to say when a doorbell rang in sharp, clanging tones that reverberated around them like a call to prepare for the battle of Armageddon.

Holland winced and shrugged his shoulders as he wiped his hands on a towel. “Gift from the Ladies’ Auxiliary,” he said and disappeared into the hallway.

The doorbell rang again, twice, with the pressure of a determined finger. She looked down into her coffee and thought she saw it vibrate with the next insistent ring. Hinges squeaked as a heavy door swung open.

“Morning, Sheriff. Dr. Martin,” she heard Holland say with a volume and pressure in his tone that made Sadie slip her bare feet off the chair where she had them propped. She brushed toast crumbs off her blouse and smoothed her hair back from her face, feeling like an orphan needing a mother to rub her face clean with the corner of an apron and a little spit.

“Holland,” said a woman’s breathy voice. “There is a four-wheeler parked in front of the cemetery gates, and I found this cheap pair of shoes in the gutter. I was so worried that someone had broken into the garden and damaged the fountain again. The sheriff came right over when I called.”

Sadie was taking a sip of coffee when Holland entered the kitchen followed by an anxious-looking woman in her mid-sixties wearing a white coat, perfectly creased slacks,



and a smart pair of shoes that tapped military style. She came to a full stop at the sight of Sadie and dropped the pumps she was holding. They thumped to the floor.

Sheriff Moore almost bumped into Dr. Martin and managed to sidestep her before planting himself in front of the back door as if he expected Sadie to make a run for it. He stood, arms crossed, his face serious, watching her without a word.

Sadie took another sip of coffee and tried to ignore the bouncer in blue.

Holland gestured toward the doctor. "Sadie, this is Dr. Martin. Sheriff Moore."

Dr. Martin stared at the first aid kit and the band aids on Sadie's arms. "You should've called me, Holland," she said to him, almost pouting. "I don't know why you insist on taking in every stray that comes knocking. Or climbing over the wall." She nudged Sadie's shoes to the side with her foot.

"She just wanted to visit her sister's grave," Holland said as he placed lids on the containers of soup that lined the counter.

"Sister?" said Dr. Martin.

"Luella," said Holland.

"You're Sadie Palmer?" the doctor said like she had just met someone on a most-wanted list.

Sadie nodded, swirling what was left of her coffee in her cup and wondering why Dr. Martin was looking at her as if she had a contagious disease.

"I thought I recognized Luella's Gator," said the sheriff to Holland.

"She's a trespasser," said the doctor and looked at the sheriff like she wanted him to put Sadie in handcuffs that moment.

Sadie was surprised at Dr. Martin's open disdain and could not account for this level of hostility in someone who was a medical professional.

"She's no trouble," Holland said and glanced at Sadie, who smirked.

The doctor's face clouded as she looked from Sadie to Holland. She reached out and squeezed Holland's arm. "You have enough on your plate, with the community yardsale coming up, and you need to avoid any more stress."

Holland looked down at her hand on his arm, face flushed. Sadie could not tell if he was annoyed or embarrassed.

"What do you want to do?" The sheriff broke in, shifting his feet.

"I don't see any reason to press charges," said Holland, ignoring the doctor's grip on his arm, and looking the sheriff in the eye. "Just pull the Gator around into the back lot."

Sadie dangled the keys to the Gator in front of the sheriff, who was studying her as if he could not quite figure out what to do with her. "Have you heard anything about my car, Sheriff?" she said. Maybe if he would do his job and find her Mustang, she would not have to use unacceptable alternate transportation, her tone and look implied.

He shook his head and took the keys without comment, exiting through the back door as if he were glad to escape the drama.

Dr. Martin leaned in close to Holland and whispered, "The one who climbs in by some other way is a thief."

Sadie almost laughed. The woman was too much, squeezing Holland's arm and whispering in his ear like a voodoo priestess.

“I could be a thief. You never know,” Sadie could not resist saying with a flip of her hair.

Holland flashed a warning look at Sadie under his eyebrows as the doctor let go of his arm and spun around.

“You--,” she said, pointing her finger, but was interrupted by a shrill ring from the phone in her pocket. Releasing Holland’s arm, she pulled out the phone and checked the number.

Sadie shrugged and grabbed another piece of toast off the plate on the table, taking a huge bite and smacking her lips.

Holland grabbed the coffee pot as if he were relieved to be mobile again and leaned over the table to pour just half a cup for Sadie.

“Are you cutting me off, Reverend?” Sadie looked down into her cup and made a sad face.

“Maybe you should switch to herbal tea,” he said in a low voice as he handed her a napkin. “There’s honey on your chin.”

Sadie grinned and thought she saw the beginnings of a smile around his eyes, but he turned away and began loading containers of soup into a cooler.

Dr. Martin came back into the kitchen, tucking her phone into her pocket. Her lips were pressed together, and Sadie wondered what had gotten the woman so worked up.

“I won’t be able to help with the shut-ins today,” she said to Holland. She seemed torn between the need to go and the desire to keep an eye on Sadie.

“It’ll be fine,” said Holland gently.

Sadie hoped the doctor was done, but she underestimated the woman, who had some final instructions. “Keep an eye on her. I don’t think she can be left on her own. At her age. In her condition.”

Then the doctor was gone, her shoes clicking down the hall, and Sadie wondered how she kept her practice running with such a lovely bedside manner.

## Chapter 12 - Precious Rubbish

Before Sadie knew what she had agreed to, she found herself elbow-deep in layers of junk and memorabilia from her sister's farm.

"Luella asked me to help her sort through everything, but we never seemed to get around to it," Holland had said, his grey eyes cloudy with regret.

Trish had been ecstatic when Sadie mentioned it to her and suggested they donate as much as possible to the town's charity fundraiser, the annual giant yard sale hosted by the Bridgeway Church and the Plumtree Farm and Feed store, the only locations with enough parking and restrooms to accommodate the hordes that drove in from surrounding counties for the sale.

