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SISTERS: A NOVEL

by

Hannah Heath Johnson

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May, 2012

## Dedication

For my beautiful daughter, Heather Grace, who will continue the Caldwell sisterhood. Elijah, the next one's for you.

## Acknowledgements

What a tremendous privilege to spend three years working alongside such talented students and under the direction of such gifted professors. I am profoundly grateful to my classmates for their careful readings of various versions of this manuscript. They were invaluable in helping me envision the novel's direction. I am particularly indebted to my thesis director, Richard Bausch, who was deeply generous with his time and feedback, and to my thesis committee members, Sonja Livingston and Lorinda Cohoon.

On a more personal level, I am full of gratitude for the many friends and family who have encouraged me and helped me through my M.F.A. journey. They are too many to name, but I'll start with my parents, Duke and Debbie, who spent many hours babysitting to make sure I finished my thesis (and all the other stories along the way). Since I wrote my first short-story as a third-grader, they've been my biggest fans.

Most of all, I offer my thanks to Brad, who has supported this three-year endeavor with such enthusiasm and love. Between reading countless versions of my stories, listening to me overanalyze workshop comments, and entertaining the kids on Tuesday nights, (not to mention providing for our family), you have helped make my dream come true. Thank you for believing in me. And to Heather and Elijah, who bring such richness, joy, and love, you inspire me. I love you, all three.

## Abstract

Johnson, Hannah Heath. M.F.A. The University of Memphis. May, 2012. *Sisters: A Novel*. Major Professor: Richard Bausch.

This fictional novel, which explores familial relationships stretching across generations, is told from the points of view of three female characters. Amber, whose voice opens the novel, has been crippled by the loss of her eight-year-old daughter. Although their daughter's loss casts heavy shadows over their marriage, the couple agrees to take in two girls who were removed their home as a result of parental drug abuse. Sarah, the mother of one of the girls, is the second narrator, and she becomes embattled with Amber in attempt to keep custody of her daughter. The final speaker is Mabel, Charlie's grandmother, who fears the destruction of family after losing two sisters and interjects herself into the conflict to side with Sarah.

The primary conflict of the novel is the custody battle over the two children, but the story also explores the effects of loss on relationships, especially on Amber and Charlie's marriage. Sisterhood and family bonds also take center stage, with Mabel torn between her loyalty to Amber and Charlie and her belief that Sarah should be with her daughter. Whether she makes the right choice becomes the central question of the novel.

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## Chapter One (*Amber*)

The fog that rolls off the Little Red River before sunrise is a thick fog, so white and dense that Amber always imagined she could take hold of a drifting wisp and shape it, twisting it into a circle or a square or a star. The fog would be cold and wiry in her hands, and she might lay her face against it to feel the dampness before she released the shape, watching it float away. Or she might hold on to it, like a trapeze, and let it carry her on the wind, higher and higher, further and further away from the rock she sat on now, the one that reached furthest into the water, the one she always chose. But that would leave Charlie alone in the river, standing with his back to her in knee-deep water, taking off his gloves to carefully, carefully, tie a knot in his fishing line. And he didn't like to be alone.

He turned toward Amber and waved for her to join him, but she shook her head. The water was too cold. She preferred watching from the rocks. Charlie knew this. Since their daughter, Ellie, died, they'd come to the river every Friday, getting up before dawn for the two hours' drive. It made Charlie crazy to go more than a week without leaving town. Ellie's death had stirred a deep restlessness within him. It was worse in the fall, when the leaves struck the same golden orange they'd been the October morning he found Ellie lifeless. It was August now, the Arkansas summer at its peak, but fall was coming, and Amber and Charlie both felt it bearing down. The second Tuesday in October would mark the third anniversary of Ellie's death—Amber had checked the calendar to see what day of the week it would fall on, this year—but they'd be gone from Arkansas by then, if everything went as planned, greeting October in the heat of Africa, far from the changing leaves.

Charlie stood amidst the fog, his figure emerging sharply at times, then disappearing. Within the hour, the sun would be out, the steam would clear the water, and other fishermen would crowd the water's edge. But for now, Charlie had the river to himself. Blurry and indeterminate against the haze, he could've been anyone. It was Amber's favorite part of the day.

Charlie waved again.

"Come on out," he said. "It's not that cold." Some days she stood beside him at the edge of the river. Other days, when he fished in shallow water, she pressed a lawn chair into the mud at his feet, dipping her toes in the clear water. She never fished.

"I'm fine here," she said, curling on her side and laying her face against the rock. The big rocks lining the river were flat and smooth. Before, when Amber and Charlie brought their kids—Ellie and her two little brothers, David and Corey—to the Little Red, the kids would try to walk the length of the river without stepping off the rocks, jumping from one to the next. Amber walked alongside, ready to help if one of them missed a step and fell. She traced the side of the rock she sat on now, slipping her finger into the smooth crevice on its underside. Every week, she reached down the rock and found the crack, felt its edges. It was always there.

Charlie walked a ways down the river and stopped, crouching in the water. Amber knew he was thinking about Uganda. It was all he ever thought about. After a year-long application process, they were weeks away from a new life as missionaries. There was one last interview with the mission board—a formality, Charlie called it, since they'd already been approved—then, they'd be gone. Charlie seemed like himself now, his old self, like he'd been before Ellie died. Amber had seen pictures of the children they'd be



serving in Uganda—beautiful faces with wide eyes—and pictures of the little mission house where they would live, with its cotton yellow curtains. She'd be teaching school while Charlie planted churches. A missionary family, like they'd dreamed of becoming. But Amber could only think about the distance. She'd be falling asleep in Africa when the sun rose over the farmlands of east Arkansas. How long, exactly, would it take to get from the airport in Kampala to the gravel road leading into Cogbill Cemetery, where Ellie was buried, a few miles outside of Parkin?

Charlie waded over to Amber and leaned against her rock. His thick curls stuck out beneath his baseball cap, and his face was brown from the sun. He was aging better than she was, Amber suspected. She put a hand on his shoulder for balance and dipped her toes in the river.

“I don't see how you stand it,” she said, as Charlie leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“This might be our last fall in Arkansas,” he said. Amber pictured his words rolling and tumbling, like the shapes made of fog, drifting on and on and on down the river.

Amber was quiet, and he said it again, louder, as if she hadn't heard.

“I heard you,” she said.

The sun was up now, the fog gone, and Charlie looked very much himself as he walked back into the water and cast his line, waiting.

On the trip home, they rode in silence. Friday was Charlie's day off from the church, since he preached on Sundays. Before Ellie died, they came to the river some

Fridays but stayed home more often. It was an easy intimacy. Now, everything was arranged. Charlie's mother came to watch the boys and get them to school on Friday mornings, and Charlie and Amber left for the river before dawn.

Charlie slowed down as he neared the cemetery, a couple of miles outside of Parkin.

"Do you want to stop?" he asked. "Just for a few minutes?"

"Sure." They often stopped on their way into town on Fridays, before they picked up David and Corey from school, but Amber preferred coming alone. As Charlie turned down the gravel road into the cemetery, Amber watched a stray piece of ash float onto their windshield, crumbling as it struck the glass. In the late autumn, once farmers had burned their fields, black ash danced on the wind all across Parkin. Ellie had taught her little brothers to chase the falling ashes, trying to pluck them from the air, but the ashes disintegrated when they were touched, dissolving softly as if they were never really there. Still, the kids loved the chase. Amber's chest tightened.

At Ellie's grave, Amber sat near the tombstone, as she always did, and Charlie stood beside her.