On Saturday morning, after several cups of coffee and a plate of French toast with fresh strawberries and whipped cream, Sadie felt fortified for the project. She threw on a loose cotton blouse and blue jean skirt she found hanging in the closet. They were comfortable and serviceable, and she would need them to tackle the pile of cast-off belongings and keepsakes in the garage. She brushed back her hair and covered it with a large blue-flowered bandana she found in the dresser drawer. An odd pair of garden gloves completed her ensemble.

"Ready, Sadie?" Trish peeked in the kitchen and stopped short, staring with her mouth open.

Sadie looked down at her outfit and put her hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't have anything to wear for cleaning."

Trish shook her head and said, "It's okay. Luella would like it."

"Are you sure?"

“It’s perfect. It’s like she’s overseeing the project,” Trish said and took a deep breath. She held up a box of garbage bags in one hand and a broom in the other. “What else do we need?”

“More coffee,” they both said together.

Sadie kept an eye on Trish as the morning progressed, worried she would strain herself.

“Don’t overdo it,” Sadie said when she saw Trish carrying a stack of National Geographic magazines. “I was a midwife, but I don’t think I could handle twins if you go into early labor.”

“I’m fine,” Trish retorted, putting her hands on her hips and wagging her finger at Sadie. “Don’t you overdo it.”

Every so often one of them would give a shout at some treasure or curiosity they had found: a Red Wing butter churn crock, a brass spittoon, a cedar chest packed with moth-ravaged dresses and hats, silver dollars in a display frame, or a rusty tricycle.

By ten o’clock, they had filled over ten lawn-and-garden bags with trash plus recycling. They decided to make the driveway their sorting area and put sticky notes on larger items they could not move.

They finally stopped to rest, sitting on two large coolers they had drug out from behind a bunch of camping supplies and fanning themselves with old newspapers.

“Too bad we can’t plug that in,” Sadie said, pointing to a window air-conditioner that was missing its plug.

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep some of this?” Trish waved toward the piles of items in the driveway.

“What would I do with it?” Sadie shook her head. “No. It’s all got to go.” She had no desire to leave this mess for someone else, and she was a little peeved that Luella had not done it.

Trish laughed and saluted. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

The dogs yapped a greeting from next door, and Sadie watched Bill Martin’s familiar truck coming up the driveway.

“Need some help?” Bill said, stepping around the piles in the drive and surveying the wall of junk behind them. He pointed to the back of his truck. “I can take a load in my truck after I’m finished measuring at the sinkhole.”

Sadie and Trish looked at each other and grinned.

“Why don’t you take the Gator instead?” said Sadie, smiling up at him. “It’ll be easier to maneuver in the woods, and we can go ahead and load some items into your truck.”

Bill blinked, like he was trying to turn a switch on in his brain.

“Gator?” he said.

“Yeah,” said Trish, pointing at the barn. “It’s in the barn. Luella used it to haul wood and get the mail. I think she even snuck out on the main road to get groceries a few times.”

“It must run in the family,” Sadie laughed.

Sadie and Rita watched as Bill maneuvered an oak vanity, a blackened muffler, a canoe, a chandelier, the air conditioner, and most of the bagged items into the back of his truck and still closed the tailgate.

“You can use the back seat, too.” he said. “I’ve got a few boxes in there for the yard sale, but there should be room for some of these smaller items.”

“I don’t think we’ll get done by next weekend,” said Trish, one hand on her hip, surveying the rest of the garage.

Sadie threw up her hands. “We haven’t even touched the attic or the barn, and everything still has to be priced.”

“I might have a few hours to spare in the evenings,” Bill said, and Sadie clapped.

“We can feed you,” said Trish. “You staying at your mother’s?”

Bill choked on the water he was drinking. “No. I’m at the Meadowood B&B,” he managed to say, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as Sadie pounded him on the back.

“Even better,” said Trish, retrieving the keys to the Gator from the kitchen and tossing them to him.

As Bill started the Gator and roared out of the barn and down the overgrown path into the woods, Sadie and Trish began shoving items into the back seat of Bill’s truck, tucking things around and inside each other, hand weights in hat boxes and musty tablecloths in leather suitcases.

“I bet we can fit more if we repack his boxes,” said Trish, as she and Sadie tried to find a place for a red velvet lamp shade with frayed fringe.

Trish hunted in the garage for smaller items they could add as Sadie shifted Bill’s boxes, full of hand-made bird mobiles, rolled posters, rock collections, yellowed yearbooks, and framed photographs of local landscapes. One frame was coming apart at the edges, and as Sadie tried to smack the seams back together, a photo fell out and



landed on the ground. She picked it up and gently shook off the grit. It was a Polaroid of a woman in a tailored dress standing beside a man and boy of about five in suits on the steps of a large brick building.

Sadie recognized the woman as Dr. Martin, and the man beside her must have been her husband. Sadie stared at the boy's face, which looked so much like her son Christopher as a boy that it took her a second to realize she was looking at a younger Bill.

The boy looked blankly at the camera, and although he was holding his mother's hand, the tilt of his shoulders as he leaned slightly away from her made him look as if he wanted to step out of the frame. Sadie flipped the photo over and read, "Cynthia Palmer Martin, George Martin, and William Martin, 1987."

Sadie felt as if the ground were falling away and grabbed the door handle of the truck.

"Are you okay?" said Trish, coming up behind Sadie and catching her as she swayed.

Sadie quickly slipped the photo into her sleeve as Trish hustled to get a lawn chair and insisted she sit.

"I'm okay. I'm okay," Sadie said even though she was not okay, not at all okay.

## Chapter 13 - Keeping Secrets

Trish was checking Sadie's pulse when they heard the sound of a motorcycle, which got louder as it turned into the drive and pulled up to the house. Then there was silence.

Trish rubbed her hands together. "I believe lunch has arrived," she said and ran around the truck.

Sadie was grateful for the chance to pull herself together and was relieved when Trish came back a few moments later with Holland in tow, a picnic basket on his arm.