"I don't think I can leave her," she told him.

"What do you mean?"

"If we go to Uganda, I can't come visit her. I don't think I can do it, Charlie."

He didn't answer for several minutes. They'd had similar conversations before. Every conversation they had now, really, was somehow about Ellie.

"There's nothing you can do for her now. You know she's not really here," Charlie said.

“I don’t want her grave to be dirty.” Amber pointed to an overgrown grave, with faded plastic tulips in its vase. “Look at that. You can’t even see the tombstone. I don’t want that to happen to Ellie’s.”

“You know our family will take care of it. My mom, and my grandmother. And people at the church. They’re already out here, all the time. They loved her, too,” Charlie said.

Charlie had no idea how often Amber visited Ellie’s grave. Some days, when she dropped her boys off at school, Amber spent an entire day at the cemetery. She wasn’t upset when she was there, and she could think about things besides Ellie. But when she wasn’t at the cemetery, an overwhelming dread would press upon her, suddenly, that Ellie was trapped beneath the ground and her mother wasn’t with her. Amber had gotten out of line at the grocery store once and driven straight to the cemetery, leaving her buggy of cereal and bread and snacks for Corey and David’s lunches in the middle of the line. When it hit her, the need to be physically near Ellie, she almost couldn’t breathe. What would she do in Africa?

“I’m just saying, I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Ellie’s with Jesus, Amber. Sitting beside her grave isn’t going to help her.”

“It helps me.”

“You can’t stay in Parkin your whole life. The kids in Uganda need you more than Ellie does now.”

“I am Ellie’s mother.” Amber didn’t finish the thought—the children of Uganda were not her children. They were God’s children, Charlie would tell her.

He wiped Ellie's tombstone with the inside of his shirt. "We need to get her some more flowers out here," he said. "Something colorful."

"We will."

"We need to go now, though. It's almost time to get the boys," Charlie said.

"I'm not ready to leave. Go get them and come back for me later," Amber said.

With the exception of Uganda, Charlie never argued with her about anything involving Ellie. Once he was gone, Amber took off her shoes and curled onto her side, laying her face against the cool grass. It was a comfort to be near physical proof of Ellie's life. Charlie was right, of course—Ellie wasn't really here. But when Amber and Charlie and the boys went out to eat or played Spades at the kitchen table, it was as if Ellie had never existed. Amber liked proving to herself that Ellie was real.

When they first started coming to the grave, Charlie would pray aloud. He would quote scripture and beg God to give their family strength and peace. One day in their early grief, as Charlie sobbed, face down on the grave, and begged Jesus to comfort the family's spirits, Amber had screamed at him to be quiet—*Stopitstopitstopit*. That was the last day they'd brought David and Corey to the cemetery with them. Charlie brought them sometimes, just the three of them, but they'd never come again as a family.

The spring that Amber and Charlie met, Amber's last semester in college, they would meet at the practice football field, halfway between their dorms, and sneak onto one of the big podiums that drum majors used during band practice. They'd lay side by side on the hard wooden planks, sometimes in the middle of the afternoon, when the

voices of students walking to class were faraway and unimportant, and other times at night, when they felt like there was no one else in the world. The first time was during a meteor shower, late on a Wednesday, and they wanted somewhere to watch the stars. They didn't see any meteors—too close to the lights of campus, Charlie decided—but they'd laid flat on their backs next to each other for two hours, Charlie finally taking Amber's hand. After that, it was where they always met. It was on the podium, the skin of their legs touching, that Charlie first told Amber he wanted to be a missionary. She had loved him, as soon as he said it, for his compassion and for his heart. She said it out loud, in fact, walking back to her dorm. I love him. And it had surprised her, because she'd loved someone very different from Charlie all throughout college and, it seemed, forever. But there she was, suddenly, in love with a man who talked about God's calling. It was not completely foreign to her. She'd spent two summers in South America with a team of students from her church, leading backyard Bible clubs and serving food to the homeless. But she'd never imagined that it could be her life, forever. She'd envisioned a very specific life for herself, actually, with Jackson, who she'd loved before Charlie and who never talked about God. He was headed to law school with his own plans to change the world, and Amber was going with him. But there was Charlie, suddenly, with his thick curls and easy smile. And she knew Charlie loved her, from the start.

So it began. When she and Charlie got married, they daydreamed about life in a foreign country, an adventure driven by divine purpose. Charlie's first job, pastoring a church that met in the poorest neighborhood in Arkansas, a trailer park just outside of Parkin, was supposed to be temporary, until they were ready to head overseas. But ten years later, they were still there. The church needed them, they'd decided. So Amber was

stunned, a year after Ellie's death, when Charlie came to her, said he was ready to apply with the mission board, and asked her to pray about it. Six months later, when he asked what she thought, she had to tell him she hadn't thought about it at all. "What about David and Corey?" she'd asked him. "They're too little. It could be dangerous." God would take care of them, Charlie said. "He didn't take care of Ellie," Amber replied.

As they'd waited, dumbfounded, for the autopsy report after the bizarre morning they found her still and blue, Amber had imagined every possible scenario. A venomous spider crawling into Ellie's bed. An allergic reaction to the Thai food they'd eaten for supper—Ellie'd never eaten it before, had she? But she'd taken a bite of Amber's that night, and they'd laughed about how her eyes watered, at the heat. Or maybe Ellie had suffocated somehow, trapping her face into her covers as Amber feared she would do when she was a tiny baby. Amber hadn't guessed it was an aneurism, had trouble understanding it for days. A weak vessel in Ellie's brain—there since birth, just waiting, waiting, until two months after her eighth birthday—had ballooned and burst.

Amber wished she could be like Charlie. He was determined to make Ellie's death mean something. He told their story to anyone who would listen, how God had lifted them through darkness. Now he wanted to take their story to Africa, spreading the redemption of Jesus to the villages of Uganda. She admired his faith, envied it a little. She'd told him, once, that his testimony was ringing less and less true for her. She told him in bed, just before they went to sleep, and she could tell from his face he wasn't surprised. He prayed for God to remove her doubts, brushing his fingers through her hair while she fell asleep. They hadn't talked about it since.

The night before their final interview with the mission board, Amber sat at her mother-in-law's kitchen table, helping Corey, her oldest son, practice words for a spelling test, while Charlie and his mother made plans for the week. His mother, Janet, was keeping the boys during Amber and Charlie's trip to Nashville for the interview.

"You're going to do great, you smart thing," Amber said to Corey. "You don't even need to practice."

He grinned and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Will you call me as soon as it's over?" he asked. "Do you promise?" He'd begged to miss school and go with them.

"Yes, baby," Amber said, brushing a piece of hair off his forehead. He had Amber's freckles. "We'll call you as soon as we know anything."

Corey and David were excited about moving. They were good boys. That's what Amber said when anyone asked about them—*They're good boys*—and it was true. Corey had been reading about jungles and rivers and snakes. It was nice to see him happy. His third-grade teacher had called Amber earlier in the school year, concerned that Corey was making up stories after he told his class he was moving to Africa. Both of the boys' teachers and counselors were always calling to check on them—"make sure he's doing all right," Corey's teacher had said. "He's been through so much." Amber's family may as well have walked through Parkin with signs on their foreheads reminding everyone they'd lost Ellie, that their family was incomplete. It was present in every interaction. Checking out at the grocery store. Driving through the bank to make a deposit. At least in Africa, it wouldn't be there. No one would know.

“Does the church know you’ll be gone?” Janet was asking. She sat at her kitchen table with a notepad in her hand, making notes about the boys, instructions for the week. What could she need to know that she didn’t already? She kept them all the time. Her hair, dark like Charlie’s, was pulled back from her face in a clip, her eyes serious.

“Yes,” Charlie said.

“Have they found anyone yet, to take your place?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

Janet didn’t understand the plans to go to Africa. “Why do it to your boys?” she’d asked. Why not let them have a normal childhood, after what they’d been through? Why move them halfway across the world, where they didn’t know anyone or anything or even speak the language? She wasn’t asking those questions tonight, but Amber sensed them in everything she said, these questions about the church, as if Charlie and Amber were abandoning ship. But Amber couldn’t blame her. She’d asked the same questions herself.

“Well, I guess you’re getting out of Parkin just in time,” Janet said. The shoe factory in Parkin, which employed over 100 of the town’s 4,000 people, was closing, and the high school would be annexed by a nearby district the next year.

“That’s not fair,” Charlie said. “We were planning to leave way before any of this.” The factory closure had hit the families of Lakeshore, the trailer park where Amber and Charlie’s church met, especially hard.

“They’ll find someone for the church,” Mabel, Charlie’s grandmother, called from the living room. She sat in the recliner, with David, Amber’s youngest son, in her lap. She’d come over to see them off. “I’m not worried about that a bit.”



Amber patted Corey's head and went into the living room with Mabel. She appreciated Mabel with a tenderness she couldn't feel for Janet. Amber was grateful for the way Mabel loved David and Corey, the way she loved Charlie, the stories of the family she carried with her. All of that, minus the edges that cropped up with Janet, the power struggles and jealousies. When they visited her, Mabel always patted Charlie on the back on his way out the door and said, "Glad you came, Charlie." It was a reminder that it was really Charlie, not Amber, who was truly Mabel's, but still, it touched Amber. And she thought that Mabel thought of her, too, as one of her own. There had never been that with Janet.

Amber sat on the couch next to Mabel, and David climbed down from his great-grandmother's lap, settling beside Amber.

"I'll miss you," he said. The trip to Nashville would be the longest she'd ever been away from him, and the furthest. Since Ellie died, Amber felt nervous when she left the boys. For her and Charlie's tenth anniversary, they'd made plans to go to the beach, just the two of them. "It'll be *good* for you," everyone had said, Ellie's death even more firmly imprinted on them, then, in the early days, hovering just beneath the surface of every conversation. But they'd gotten ten miles outside of Parkin and turned back. Amber couldn't do it. They'd spent a night at home, by themselves, then Charlie went to get the boys in the morning.

"I'll miss you, too, sweet boy," she said, kissing him. "You'll have fun with MiMi and Grandma and we'll be back before you know it." Amber pressed the back of her palms into her eyes, startled to feel them burning.

"You don't have to do it," Mabel said, watching her.

“I’m just being silly,” Amber said. “Not used to being away from them.”

“I mean all of it, going there. You don’t have to do it.” Mabel reached out and squeezed Amber’s hand, her skin cool and soft, the veins on her hands raised.

“I want to. We want to,” Amber said. She wanted to say more, try to convince Mabel.

“All right,” Mabel said. “Then you should go.”

“Yes.”

Amber was quiet. She was afraid her silence was betraying something within her, but she wasn’t sure what, and she didn’t know what to say. Oh, Lord, let me want to go. The first afternoon Amber and Charlie drove through Lakeshore, when Charlie interviewed for the job, Amber saw the trailers—some with caved in ceilings and sheets for doors and some neat, with carefully tended gardens—and felt so overwhelmed with hope and possibility that she turned to Charlie and said, “This is the job for us. I know it. I *know* it.” And how she had loved the church, then. And she still did. But to have that conviction, that hope. She wanted to feel it about Africa. And hadn’t she in the beginning? But there was a nervousness, now, that never quite went away. They’d had their windows rolled down that day, and Amber slapped her hand on door of the car when she said it— I *know* it.

The morning of the interview, in a hotel conference room stocked with bottled water and fresh fruit, Danny, a mission board representative, assured Amber and Charlie they had nothing to worry about. Amber and Charlie sat beside each other on a couch

with hard cushions and Danny sat in a chair, facing them. The layout of the room and the way Danny leaned toward them reminded Amber of the counseling sessions she and Charlie had gone to together, in the first few months after Ellie died. Danny's kind face and slick grey hair—almost comical—vaguely reminded Amber of a teacher from her childhood.

“We have to take one more look at some of the details on your application, but that's routine procedure,” Danny said. “You both explained your answers well.”

The final interview was intended to revisit any problematic answers from previous interviews or questionnaires. Charlie had joked that the mission board's background check was as thorough as the FBI's. Nothing was off limits. Amber had answered questions about Ellie's death, questions about theology. She knew the right answers. She wrote that Jesus had sustained her through the darkest days of her life, as her eight-year-old daughter lay in a morgue down the street. “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints,”—hadn't she underlined that Psalm so many times that her pen cut through the pages of her Bible, tearing several pages at once?

Amber tried not to smile as Charlie struggled to explain why he'd answered yes to “Have you viewed pornography in the last five years?” His answer—There'd been no intimacy between the two of them, for awhile. It was a difficult time—was apparently satisfactory, and Danny turned his attention to Amber.

“You marked ‘yes,’ in response to the question ‘Have you ever had any suicidal thoughts?’ If you don't mind, please just explain your response.”

Amber had written that she'd wished she was dead when Ellie died, had begged God to bring Ellie back and take her instead. But she'd never really contemplated suicide,

she explained. She had two other kids to think about. Hadn't everyone told her that, to get her to pull herself together, once some time had passed? You have two other kids. And hadn't she told herself that, to make herself get out of bed in the morning, walk into the kitchen where Charlie was putting waffles in the toaster and filling sippie cups with milk? I have two other kids. And here she was now. She'd survived, she'd been delivered. But for what? "God can make all things new," Charlie always said, when they were counseling other families in the wake of a loss. But not all things. Not really.

"It's nothing to worry about," Danny continued, "Your answer on the questionnaire is sufficient, but we have to walk through these things one more time in person."

Amber stared at the ground, her eyes resting on Charlie's boots, still muddy from the river. A crumbled piece of ash rested on the brown leather of his left heel.

"I have those thoughts every day," Amber said, louder than she'd intended, startling herself. As soon as the words were out, she felt a rush of freedom, a way out of Africa, the promise of staying in America, in Parkin, only five minutes from that grave. She was committed to the lie now, and she spoke quickly. "I took half a jar of Tylenol one time, and I hoped that would do it, but it just made me sick. Sometimes I picture myself jumping off bridges, you know, just kind of imagine it in my mind. What it would feel like. I think about what I would look like in a coffin."

Charlie stared at her, his mouth half open.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

“I didn’t want to tell you,” she said, not looking at him but clinging to this story, now, this lie that would keep her home, with Ellie. “I’m sorry,” she said to the interviewer. “I should have said something sooner. I’m just trying to be honest.”

Danny appreciated her honesty, he told her kindly. And in the same kind tone, when they met with him again two hours later, he explained that the mission field was a difficult place, that the mission board couldn’t send someone with such a serious, unresolved problem. He prayed with Charlie and Amber and talked to them about resources for mental health professionals. He was sorry, but they would be denied acceptance to the program.

On the quiet drive home, Amber watched the passing farmlands, one row of cotton blurring into another.

“Why did you say all of that stuff?” Charlie demanded.