"Stubb's brought chicken-salad sandwiches and tea," Trish said, taking the basket and kissing Holland on the cheek as if he were a saint delivering gifts to the poor.

"Anything to help the cause," he said, glancing at Sadie.

"Much better than tuna sandwiches and water," said Sadie with a weak smile, wondering if her wearing Luella's clothes would upset him, but he did not seem to notice.

They ate lunch sitting under the maple tree in mismatched lawn chairs around a lacquered card table. Holland set a large glass of iced tea beaded with moisture at her elbow. A striped paper straw and a sprig of fresh mint sprouted from the top. Then he eased into the chair across from her and leaned forward, as if waiting for her to take a sip.

Sadie reached for the glass and took a long swig on the straw. It was ice cold and zippy, with a hint of sweetness that tasted like honeysuckle and peaches. She held the glass in front of her face a moment and examined its amber depths as if she could do a psychic reading and discover its secret.

"I think I'm in love," she said and took another swig, almost draining the glass.

“It’s his sun tea,” said Trish, holding her glass to her hot cheeks. “Luella never did figure out the exact ingredients. It was like a game with them.” She turned to Holland and said, “But there’s something different. Did you add something?”

Holland shrugged and smiled. “More?” he said, holding up the thermos.

Sadie shook her head, waiting for the brain freeze to subside. Setting the glass on the table, she took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. It was heaven just to eat with friends who accepted her, who acted as if they had known her all their life and could finish all her sentences.

She tried to enjoy the moment, but the whole time she was thinking of the photo she had in her sleeve and how it could mean the end of this easy comradery. Now, she wished she had never come home, never looked back.

“I’ll clear up,” Trish said, getting up and gathering plates and silverware as if she had not worked all morning. Sadie wished she could rebound so quickly.

“That was her favorite color,” Holland interrupted Sadie’s thoughts, pointing to the bandana on her head. So he had noticed.

Sadie touched her head. “When she was little, she thought everything blue was hers.”

He was watching her, a slight frown creasing his forehead. “You’ve done an amazing amount of work,” he said. Too much, his look implied.

“Bill’s helping us load and haul this week, when he can.” Sadie tried to sound more confident than she felt.

“I can help as well,” Holland said, his serious grey eyes assessing, troubled.

Something in his eyes made a little flutter start in Sadie's chest and work its way up her throat. He knew. Of course he knew.

Holland leaned forward and looked her in the eye. "Don't you think Bill deserves to know?" he said gently.

Sadie looked down at her sleeve and pulled out the Polaroid of Bill and his parents, placing it on the table and finally meeting Holland's eyes.

"I didn't recognize her. She was still a child when I met Finch," Sadie said, her hand trembling on the table. She felt chilled, sick to her stomach. "No wonder she hates me. She must have thought I had stolen her father away," Sadie said. "Bill is going to hate me, too."

"Give him a chance," Holland said, reaching across the table and taking her hand.

Sadie wished she could pack her faithful pink suitcase and hop onto his motorcycle and head out of town, but he was holding her hand, and she did not want to let go.

Holland stayed until Trish headed home and Bill came back with the Gator and finished off the rest of the sandwiches and tea. He stayed until Sadie gave the photo to Bill and watched his face go still. She had seen that look before, when he got a call from his mother.

"I realized Dr. Martin was your mother when I saw this picture," said Sadie, pointing to the woman in the photo. "Her maiden name is Palmer," she continued as Bill looked up at her with a puzzled expression. "Finch Palmer was her father. I'm his second wife, Sadie Palmer."

Bill said nothing. He just sat looking down at the photo, rubbing the corner of it with his thumb, his shoulders taught. Sadie looked at Holland, but he was watching Bill.

“That explains a lot,” Bill finally said, looking up at Holland. “But why didn’t mom tell me about my grandfather?”

“Maybe she was angry about his remarrying and moving away,” Holland said.

“Did my grandfather know about me?” Bill said.

“I don’t know,” Sadie said. “I’m sorry, Bill. We never talked about Gypsum.”

Sadie wished she could give Bill a hug like she had hugged the maple tree and make the hurt in his eyes go away, but she did not feel she had a right to comfort him. She was not prepared when he reached over and enveloped her in a bear hug.

“Um...,” said Sadie, eyes wide, as she looked at Holland over Bill’s shoulder and patted Bill awkwardly on the back.

Holland was smiling at them like he had performed a miracle and was shortly to be handed a crown of glory.

## Chapter 14 - Not at This Address

Bill came over every night that week to help with the yardsale items as promised, and Sadie was secretly thrilled when he insisted on calling her Mamaw even when she warned him it might upset his mother.

He had shrugged and said, “You’re my Mamaw,” as if that settled the matter.

Trish and Sadie worked their way through the attic and guest bedrooms and left the barn and other outbuildings to Bill and Holland.

As Bill hauled each truckload away, Sadie began to feel the house and her spirits lighten. She was rummaging through the last set of tall kitchen cabinets and making stacks of copper pots and bakeware on the kitchen table when she knocked a large stainless steel canning pot off onto the floor. It landed with a clang on the mottled linoleum, and the lid rolled until it crashed into the stove.

A painted shoebox fell out of the pot and hit the floor so hard it snapped the twine around it, and an avalanche of papers and photos tumbled out of the box.

Gathering the contents, Sadie stuffed them back into the shoebox and carried it to the front porch, where she could sit in Luella’s rocker and work on smaller projects and where the light was better. There were old school photos, newspaper clippings, recipes torn from magazines, sketches of flowers on odd bits of paper, and yellowed stacks of letters and bills.

Sadie picked up a bundle of letters wrapped with faded blue yarn and untied them carefully. Luella’s tiny watercolors of garden scenes and birds ran along the edges of the stationery. When she held the letters up to her nose, she caught the faintest scent of cloves and dried lavender.

Some of the letters had never been sent but only sealed, awaiting an address and stamp. When she opened the envelope on top and unfolded the letter, a tiny pressed bouquet fell out from between the fragile creases of the paper. She smiled at Luella's sloping handwriting:

*Dear Sadie,*

*It's quiet around here without you. I miss our talks.*

*I wish you could be here with your trusty pink suitcase. I'm as big as an ark now.*

*The doctor is so far away, and there are no other midwives in the area.*

*We're still deciding on baby names. I'm for Melanie if it's a girl, and Jimmy is for Melvin if it's a boy, but I think Melvin sounds like something you put on toast.*

*Please write soon. You're always in my prayers.*

*Your Loving Sister,*

*Luella*

*P.S. I didn't know.*

Sadie sat staring into the front yard, one finger stroking the stack of letters. The idea of Luella wanting to heal the rift between them all those years ago was so heavy that Sadie had to take a moment to process the idea. If Luella had sent the letter, would Sadie have responded at the time, when she was still so angry and hurt? And what did Luella not know?

The next letter had been returned to sender:

*Dear Melanie,*

*I loved you from the moment I brought you home, even before that. You are a strong, beautiful woman.*

*Take care of yourself, and don't let that no-good weasel back into your life.*

*Make sure to water the azaleas and fertilize the ferns I gave you.*

*Look come see me once in a while.*

*Your Loving Mother,*

*Luella*

Another letter was marked "Not at This Address." Inside the envelope was a faded newspaper article about U.S. troops in Vietnam, and a letter from Luella. The handwriting was shaky, and there were several words that were almost illegible:

*Dear Sadie,*

*I don't know if this will get to you. My other letters came back.*

*Jimmy's dead. His helicopter went down, and they haven't recovered his body yet.*

*I know you loved him, too.*

*Please come home.*

*Luella*

Sadie pressed her hand against her mouth and moaned. Luella alone, and needing her, when she was God knows where. Sadie turned the letter over, looking for a date. She and Finch had moved around so much with his business, and she could not remember where they had been living at the time. All she could remember was her own grief when she heard that her childhood friend, and first love, Jimmy had died.

One unopened letter was a brighter white and had Holland's name written on the envelope. Sadie set it aside and picked up one with her name on the envelope:

*Dear Sadie,*

*If you're reading this, you're home. And that makes me happy.*



*I'm leaving everything in your hands because I know you'll know what to do.*

*Give Holland a chance. He will grow on you.*

*And Trish will need a mamaw.*

*I will always love you.*

*Your Sister Forever,*

*Luella*

*P.S. Please give Holland my navy blue bible. The family bible is on the shelf in my bedroom.*

The drier buzzed inside the house and startled Sadie into action. There was comfort in folding still-warm sheets and towels into squares and rectangles that fit neatly on linen closet shelves, unlike the memories and emotions that spilled out of her like shrunken, mismatched laundry tumbling out of a basket.

## Chapter 15 - Keeping a Man

Sadie found Holland's number taped to the top of his casserole dish sitting on the counter with a pile of others she had not yet returned. She dialed, but it went to voicemail. Probably out in the garden shoveling mulch. She left a cryptic message about Luella's bible and the letter addressed to him.

She was standing at the kitchen sink, still in her bathrobe and slippers when she felt her phone vibrate in the pocket. Sadie dropped the dishtowel in the dishwasher, scattering suds, and checked her phone.

Holland was coming over.

Scurrying into the laundry room, Sadie pulled a sundress out of the dryer and almost fell trying to change into it. She whipped her hair into a chignon and tied a pink scarf around her neck. Sliding on her knee-highs and new pumps, she rummaged in her make-up bag and pulled out mascara and her favorite shade of lipstick, a glossy pink that made her feel like spring after a long winter.

She was sitting in Luella's rocker on the porch and reading the newspaper, one leg over the other, her foot bouncing, when Holland cruised up the driveway on his motorcycle. Sadie sat up and stared as he flipped up the sunshades over his glasses. He was wearing a brown leather jacket that creaked when he shifted in his seat.

"Ride?" he said.

She nodded and tossed the newspaper aside.

"You might want to change your shoes," he said as she started down the steps.

Sadie held on tightly to Holland and let the ground roar away beneath her as they rode past farm houses, long gravel drives, and shy horses nibbling tender grass, whisking

flies with their tails. Past the Cedar Depot and over the bridge on the edge of town, where Jimmy had held her hand and proposed, and where she had said no and left him standing in the moonlight, the water running swift and deep under his feet.

They rode through trees touching in bowers high over their heads and into a valley of patchwork fields crisscrossed with fences and sloping hills hazed in dust motes fed by disturbed layers of last year's grasses.

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*Luella was in the front pasture, sitting on one of the kitchen chairs she had dragged out of the house. She was wearing an old man's work shirt and a blue skirt that billowed around her small, tan legs and bare feet propped on the rungs of the chair. A large sheet of thick paper was clipped to the makeshift easel and board in front of her. Sadie walked up behind her without a word and studied the "scene," as Luella called her watercolor creations.*

*"Jimmy was here," Luella said from under her floppy sunhat, dabbing her brush to create a muted tree line on the horizon of her painting.*

*"You forgot the cow patties," Sadie said, snapping the top off of a tuft of grass and tearing it into little pieces.*

*"Jimmy said I'm an exceptional painter," said Luella, adding a row of fence posts.*

*"He does like using those big fat words, doesn't he?" Sadie threw what was left of the grass into the air and watched it blow away. It had been a month since Jimmy had proposed and she had refused. There was no going back to their easy conversation and late-night escapades.*

*“He wants to settle down, raise a family,” said Luella, cleaning her brush on a tattered dishcloth.*

*“Well, I’ve seen too much settling and too much raising of families,” Sadie crossed her arm and kicked at the chair leg.*

*Luella held her brush away from the paper and until Sadie stopped kicking and then added tiny orange day lilies on the fence row.*

*“If you marry him, you can keep him,” Luella said.*

*Sadie laughed and grabbed Luella’s sunhat off her head, knocking the paintbrush to the ground in the process. “Luella, he’s not a pet,” she said and rolled her eyes.*

*“Anyway,” Sadie continued, squashing the sunhat down on her own head and posing, “you’re only seventeen. What do you know about keeping a man?”*

*Luella stared at the paintbrush at her feet and then looked up at Sadie with eyes like little storm clouds ready to burst. “A whole lot more than you, Sadie Jane,” she said, lifting her chin.*

## Chapter 16 - Sacred Space

Holland parked the motorcycle in a makeshift drive at the side of the road and killed the motor. Pulling off her helmet, Sadie steadied herself and waited until her heart stopped thudding before climbing down.