“I don’t know.”

“Was it true?”

“No.”

“You could have just told me. You could have just said you didn’t want to go.”

“I’m sorry.” She really was.

“Do you know how many months we’ve worked toward this? All of those interviews and applications?”

“I know.”

“I wanted to go, Amber. We’ve been talking about it for yours. You said you did, too.”

“I know.”

Charlie hit the middle of the steering wheel with his fist, staring straight ahead.

“What now?”

“I don’t know,” Amber said.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I can’t believe what you just did. After we came all this way.”

“I tried.”

“You should’ve tried harder. You didn’t seem to have any trouble in there.”

The relief Amber felt was almost physical. Surely God could forgive thirty minutes of lies in a hotel conference room better than a lifetime of lies in another land.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

Amber had fallen asleep in the car on the way home when she heard Charlie on the phone.

“We’ll be there as soon as we can,” he was saying. “We’re an hour out. Tell her we’ll hurry.”

“What’s wrong?” Amber sat straight up, her heart cold. “Did something happen? Is it the boys?” They’d had David and Corey tested in the months after Ellie’s death—

endless cat scans and MRI's—and every test said their brains were fine, fine, fine. Hers had been an anomaly, Ellie's. A fluke. But the fear never went away.

“They're fine.” Charlie put his hand on her leg, looking at her, full in the face, for the first time since they'd walked out of the conference room. “It's Linda.”

Amber leaned her head against the dashboard, trying to catch her breath. Linda was one of their church members, one of the first they'd had. One of the few, in fact, that had been with them from the beginning, all ten years. People were always coming and going in Lakeshore, but Linda was raising her grandchildren in the same trailer where she'd raised her own kids. She'd spent her life there. “Is she all right?” Amber asked, after a moment.

“You have to calm down,” Charlie said. Amber was still leaned forward, her head in her hands. “There is nothing wrong with David and Corey,” Charlie said. “They're normal little boys. You've got to relax.”

“What's going on with Linda?”

“She was having trouble getting her breath, I think. They took her to the hospital in an ambulance earlier this morning. But Linda wants to see us.”

“Okay. Poor Linda.” She'd been battling lung cancer for over a year. She hadn't looked good the last time Amber saw her.

“Do you want me to take you home first, or do you want to come with me?”

“I'll go,” Amber said, stung that he asked. She didn't go on all the church visits with him anymore, like she'd done in the beginning, but she loved Linda, had always loved Linda. Linda had been a friend to her. And she loved Linda's granddaughters, the two girls that lived with her.

“It doesn’t sound good,” Charlie said.

“Okay.”

“You sure you want to come?”

“Yes.”

When Amber saw Linda in her hospital bed with oxygen tubes in her nose, eyes and skin yellow, Amber believed that she would die. Linda motioned for Amber and Charlie to come to her, and Amber took her hand, stroking her fingers through Linda’s hair, thin and brittle against her pillow.

“I’m so sorry,” Amber said. “Where are the girls? Do you want us to go get them for you, so you can see them?” Linda had had custody of her granddaughters for as long as they’d known her. The two girls were in fifth grade now, in the children’s Sunday School class that Amber taught. They were favorites of Amber’s, always had been. She felt for them—their mothers, Linda’s two daughters, were both on drugs, in and out of Linda’s trailer while Linda took care of the kids. They were sweet girls. Even as Amber saw them beginning to harden, as they got older, she felt a deep compassion for them. It was refreshing, because compassion was harder to feel, now.

“They’re gone,” Linda said. Amber had to lean in closer to hear her.

“What do you mean?” Charlie said. He’d been standing back, leaned against the wall, but he came forward now, joining Amber beside Linda’s bed.

“I can’t take care of them anymore,” Linda said. “I’ve known it for awhile. I called their caseworker earlier this week.”



“What do you mean? Where are they?” Amber asked. She’d seen Jessica, the oldest, just last Sunday. Jessica was walking to church by herself, and Amber picked her up. Jessica had thrown her purse on the dashboard and climbed into the passenger seat, propping her feet on the dash. “Will you take me home after church, too?” she’d asked. “Just me and you?”

“They’re in foster care,” Linda said. “Just outside Little Rock. They’re together. I can’t do it. I knew I was sick. I called the caseworker to come get them. I didn’t want them to be at the trailer without me, with Sarah.” Sarah was Linda’s daughter, Jessica’s mother.

“So they’re just gone?” Amber was having trouble putting all of it together. She knew Linda loved the girls—raised them like they were her own children—and couldn’t imagine her just letting them go. Her heart ached to think of Jessica and Karlyn away from their family, in a new school, away from the church.

“It’s temporary. Until we get permanent custody figured out. We don’t even have electricity at the trailer, right now,” she said. “I haven’t been able to work. There’s no money.”

“I’m so sorry,” Amber said.

“I wanted to ask if you—” Linda started.

Amber felt Charlie tense up beside her.

“Linda,” he said. “I’m so sorry for everything you’re going through, and we’ll do everything we can to help you, but we’ve got a lot going on right now.” Amber stared at him, confused. He was rubbing his palms together, like he did when he was nervous.

“But these girls don’t have anybody,” Linda said. “I was wondering if you would be willing to take them. At least take custody, for now. There’s no one else for them. I can’t do it anymore. I’m not going to lose control of them, let them grow up just like their mothers.”

Amber hadn’t seen the question coming. Charlie had, she realized.

“You know we’ve had plans to move to Africa,” he started.

“But we’re not,” Amber said. “Not anymore.” She felt a fullness of heart, a rising protectiveness of those little girls. She heard Charlie suck in his breath beside her.

“Of course,” Amber said, not turning her eyes from Linda’s to Charlie’s. “Of course we will.”

“Are you sure?” Charlie asked her on the way home, in the same flat tone he’d had since the interview. They’d told Linda they would give her an answer in a few days. Amber had squeezed her hand when they left, trying to let her know that yes, yes, they would do it, would care for those beautiful girls, of course they would.

“It’s the right thing to do,” she’d said. “They don’t have anybody else.”

“What about Sarah?” he asked. Amber had befriended Sarah, Jessica’s mother, had tried to help her get treatment for meth addiction, tried to help her find work. She had prayed with her, listened to her, talked to her about being a mother. Amber’s heart constricted at the thought of Sarah, who was carrying another child even now, a boy this time.

“She’s already lost Jessica,” Amber said. “She doesn’t even have custody.” Sarah herself had signed custody over to Linda, before going to rehab years ago, and never gotten it back. Sarah had been in and out of her mother’s house since then. Sarah’s sister, Alex, Karlyn’s mother, had left when she realized the girls were gone, Linda had told them. She’d had no hope of getting her daughter back.

“You don’t recover from a meth addiction,” Amber said. “There are some things you just don’t get over.” Charlie didn’t think so, of course. He thought there was healing for anything, with God’s grace.

In the beginning, when Charlie and Amber first started at the church, Sarah had been cool toward Amber. Even after Ellie died, when everyone else was so kind the kindness became toxic, Sarah was distant, barely greeting Amber when she brought the girls home from church. She hadn’t softened until the day Amber knocked on her door, begging that she give Ellie’s clothes back. Six months after Ellie died, Amber had asked Charlie to get rid of Ellie’s clothes, except for a few things she’d boxed up to save. She couldn’t stand looking at them, hated knowing Ellie’s drawers were full. “I don’t care what you do with them,” she’d told him. “Just get them out of here.” And he’d taken them to people who needed them at the church, giving most of them to Linda for those two girls, both close to Ellie’s size. And suddenly there were Ellie’s clothes getting on the bus to go to church, Ellie’s clothes playing on the playground afterwards, a dark-headed little girl raising her hand in Ellie’s sleeve. It was too much. “I’m so sorry,” she’d told Sarah the morning she went to get them. “But we made a mistake. I can’t stand to see them.” And Sarah gathered the clothes for her, and they’d been friends since, as much as they could’ve been. Sarah had lost another child several years before, a son, who was

taken away from her, forever, by the courts when he was fourteen months old. The two women had found some connection in this, but Amber had always known it wasn't the same—it wasn't her fault Ellie died. If Sarah had done things differently, made better choices, she could've kept her son. Amber hadn't had a choice.

“Sarah can't take care of the kids,” she told Charlie. “And Linda's too sick. It's the right thing to do.” When she heard herself say this—*It's the right thing to do*—she knew it really was the right thing to do but somehow it was also the thing that she wanted, and she felt the world beginning to shift into place.

“Do you really think this is the best time to do something like this? If you haven't noticed, things aren't exactly going well for us,” Charlie said, his voice more exhausted than angry.

“But what if this was why? What if our plans didn't work out because we needed to do this, to take care of these girls?”

“Didn't work out? Amber, they would've worked out just fine if you hadn't lied and ruined them on purpose.”

Charlie had driven to Janet's neighborhood, to pick up the boys, but he passed her house without stopping, circling the nearby streets.

“But we've always talked about adopting,” Amber said. And they had. Charlie had felt convicted reading the book of James—*True religion is this, that you care for the widows and orphans*—and Amber had felt it, too, and they'd said they would adopt, one day. But all of that had disappeared with Ellie. Recently, Charlie had started dropping hints about possibly adopting once they got to Africa. What was the difference? These were girls they knew. And loved. Girls who needed them.

“This wouldn’t even be adopting,” Amber said. “Just taking custody for now.”

“For now? Until when? It’s bigger than that. You know it.”

“They don’t have anyone else, Charlie.”

“I get that. But have you forgotten what happened this morning? That was *this morning*. We’re not in the best place to take a couple of kids into our house.”

“I know it was wrong,” Amber said. And she did, intellectually. Hadn’t they talked about going overseas, for years? And hadn’t they spent months applying? But there was no guilt in her heart. Only relief, still, that she wasn’t leaving Ellie.

“We could do this, Charlie. We could make it work.” Charlie pulled into Janet’s driveway and turned off the engine. Amber stayed in the car and watched him walk inside.

The next Friday morning Amber listened to the steady rush of the river. From the arch of Charlie’s back, she could tell, through the fog, that he wasn’t fishing. She walked over and slipped her arm through his, bracing herself against the cold.

They hadn’t talked about the interview, or about their visit with Linda, in the two days they’d been home. Charlie walked strangely around her, taking care of the boys, doing what needed to be done, without talking to her. She’d seen him staring at her, a few times, curiously, as if she were something he’d never seen. When he’d asked her if she was coming with him that morning, he was already dressed to go, Amber still asleep. It felt like an afterthought. But she’d jumped up and gotten ready, thinking maybe it was finally coming—that Charlie would say all he wanted to say. He had to eventually, didn’t

he? And they could talk about Jessica and Karlyn, decide what they were going to do. But there was still a stiffness, a formality. She'd felt it once before, only a few months before they got engaged. Jackson, Amber's ex-boyfriend, had called her, and she'd met him for lunch—she didn't know why—and Charlie had seen them standing together, beside Amber's car. Charlie was formal, then—not angry, but as cool as a stranger. Amber had begged him, finally, to believe her—that she loved him, Charlie— and then it had passed.

“I'm so sorry,” she said, squeezing his arm. “Really. We never should've gone to Nashville. I should've told you.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said.

“I think we can make it work, with the girls. Maybe it can be a new start for us. For our family.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Yes.”

“I don't know.”

They were both quiet. Charlie walked away from her, back into the river.

## Chapter Two (*Sarah*)

When the social worker came to tell Sarah and her mother that Karlyn and Jessica wouldn't be getting off the bus after school, the trailer had already been dark for three days. They'd made it longer than three days without electricity before—they'd gone over a week, in fact, but that was in the middle of the fall, not in August. Sarah's sister, Alex, had strung an extension cord from a neighbor's trailer a few times, then, to power a fan, but with the factory closing and people all over Lakeshore losing their jobs, neighbors weren't as generous now.

The girls were in the custody of the Department of Human Services, the woman said, wouldn't be coming home any time soon. She'd gestured toward the dark trailer, a quick dismissive swipe of the hand, and looked hard at Sarah's belly. Did Sarah know how many heat deaths there had been this summer? And then, just like that, she was gone, leaving Sarah and her mother, Linda, in a quiet trailer, the absence of the girls as thick and suffocating as the heat itself.

They'd been sleeping on mattresses in the living room since, with the door and windows open, their clothes thrown throughout the dark room. Alex's things, too, were everywhere. She had packed quickly, throwing what she wanted in her backpack and leaving everything else for Sarah and Linda to sort through. Mismatched shoes, clothes she couldn't wear, garbage. Thanks, sister. Alex would never be able to pass a drug test, she'd said, never be able to get a job and get her daughter, Karlyn, back. As Sarah and Linda watched her toss her backpack into the bed of her boyfriend's truck and jump into the cab, Linda said, "She's never coming back." Linda had said the same thing a few times, before—Alex was always coming and going—and Alex had come back. But Sarah thought her mother was right, this time. She didn't know if she would ever see her sister

again. Alex had hugged her, a quick hug, on her way out the door, and patted Sarah's belly. "Take care of that little man for me," she'd said. And then, a shout, while her boyfriend was already pulling out of the driveway, "Tell Karlyn I love her." Linda had been holding a soda, and when Alex said that, she'd thrown it—because Alex was, after all, driving away from all of them, Karlyn, too. The can fell well behind the car, hitting the gravel and spewing everywhere.

"I shouldn't have thrown that can," Linda said later. "I might not ever see her again."

"She'll come back," Sarah said.

"I'm not sure."

"I don't think they saw it, anyway," Sarah told her mother. "It didn't hit the car. She never looked back."

"Never looked back," Linda said. "Her own daughter."

Wherever Jessica and Karlyn were, they must've had everything new. No one had come to get any of their things. Jessica's faded Little Mermaid pillow was on the couch where Linda had been sleeping, both of the girls' clothes piled in their room, where'd they'd left them. Sarah had seen plenty of abandoned trailers—people were always leaving without notice in Lakeshore, leaving behind whatever they didn't want or didn't have time to pack—and that's how their trailer felt, now, but it wasn't abandoned—Sarah and her mother were still there, left behind with the mismatched shoes.



The floor in the kitchen was dry, finally, though the water had darkened the wood. The first day the power was out, a growing pool of water seeped under the refrigerator. Sarah had wiped it up, leaving dry towels to catch the new water, but the puddle kept coming back, saturating towel after towel. Linda had told her not to open the refrigerator, to seal in the cold and save the food. But that was just a fix for temporary outages. Sarah had gotten the food out—cold leftover spaghetti, cheese, milk—and eaten as much as she could, until she felt the nausea pushing upwards and knew she could not swallow another bite. Linda watched her from the kitchen table, and Sarah recognized the disgust in her mother's face. "We don't have money for more food," Sarah had told her, "We need to eat this, while we can." She'd begged her mother to eat, too, because Linda was sick—lung cancer. "You need your strength," Sarah said. But Linda only watched. Sarah knew her mother resented her for being comfortable in poverty, even though Sarah really wasn't all that comfortable, just knew how to navigate it. She threw the rest of the food out the next day.