Rummaging in the bike's compartment, Holland pulled out a half-gallon of lemonade, two mugs, and a plastic bag full with ginger snaps.

"I can see why Luella was so attached to you," said Sadie as he handed her a picnic blanket and a sunhat.

Sadie followed him as he pushed through the tall grass to a mown path, where they spread the picnic blanket on the cut grass and it settled in uneven lumps.

"The farmer lets some fields rest every year, but he always mows a path," he said as they anchored the four corners of the picnic blanket with the lemonade, mugs, and cookies.

Holland stood looking out across the field with the afternoon sun on his back. Taking a bandana out of the back pocket of his jeans, he wiped the sweat from his neck and head. His wispy grey hair stuck out, and his stance was a little bow-legged from arthritis, or maybe from riding his motorcycle. He looked like a veteran adventurer on a safari.

"You don't look very much like a reverend," said Sadie, joining him and fanning herself with the sunhat.

"Is that a compliment?" said Holland, looking at her sideways.

Sadie laughed and smacked his arm with the hat. "You know what I mean."

"What's a reverend supposed to look like?" said Holland, arms crossed.

“I don’t know. A suit. A bible under one arm,” said Sadie.

Holland smiled. “I’m not that kind of reverend.”

Sadie laughed. “If you wore a suit, I’m sure the Ladies Auxiliary would think someone had died and start ordering flowers and fried chicken.”

“Something like that,” said Holland, suddenly quiet, his eyes shuttered behind his glasses, and Sadie wondered if he was thinking about Luella.

Sadie pulled out a flat package she had tucked into the large, deep pocket of her sundress and handed it to him. “She wanted you to have this.”

Holland’s eyes filled with tears as Luella’s well-worn bible fell open in his hands to ragged pages filled with years of notes and musings jotted in the margins. Holland closed the Bible, tucking the unopened letter inside, and held it to his chest as if holding onto a lifeline in a deep ocean.

Sadie looked out over the wildflowers and thistles dotting the tall grass that stretched around them and waited quietly, not wanting to disturb the sacred, until Holland lifted his head and started to breathe again.

A breeze stirred the hair around Sadie’s face and dried the sweat across her nose and forehead. Kicking off her shoes, she rubbed the top of her foot with a toe.

“Did you bring Luella here?” she said.

He shook his head. “I didn’t want people talking. We visited on her porch, discussing books. She’s...she was, a great reader.”

Sadie nodded. “She always kept a book hidden under the mattress when we were girls so she could read by flashlight after curfew.”

“It’s different with you,” he said, his face full of question marks. “Direct. More like...an avalanche, than a snowfall.”

“Are you saying I’m easy?” she laughed.

He flushed.

“I’m sorry,” said Sadie, putting her hand over her smile.

“She would never ride the motorcycle,” he continued. “She thought it was too dangerous. Used to tell me I should sell it and invest in something with four wheels.”

“Like a Gator,” Sadie said, and Holland smiled.

“My kitchen is always open,” he said. “I love folks dropping in, but...”

“Sometimes it’s nice to be able ride away from the doorbell?” said Sadie.

Holland nodded, looking relieved that Sadie understood.

“Luella knew.” Sadie put her hand on his arm.

“She kept me here,” he said.

“She still does,” Sadie said and looked at him under the brim of her hat.

He was silent.

“Although...,” she said with a smile, “I have to thank her for that.”

Holland’s smile folded his wrinkles into deep creases framing his mouth.

They sat and chained daisies in between bites of ginger snaps and sips of cool, sweet-tart lemonade. Dragonflies hovered and drank from the moisture beads on the mugs as their iridescent wings caught the slanted sun.

“Luella’s or your recipe?” asked Sadie, taking a bite of a ginger snap.

“Half-and-half,” he said, picking up the other end of the chain. It curled and filled the space between them.

Sadie's frown accented the wrinkles on her forehead. "She said she didn't know. In one of the letters. I didn't understand what she meant at first."

"That you loved Jimmy."

"I would have married him." Sadie shrugged, picking at the petals of the daisy she held. "Eventually."

"But he married Luella," Holland's voice was matter-of-fact.

"I jumped straight into Finch's arms, and we whirled around like tops, feeding off each other's negative energy." Sadie's frown deepened. "He avoided facing his daughter. I avoided Jimmy and Luella."

After a few moments, Holland said, "I miss Luella like I'd miss an arm."

Sadie nodded.

He was silent for a moment, his shoulders slumped. "I'm so tired of burying people," he said, crushing the flowers in his fist.

Sadie scooted over to him and said "Come here."

Holland hesitated, surprise flashing across his face, and then leaned forward. Sadie gently removed his glasses, cleaning them on the Kleenex tucked inside her sleeve and placing them back on the bridge of his nose. Holland reached out and brushed her bangs out of her eyes. She caught his hand and held it to her cheek as the cicadas hummed around them.

It was dark when Sadie and Holland finally pulled into the gravel drive in front of the farmhouse where she had grown up and Luella had grown old. The moon was at three-quarters and bright enough to silver the fields and the rustling tops of trees, their trunks in shadow. The damp night air pushed against her skin with the scent of



honeysuckle and the faintest whiff of skunk. Across the field, she could see the lights of Trish's house through the brambly fencerow.