How different Sarah's life had been from her mother's. Linda had worked at the shoe factory in Parkin for thirty-three years—she always repeating that to people from the church who brought food to the house, *thirty-three years*—and was accustomed to providing, not receiving. Sarah and Alex had grown up in this very trailer, but it had been neat and clean, cared for. It was easy for Sarah to forget the ease of her childhood. She'd first left Linda's home when she was 18 years old, only to come back six months later, before she left again. For the first few years, Sarah had taken her baby, Jessica, with her, whenever she left. But when Sarah went to jail on drug charges, when Jessica was five,

Linda had gotten custody of her, and Jessica had been with Linda since. Sarah had been back home with them, off and on, for the last two years.

Sarah heard how people talked about her family—*It's a shame, how Linda Mitchell's daughters have run through everything she had*—and she saw it in her mother's face sometimes, heard it in the edge of her words. She'd heard her mother tell the preacher's wife, Amber, once, that she had to keep a roof over her daughters' heads to make sure her granddaughters had a home. Sarah had felt a hardness toward her mother when she said it, but also a very acute and tender ache. Linda had been laid off from the factory four months ago, one of the last rounds of layoffs before the factory was scheduled to close this month, and their money had finally run out. Linda wouldn't have been able to work much longer, anyway. She was getting sicker. Sarah was ashamed, to think how different Jessica's childhood was turning out to be from her own. Before the girls left, Linda kept saying the power would be back on in just a day or two, that she had a bit of money put back and only needed a little more to get it reconnected. But once the girls were gone, she quit talking about the electricity, sleeping with her back to Sarah in the living room of the trailer, all the hope seeming to have drained out of her, any thoughts of a future.

Karlyn and Jessica often told people they were sisters. They were more pretending than lying, it seemed to Sarah, family lines blurring when the five of them slept underneath the same roof, Karlyn and Jessica sharing a mattress. They wore the same size clothes, though Karlyn was nearly a year older than Jessie and should've been

a year ahead in school. People often talked to Sarah about her *daughters*, and Sarah never corrected them. Alex was gone so much people forgot about her, thought both of the girls belonged to Sarah, but they didn't look like sisters, didn't even look like cousins.

Jessica's daddy was black, her skin and eyes dark, and she was tall like him, taller than Karlyn, even though she was younger. When Sarah was out with the girls, people often mistook Karlyn for her daughter, Jessica for a friend. Karlyn was pale and freckled, like Sarah and Alex, with their thick blond hair and green eyes. *No*, Sarah would say. *This one is mine.*

Sarah was fifteen when Alex got pregnant with Karlyn, and she'd seen how her mother and Alex talked, how Alex was suddenly a woman. After Karlyn was born, Alex hid condoms in her make-up bag and took the pill from time to time, but Sarah never tried to prevent herself from getting pregnant. She couldn't imagine that such a blessing could come her way, saw no need to try to prevent it. She sat up with Alex late into the night, helping with the baby, and watched her nurse, Karlyn's cheek pressed against Alex's breast. When Sarah found out she was pregnant with Jessica, she'd felt her life begin to change into something beautiful, something full. She sat sideways in the desks at her high school, her stomach too big to face forward, and propped her feet on her backpack, feeling her own importance.

As soon as the social worker left, the day she told them the girls were gone, Sarah had turned to her mother and said, "It was Amber." No one else would have reported them to DHS for not having power. Linda was quiet. She had to know it, too. There was

always the threat of DHS coming in, taking kids—lots of the families in Lakeshore had open files with the agency—but rarely did it actually happen, partly because nobody in Lakeshore would ever report another family. Any other day, they could've been the ones in trouble. Sarah knew Amber had made the call. She and her husband worked at New Hope, the church that met in a trailer at the center of Lakeshore, where Linda went twice a week. Amber was always coming by to visit Linda and the girls—they went to the church, too—and she and Sarah had become friends. Some friend.

Sarah sat on the front steps of the trailer the following Wednesday night, when Amber and Charlie usually drove busses through the neighborhood to pick kids up for church. Sarah wanted Amber to see her, have to look her in the eye, but the busses didn't come. Were Amber and Charlie were already gone? They'd been talking about moving to Africa as missionaries—maybe calling DHS was a last loose end to tie up before they left. The anger, a hard knot in Sarah's stomach, was easier to hold on to than the ache for Jessica, the fear. Where was she, even now? Was she afraid? Jessica was a tender-hearted child. Linda babied her too much, in Sarah's opinion, but she was a sweet girl, soft. Wouldn't she be homesick? Wouldn't she want her mother? But Karlyn was with her—that was the only question Linda had asked the social worker. *"But they're together, right? They're together?"* Sarah had been stunned at Linda's calmness, her resignation—and Karlyn had some of Alex's toughness. Surely she would protect Jessica, walk her beside her through the halls of whatever new school they were going, tell her not to be afraid.

When Jessica was four years old, Sarah had her second baby, a boy. She was already out of Linda's house by then, living with a man Linda wouldn't allow under her roof. When Sarah went to jail for the first time, Jessica went to stay with Linda. Linda tried to get the baby, Jamieon, but he stayed with his daddy. Three months later, when Sarah's boyfriend was arrested on drug charges, Jamieon was taken by the courts, forever. He was fourteen months old at the time, just beginning to talk. Something in Linda's heart had changed toward Sarah then and hadn't been the same since. Jamieon's skin was lighter than Jessica's, his hair slicker, but his mouth had turned like hers, just at the corner. When Sarah imagined him growing, she saw Jessica's face. Sarah had laid her head in Amber's lap and wept over that child.

Amber had lost a daughter—(so why didn't she know better? than to get someone else's taken away?)—so she understood Sarah's ache, when she wanted to see Jamieon's face so badly that she physically hurt. Of course, it was different—Amber didn't have to wonder where her child was, who was raising her, what she looked like, if she was happy, if she might pass her on the street and not know her. And Amber's loss was not her fault. She could grieve blamelessly. Sarah had always envied that simple grief, terrible as it was.

When Amber's little girl died, the church buses didn't come pick the kids up for a few weeks. Karlyn and Jessica knew the girl, cried for her, and Sarah and her mother hadn't known what to do. But then the busses started again, Charlie driving them by himself, at first, and with Amber, later. The girls went back to church, and life went on. Amber never talked about the girl, but when Sarah wept for Jamieon, Amber held her

hand with a steady pressure, and Sarah knew she was not alone. The betrayal was incomprehensible.

Sarah had seen Amber angry only once. It was recently, just before Dexter, Sarah's boyfriend, was arrested for selling meth. Dexter's pit bull pinned Jessica on her back and bit through the flesh over her lip before Dexter could pull the dog off. Sarah saw it happen. She'd pressed a washcloth hard into Jessica's lip in the car, blood running into the creases of Jessica's neck and upwards, into her eyebrows. "It won't stop!" Sarah had screamed at Dexter from the back seat, begging him to hurry. The blood didn't stop until Jessica lay staring up at her from the emergency room table, the doctor sewing stitches through her wound like she was a doll. Sarah had squeezed Jessica's hand and turned her face away. The stitches made a crooked S from Jessica's lip to her nose, string sticking out at either end like thin blue hairs.

The first morning Jessica went to church after that—walking down the street with her hand over her mouth, embarrassed—Amber had knocked on the door fifteen minutes later, before church had time to start, her eyes a steely grey that was unfamiliar. Her hardness, as she spoke calmly about how Jessica could have been killed, how it happened all the time, had startled Sarah and made her feel ashamed. When Amber demanded to know where the dog was, Sarah told her he was dead, though Dexter had actually given him to his brother, who lived outside of town, where there weren't any kids. The questions had come back to back, like gunshots. Where were you? Why was Jessica outside alone? Sarah, where were *you*? Did you know she was near the dog? Do you

understand she could have died? Jessica had told Amber the dog slapped her face with his nose first, a hard slap that felt more like a fist, Amber said, her voice still calm and even. She'd said he was bigger than she thought and his breath smelled like garbage. "She was afraid," Amber had said. "She's still afraid. She shouldn't have to be."

Amber had softened when Sarah wept, when she told her that DHS had already been to the trailer to investigate and she was afraid Jessica was going to be taken. "I know you love Jessie," Amber said, and Sarah relaxed. She didn't like it when Amber called Jessica "Jessie," envied the intimacy Amber shared with her daughter, but this was familiar territory. Amber trying to help her keep the girls, make their home better, find something beautiful in the midst of everything broken.

When Linda went to the hospital, Sarah had a feeling Amber would come, either to the hospital or to the house. Linda was in and out of the hospital a lot now, getting fluid pumped off her lungs or getting treatment for the pneumonia that kept creeping up on her, and Amber always came. She'd have the nerve to come again this time, Sarah predicted, that hardness settling back over her. Sarah usually stayed the night in the hospital with Linda when she was sick, but Linda had said one of her friends from the factory wanted to stay this time, a friend she hadn't gotten to visit with in awhile. So Sarah was home, alone, when she saw Amber's car. She walked outside and stood at the edge of the lot, not wanting Amber to come inside the trailer. Amber got out of her car and stood directly in front of Sarah, waiting for her to speak first.

"Why are you here?" Sarah asked.

“I wanted to check on you,” Amber said.

“You turned us in.”

Amber looked away, watching Baker, Linda’s dog, nose at a package of turkey Sarah had tossed out when she cleaned the refrigerator. The sun had bleached the meat, and its edges were stiff and curved.

“Get away from there, Baker,” Sarah said, kicking the turkey and swatting at the flies. “That’s nasty.”

The dog picked up the meat and carried it under the trailer, sliding through a missing panel. Amber watched him. Sarah knew she was afraid of dogs, had been even before Jessica was attacked. Sarah had seen her back away from trailers without ever ringing the doorbell if she heard a dog barking.

“You gonna take the dog next?” Sarah asked. “Call animal control?”

“It had to be you, Amber,” Sarah said, when Amber didn’t respond. “Nobody else would’ve done it.” Baker walked out from under the house and stood beside Sarah. He was a lab mix, a tall dog, standing all the way up to her waist. Sarah scratched his head and patted the side of his neck.

“The girls are okay,” Amber said. “They’re safe.”

“Jessica is mine. Karlyn is Alex’s. They should be with us.”

“People are dying in this heat,” Amber said. “You and your mom don’t need to be here either.”

“The power will be back on in a day or two,” Sarah said. “What’s it to you? Just trying to check our girls off your list before you leave for Africa?”

“We’re not going. We’re staying here,” Amber said.



Sarah was surprised. What did Amber's going to Africa, or not going to Africa, have to do with her calling about Jessica and Karlyn? Sarah couldn't find the connection, but she sensed that it was there.

"Well, I guess there's enough poor people here for you after all," Sarah said. "There are going to be more, with the factory closing. What are you going to do? Keep taking people's kids away?"

"You don't need to be staying here, in this heat," Amber said, raising a hand to her eyes to block the sun. "It's not safe. There are places you can go, drug treatment places, where the baby can stay with you when he comes. Some of them even let you have bigger kids, and Jessie could stay with you. That's what I came to tell you. Charlie and I could help you find one."

Sarah felt a rush of anger, then a rush of fear. Amber had never addressed the drugs. "I'm not using now," she said.

"I don't know if that's true or not," Amber said. "But either way, it would be a good place to go. Help you get back on your feet."

"Go to hell, Amber."

Sarah walked back inside the trailer and watched through the window as Amber got back into her car. She pulled her cell phone from her purse and called someone, talking for a minute, in the car, before she drove off.

Sarah rubbed her stomach. She loved the baby, wanted him, now with a fierceness that almost brought tears to her eyes. When she was newly pregnant, it hadn't feel like the baby was real or that he would ever be truly hers. Sarah had sensed, all along, that she would lose him, either before or after he came. There had been drug use in the beginning,

the meth that Dexter was selling. Sarah quit, for the most part, once she found out she was pregnant, but she'd never thought she could carry a healthy baby, this time, had never expected him to actually be born, her own baby boy. She hadn't daydreamed about him, like she'd done with her other two pregnancies, when she thought of nothing but the child. It had been depressing, to see her stomach grow and feel like it was just a tease, a reminder of what it would be like to actually be pregnant, because surely there wasn't really a baby in there? But he would be coming soon now, and Sarah was starting to believe in him, that tiny boy. If he'd made it this far—she never expected him to—he might just come, like any other baby. Either way, he was hers now, and she felt him inside of her. She hoped he wouldn't come early, that he would stay inside of her as long as he could, where he was hers, only hers, and no one could take him away.

That afternoon, Sarah walked down to the church to try to find Charlie, thinking he might be more reasonable, that she could convince him the girls needed to be at home, but he wasn't there. When she got home, she found her mother sitting on the back steps of the trailer, her head down and a cigarette in her hands. She was wearing new pajamas, light blue satin with a white flowers weaving up to the collar.

“Hey, Mama,” Sarah said, leaning down to hug her. Linda's hair, grey like it had been for as long as Sarah could remember, was thinning at the part. Sarah kissed the top of her head.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, sitting down beside her.

“Okay.”

“You’re supposed to quit,” Sarah said, kicking at the pile of cigarette butts that circled out from the steps. “You said you would.”

“So did you,” Linda said.

“I have.”

“Saw you smoking one the other night.”

“Just that once,” Sarah said.

Linda put her hands to her face. Sarah scratched the arc of her mother’s back, tracing the raised flowers. The hospital wouldn’t have given her pajamas that nice.

“Nice pajamas,” Sarah said.

“Thanks.”

“Where’d you get them?” Sarah asked.

“At the hospital.”

“But did your friend bring them to you, I mean? They’re not the ugly hospital pajamas.”

“Yeah.”

“You never told me who it was that came. Did you have a good visit?”

“Yeah. I don’t think you would remember me talking about her.”

“Amber came by while you were gone,” Sarah said, standing now, to take some pressure off her back.

“Oh yeah? Did you talk to her?”

“Not really.”

“Maybe you should. Hear what she has to say.”

“She’s a bitch.” The words made Amber seem more manageable, and Sarah felt a surge of confidence. Usually, Amber was something altogether separate from Sarah’s real life, something unfamiliar and foreign. All that talk about God and healing.

“She’s a bitch,” Sarah said again, trusting herself.

Linda was quiet.

“She gave me these pajamas,” Linda said.

“What? When? You saw her?”

“They came by the hospital,” Linda said. “I asked them to.” There was an edge to her tone that made Sarah nervous.

“I tried to go see Charlie today, to see if he could help us,” Sarah said. “What do you think we need to do to get the girls back?”