She slid off the motorcycle and landed with a jar that vibrated up her heels and into her legs and back. Holland reached out and caught her, and she held onto his arm all the way to the front door.

In her excitement that morning, that burst of energy that had started the day, she had forgotten to leave a light on, and the house was dark.

"Luella always left a light on when I had to work late," she said, wrangling the heavy bunch of discount tags and rings in her hand, trying to find the right key.

Holland reached over and opened the front door, flipping on the porch light. He was close enough for Sadie to smell his aftershave and feel the warmth radiating from his skin through his shirt.

Then he stood back and said, "Goodnight, Sadie."

"Goodnight, Reverend," she said, and she thought she saw him smile as he turned to go.

## Chapter 17 - The Laser Beam of the Ladies' Auxiliary

Sadie's cell vibrated on her nightstand early the next morning, and she fumbled for it with a tingling arm. She had slept on it, exhausted from yesterday's emotional roller coaster. The call was the second one from Trish.

"Trish?" Sadie croaked into the phone and cleared her throat.

"Sorry to call you so early," Trish said in a rush.

"I'm awake," Sadie said, eyeing the clock and plumping her pillow. She was not quite ready to get up.

"Now, don't get mad...", Trish began, which made Sadie sit up in bed and swing her feet to the floor, as if she were a first-responder ready to put out a fire.

Trish cleared her throat. "There's been some talk."

"Isn't there always?" Sadie said.

Trish half laughed, worried.

"Let me guess," Sadie sighed. "The Ladies' Auxiliary?" They were good at getting upset about the smallest misdeed and sticking their noses into other people's business. Sadie was glad she had been denied membership in her "troubled" youth.

"You've gotten them riled up," Trish said.

"I've only been here two weeks," Sadie said, surprised that the club's laser gaze had found her so quickly.

"Dr. Martin has called a special meeting to, and I quote, 'deal with a public nuisance and negative influence on the spiritual leadership of this proud community,'" Trish said.

"Cynthia?" said Sadie, fully awake now, even without coffee.

“She’s got a thing for Stubbs,” Trish said. “Didn’t you know?”

Sadie groaned. Now the doctor had something else to hold against her.

“Does he have thing for her?” Sadie could not resist asking.

“She wishes,” said Trish, and Sadie felt a little giddy at Trish’s response even though she knew the gossips had their claws unsheathed and were ready to dig into her. The thought that Holland had deliberately and publicly spent time with her even though he knew the gossips would go wild boosted her confidence.

“Cynthia’s the chair of the Ladies’ Auxiliary,” Trish continued, “and according to her, you’re a vandal, a lunatic, and a moocher.”

“Is that all?” said Sadie.

“And you were seen lying on a blanket in a field outside of town...,” Trish paused, clearing her throat, “with the Reverend Stubbs.”

Sadie could hear the cringe in Trish’s voice, as if she could see Sadie’s face and knew her thoughts about using some of her self-defense moves on some busybodies.

“Thank you for letting me know,” said Sadie, grinding her teeth, or what she had left of them.

## Chapter 18 – Satisfying the Curiosity of Cats

When Sadie and Trish arrived at the church on Saturday morning for the yard sale, small children and dogs were running everywhere, and volunteers in green vests were directing traffic and trying to squeeze as many pies as possible on the sawhorse-and-plywood tables lining the back of the parking lot under a row of trees.

Sadie could feel the way the crowd edged forward as she added the pies they had brought, a brownie walnut and a buttermilk chess, to the crowded table. She was sure folks wanted a bite of one of Luella's recipes, but her attempts to cook anything from her sister's recipe box had been dismal. The instructions and ingredients looked so simple, but her first three pies had come out either soggy or burnt. Even sweet Trish had suggested Sadie stick to deli or delivery and had taken up the culinary banner herself in Luella's honor.

Sadie was also sure folks were hoping to collect some savory gossip about her. Well, that was one thing she was good at, satisfying people's curiosity.

She had dressed for a long, warm day, and she was here to work, not enter a fashion show, but Sadie smoothed back her hair when Holland joined them. He handed her a large cup of coffee and a breakfast sandwich wrapped in a paper towel.

"I thought you might be hungry," he said with a shrug, trying to downplay the gesture, but he looked at Sadie as if she were the only person there.

"Thanks, sweetie," said Sadie, leaning toward him and kissing him on the cheek. Then she slipped her arm around his back and leaned her head on his shoulder. She could feel the stares from the clusters of women all around them as he slowly raised his arm and put it around her back, pulling her closer.

Trish looked at Sadie, open-mouthed, and then punched Holland lightly on the arm. “What’ve you been up to, Stubbs? The whole town’s buzzing.”

Holland turned red and cleared his throat, but he kept his arm around Sadie.

When Cynthia Martin elbowed her way through the crowd, clipboard in hand, and stopped in front of them, the sudden lull in the whispered conversations going on around them almost made Sadie laugh until she saw the fury in Cynthia’s eyes and the way her chin trembled when she looked at Holland.

Cynthia looked down at the two pies Trish had made, and Sadie held her breath, hoping that the doctor would not take out her anger on the poor defenseless pastries by stabbing them with her ball-point pen. Cynthia clicked the ball-point pen she was holding several times and checked an invisible box on the stack of papers on her clipboard.

“You,” she pointed her pen at Trish, who jumped, “will be working in the checkout tent. You need to get off your feet. You’ve been overdoing it.” She glanced at Sadie and back down at her clipboard.

“You,” Cynthia pointed the pen at Sadie, looking her straight in the eye, “will be helping in the hospital equipment area.” Sadie thought she could see the doctor’s satisfaction at the thought that Sadie might need the equipment soon.

Without another word, Cynthia turned and began walking down the line of tables, followed closely by a clump of women in coordinated outfits who paused occasionally to arrange and rearrange donations whenever Cynthia pointed at something.

Sadie started breathing again and was encouraged when she felt Holland give her a small squeeze.

Trish saluted and slapped on the volunteer nametag one of Cynthia's followers had handed her. "Well, that went better than I expected," she said as she waved and headed to the infants' section.

"The timing was unfortunate," said Holland, watching Cynthia's retreat, his tone concerned.

Sadie's heart sank and she pulled her arm away, suddenly unsure of herself.

"But not unwelcome," he said, giving her the tiniest of smiles, as if he did not dare encourage her more. "You'd better eat that before it gets cold." He pointed down at the sandwich she was still holding.

Sadie wanted to whisk him away at that moment and wrap her arms around him, away from the perpetual audience they seemed to have. But she could wait.

"See you at lunch?" she said, reaching to straighten and smooth his collar.

Holland shook his head but he was smiling as she headed in the direction of the wheelchairs and oxygen tanks.

## Chapter 19 – To Little Hawk

It was after lunch, and Sadie was ready for a break from geriatric accessories. She was slightly sunburnt and had a headache brought on from forgetting her hat and sunglasses in the rush that morning, not to mention the emotional tension of developing unexpected feelings for the town's most eligible bachelor above the age of seventy.

Holland had not appeared with lunch. He was probably cleaning up after a mess or doctoring the cuts and bruises of people who insisted on climbing along the cemetery wall. The smell of barbecuing meat that drifted across the parking lot with every breeze made her stomach growl, and she took a deep breath, as if she could gather nutritional value just from the smell.

She could not wait. Feeling like a dinosaur on the hunt, she followed her nose toward the food source, cutting through the labyrinth of tables and around sleepy toddlers in strollers, so intent on her prey that she bumped into someone who was standing at one of the tables.

It was Cynthia Martin, and Sadie was about to double back and go a different direction before the doctor recognized her when she stopped short. Cynthia had her head down and was crying, soundlessly, tears dripping down her cheeks and off the end of her nose onto the small wooden clock in her hands.

Sadie looked around, desperate for a familiar face, anyone in the doctor's club who might be able to help, but the nearby shoppers ignored them, absorbed in picking through the piles of junk scattered on the tables. Cynthia's clipboard lay abandoned, upside down in the mix, and she did not move to retrieve it when a shopper picked it up and put it in her basket.

Cynthia rubbed at the scratches on the clock's walnut finish with the corner of her blouse, turning it over and over in her hands as if she were trying to identify, to categorize, what she held.

Sadie stepped up to her and touched her arm. "Cynthia?"

Cynthia looked up, unseeing, and then her eyes focused on Sadie's face. She looked away and swiped her free hand across both cheeks. Sadie handed her the stack of tissues from her sleeve, and Cynthia held the whole stack to her eyes.

"Can I help?" Sadie said, trying to remember her crisis training from her days as a midwife.

Cynthia shook her head, a fresh bout of tears starting down her cheeks. Sadie reached out and put a hand on her shoulder without saying anything, just providing a small human contact, an anchor, until Cynthia quieted and patted at her eyes with the tissues.

"Bill calls me Dr. Martin," Cynthia said, wiping at the mascara streaks under her eyes. "Not mom. Dr. Martin."

Sadie stood silent, listening.

Cynthia took a deep breath and blew it out, blinking and tilting her head back as if to keep more tears from coming. Sadie dropped her hand but stayed close. She did not want to agitate this already distraught woman.

"You must think I'm crazy," Cynthia said, eyeing Sadie, who shook her head.

Cynthia laughed, a short bitter burst, and Sadie was relieved to see some of the familiar Dr. Martin return. This she could deal with, but the weepy doctor was unnerving.



“My father gave this to me, you know,” Cynthia turned the clock over and pointed at the inscription: *To Little Hawk*. “I gave it to Bill for his tenth birthday, and he....” she paused, her lips pressed together, unable to finish.

Sadie stood silent, listening, regretting her part in the painful story, regretting so many things. She could not believe Bill would get rid of something so precious. He must not have known his grandfather had given it to his mother when she was a little girl. How could he, when she had never told him about Finch?

“I was never allowed to see my father, after my mother and he divorced,” Cynthia said, her voice full of anger and misery. “And I did the same thing to Bill.” Her eyes were deep forest pools fed by a thousand rain-soaked leaves, sad, and solitary. Her shoulders slumped, and she started to cry again.

This time Sadie put her arms around Cynthia and let her cry into her shoulder. She could feel the tears running down her collar bone, but she did not move. Trish crept up beside them and set the lunch plates she was carrying down on the table. She wrapped her arms around Sadie and Cynthia, her pregnant belly pressing into the circle as if the twins had something to say and would not be left out. They stood there, in the middle of the parking lot, tables and people surrounding them, holding on to each other like they were the only people in the universe, and letting the tears wash over them, wash the air, capture every contaminant and carry it away.

Cynthia had just pulled away, swiping at her eyes and sniffing, when Trish grabbed their shoulders and squeezed.

Sadie looked at Trish, who was holding her belly and looking down at her feet. Sadie looked down and then up at Cynthia, and their eyes widened. Sadie laughed, and

even Cynthia smiled as they stepped back from the damp ground where Trish's water had broken.

"It's not funny," said Trish, pouting at them. "I wanted a piece of chess pie."

Sadie looked longingly at the lunch plates abandoned on the table next to them and sighed as she started to dial 911 on her phone.

So much for lunch.

"No time for that," Cynthia tapped her on the arm. "Joe's coming with his truck."

Sadie watched in awe as Cynthia went into full doctor mode, searching around for her clipboard, which she retrieved from the confused customer who had dared to pick it up. In no time, she was clicking her pen and ordering people around.

"I want Joe," whimpered Trish and held out her arms like a toddler as Joe came down between the tables pushing a wheelchair. Holland was right behind him carrying a stack of towels and waving at people to get out of the way.

Holland and Joe were helping Trish into the wheelchair when Bill came running up and started clearing a path through the crowd for them. Cynthia grabbed Sadie's arm and shoved the clock she had been holding into her hands.

"Take care of it," she said to Sadie over her shoulder as she herded Joe and Holland toward the truck.

Sadie stared after them in a daze, tired, hungry, and spent.

Bill joined her on the sidelines and tucked her hand into his elbow like Finch used to when they went for a walk through their neighborhood, supportive but not intrusive.

The strange thing was, it made her think of Holland.

"Trish is in good hands," Bill said.

“About that,” said Sadie, turning to him and handing him the clock she had been holding.

## Chapter 20 - Swaddled

Bill was quiet on the way to the clinic after Sadie explained the significance of the clock and his entire body seemed to shift paradigms. She was not sure exactly what Cynthia had meant by “take care of it,” but she was indulging in a loose interpretation that fit her own paradigm shift of late, one of restoration.

By the time Sadie and Bill arrived at the clinic, Trish’s labor was progressing. Cynthia was too busy for conversation, although she did raise her eyebrows at Sadie when they passed in the hall and gave her a half-smile when Sadie nodded at her. Bill stopped in his tracks and stared after his mother as she disappeared into the delivery room.

Holland was there, waiting for her. “You’re something else, Sadie Jane,” he said, holding her at arm’s length and then giving her a hug that lingered as if he wished they were somewhere other than a hospital waiting room.

She almost started crying and hugged him again when she saw that he had managed to snag a whole pan of hotdogs off the grill, a half-gallon of tea, and a bowl of kettle chips covered with plastic wrap belonging to the Ladies’ Auxiliary.

“I have connections,” Holland said, handing plates around and reaching into one of the long pockets of his shorts to pull out a jar of Luella’s chow-chow, which he gave to Bill to open with his multipurpose knife.

“You carry relish in your pocket?” Sadie laughed. “What have you got in the other pocket? Banana pudding?” she said between bites.

“Something better,” Holland said and opened a casserole dish cover to reveal Trish’s buttermilk chess pie, only slightly squished at the edges.

Later that evening, Sadie was still digesting and pacing, anxious for Trish and the twins, when Cynthia came out of delivery holding two swaddled, red-faced babies. She passed one twin to Sadie and the other to Holland before collapsing in one of the waiting room chairs. She looked tired but proud, beaming at them as if she had birthed them herself.

Bill unfolded himself from a double seat across the room and stumbled over to look at the twins, peering into their sleeping faces as if he could read their stories as he read a book. “Look at their tiny fingernails,” he said.

“Trish?” said Sadie, looking up at Cynthia.

“Resting,” she said, getting up to check on her patient.

“Mom,” said Bill, following her down the hallway.

Cynthia turned around slowly, and Sadie saw that she was holding back tears, trying to keep it together, be a professional.

“Good job,” said Bill, giving her a quick hug and then hurrying out through the lobby and the automatic door.

Sadie and Holland sat together on a double seat, cuddling the twins until Cynthia came out of the maintenance closet, eyes red, and hustled them back to their mother.

“Don’t you have to preach tomorrow?” Sadie said, yawning.

“If they’ll let me,” Holland said, rubbing his eyes.

## Chapter 21 - The Return of the Mustang

It was after midnight, with no moon to steer by, when Sadie and Holland roared into her driveway on his motorcycle, but she was past caring about noise control or which of the neighbors had binoculars trained on her front door. Her bones ached, and her teeth ached she was so tired and stiff from sitting in hospital chairs.

“Sadie,” said Holland and jostled her arm as she was working on pulling off her helmet with arms that felt like ten-pound weights. “Look.” He was pointing at the shadow of a car parked in the grass beside the house, its chrome bumper glinting in the circle of light from the porch. It took Sadie’s tired brain a moment to recognize what it was.

Her Mustang.

Fatigue vanished, and Sadie dropped her helmet on the ground, clapping her hands and stumbling to the car. She put her hand on the cool metal of the trunk to see if it was really there. Holland followed her, shining his phone flashlight on the car as she inspected the whole exterior. Nothing was out of place, and there was not a dent in the body or a smear of mud on the tires.

Sadie tried the driver’s door. It was unlocked, and as she opened it, the interior light popped on, almost blinding her, and the door dinged. Her tasseled keyring dangled from the ignition. The interior was spotless, wiped clean, except for a note on white paper folded and tucked behind the visor, which Sadie pulled out and unfolded.

*Dear Crazy Granny,*

*My sister has changed her mind and is tired of not being able to drive around town and show off her ride. And the car is too hot to get a new paint job. We tried. She has decided she would rather have the four-wheeler.*

Sadie put her head back and laughed as she handed the note to Holland. “The sheriff is not going to believe this,” she said, as she pulled the keys out of the ignition.

Holland was frowning down at the note. She could see his eyebrows bunching and feel the questions. Then he looked up at her, the light from the porch reflecting off his glasses.

“Now that you have your car back. Are you going to stay?” he said.

“I want to sleep for at least ten hours, eat a large breakfast, and take a leisurely ride in a Mustang through the countryside with a beautiful man beside me,” said Sadie, putting her arms around his neck.

Holland smiled. “You’re skipping the service?” he said. “And I had prepared such a good sermon.”

“I’m open to negotiations,” said Sadie.

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*Buttermilk Chess Pie*

*9” pie crust, unbaked*

*2 c. raw cane sugar*

*1 Tbsp. flour*

*1 Tbsp. almond flour - finely ground*

*4 large eggs*

*¼ cup salted butter*

*1 tsp. vanilla*

*½ cup whole buttermilk*

*Preheat oven to 350°F. Melt butter. Stir in vanilla. Add sugar and stir. Add eggs and whisk until mixed. Add buttermilk and whisk. Add flour and almond flour and whisk. Pour into pie pan. Bake for 48 minutes. Cover crust edges or top with foil if they get too brown. Pie should jiggle slightly but not slosh. Cool on a rack for thirty minutes covered with a round cake pan. Serve room temperature or slightly heated. Refrigerate leftovers.*

*If there are any.*