“They’ve been gone a week, and you’re just now asking?” Linda said. Sarah had been waiting for her mother to do something, or at least figure out what needed doing. Linda was always the one taking charge, deciding what to do, but she hadn’t said anything. Sarah didn’t understand.

“Well, I didn’t know what to do,” Sarah said.

“They don’t need to be back here.”

“What?”

“I’m the one that called, Sarah,” Linda said, raising her head, now, to look at Sarah. “I called DHS myself, told them I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“What? Why? What are you talking about?”

“I could drop dead tomorrow, if you haven’t noticed. I can’t leave the kids like this.”

Sarah's anger was physically painful. Her own mother. She understood everything, suddenly. There'd been no friend from the factory staying at the hospital with her. Linda hadn't wanted Sarah there so she could talk to Amber. She hadn't been surprised that day the social worker came.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now. I've asked Amber and Charlie to take custody of them, and they're going to do it."

"You have no right! Jessica is my daughter." Sarah was yelling now, barely pushing back the urge to grab her mother, shake her. She slammed her fist into a tree, feeling her knuckles bleed.

"I have custody of her. She's been mine for years. You know that."

"You took your own grandchildren away from their mothers? Your own daughters?"

"It sure wasn't hard to do," Linda said, and Sarah heard disgust in her voice.

Sarah walked into the trailer and gathered her things, as she'd seen Alex do. She didn't have much to gather, but she shoved her purse full and slammed the door. She walked to the end of the street and made a right, to the front of the trailer park. She walked the full perimeter of the park. Where was there to go? Sarah felt cramps spreading across her lower back. The baby kicked her, high, in the middle of the stomach. She patted her belly and tried to think of something to say to him, in case he, too, was somehow afraid. "Everything's going to be okay," she said. Linda was still on the steps and did not look up when Sarah went inside.

### Chapter Three (*Mabel*)

On Sunday nights when she was a child, Mabel and her sisters would sneak to the river and meet their friends behind the Pentecostal church. They hid beneath the water oaks, Baptist and Methodist kids whose churches only went for about an hour, long enough to let the Pentecostals really get going. There was no air conditioning, and the voices inside drifted easily through open windows. Beneath the draping shade, girls bit their hands to quiet laughter—even Mabel herself had done it—and boys pulled shirts over their faces as the cries would crescendo, then fall, then crescendo again. Mabel’s sisters called the chorus of voices “moaning,” but it seemed like something else to Mabel, something more hopeful and more beautiful. There was no word for it, or none she’d ever been taught. Would she ever feel so intensely about anything? If they stayed too long and service ended, they watched people spilling out of the little church, all familiar faces, and Mabel marveled at how those quiet people made such noise, how they felt such fervor.

It was at the river, listening to the Pentecostals, that Mabel first held hands with a boy. Gary Williams, now long dead, had taken her hand and traced her thumb with his finger. Mabel had watched the water and pretended to listen to the rising voices, every thought fixed on Gary’s fingers, damp with sweat, holding her hand against her thigh. For days afterwards, she felt self-conscious, positioning her hand as it had been in his and trying to figure out if she’d been awkward. She held hands with her youngest sister, Ronnie, who was too little to be suspicious, and examined the tilt of her own wrist. Was it delicate? Feminine? Gary held her hands a few more times, and Mabel told no one. Then, he’d held another girl’s hand, and Mabel felt ashamed. Still, when she went to the river after that, she was conscious of her hands, carefully tilting her wrists, just in case.

Ronnie had been gone for over thirty years. Mabel had always thought her sisters would outlive her. She was the oldest, after all, a good eight years ahead of Ronnie, the baby. It seemed only right that the oldest would go first. She had never worried about her sisters dying, even though she was the worrying kind. As a young woman, before she could imagine that she would eat next to deacons at the church's widows' banquet, the youngest widow present, she'd always told herself that if—God forbid—her husband Leeland died, she would have her sisters. But Ronnie had died suddenly, with an aggression that even now felt bizarre: a diagnosis, four miserable months, and then she was gone.

Mabel had thought it was surely a fluke, that Ronnie had gone, unexpectedly, but that order would be restored, and she would go next, leaving Esther and then Josie. But now Josie, the youngest next to Ronnie, lay in a nursing home and hadn't spoken in five months. Mabel saw, as soon as Josie had her stroke, that she had been wrong. She realized it with confidence: they would go in reverse order, youngest to oldest, leaving her last, retracing the unfolding of her family until she was again an only child.

It was a terrible thought, to outlive her sisters, to be the only person alive who remembered the infinite days of their childhood. For all practical purposes, she and Esther were already the only ones left. They would get one of their kids to drive them to Little Rock to see Josie as often as they could. It was a comfort to see her, familiar and tangible. But Mabel never felt Josie's presence. She and Esther would sit by Josie's bed and reminisce as if Josie were gone, though her body lay beside them, her face the same

as it had ever been. Ronnie seemed much more alive in memory, maybe because she had been so vibrant until she got sick, and her sickness had seemed like a dream.

The Pentecostal church was still standing, still shaded by many of the same trees. The church hadn't added gymnasiums and new buildings like the other churches in town, but they'd gotten air-conditioning. So far as Mabel knew, kids never went down there now, hadn't even when her children were young. She was ashamed when she thought of what they used to do, the mockery. She hadn't seen the meanness at the time; it had felt more like tradition. She wondered, now, why her mother had allowed it. When Mabel heard all the talk about Parkin changing and drying up, more and more frequent now that the factory was closing and the schools were consolidating, she thought of how Parkin had been then, before her children knew it.

Photos of the old downtown—that's what everyone called it—were displayed throughout Parkin, an attempt to instill pride in a town that was fading. The courthouse had pictures of the old courthouse, the one where Mabel and Leeland had signed their marriage license, and the post office displayed pictures of Parkin's old churches, the Pentecostal church among them. It felt strange to Mabel to see her past emerge so haphazardly amidst her present, with such little warning.

Mabel was now three days shy of eighty-nine, almost twenty years older than her mother had been when she died, her mother who had seemed so old. Mabel herself had said, "She lived a good, long life." But she saw now that sixty-nine years was not long at



all, not long enough to sort through the mysteries of your youth, much less those of your adulthood.

The only reason to make a big to-do over an eighty-ninth birthday, Mabel knew, was if you feared there wouldn't be a ninetieth. Her children had no reason to worry. Mabel sensed many days stretching ahead of her. Still, she was thankful to be at her own birthday party, glad to have her family together. Mabel's daughters, Becky and Janet, did not cherish each other like Mabel and her sisters had. They had been in school together, like Mabel and her sisters, but they'd always preferred friends to each other, always keeping secrets. There was a jealousy between them that was recognizable but still unfamiliar to Mabel, and she didn't know why it had taken root in her home. Today, though, they were together.

Mabel sat beside her grandson, Charlie, on Janet's deck and watched her great-grandchildren playing in the yard. Mabel didn't have favorites, but she loved Charlie fiercely. He favored his grandfather Leeland, and she imagined that he looked just how Leeland's son, her son, would've looked, if they hadn't had all girls. He had Leeland's thick curls, the same sharp chin and dark eyes. She'd been surprised to feel her eyes watering that morning when he hugged her.

Charlie's wife, Amber, settled in one of the deck chairs beside Mabel. Mabel had been surprised by the lightness in her tonight, the easiness of her movements. "Good for you," she thought, and patted the girl on the back. Amber watched the children, and Mabel knew she felt a loss. It struck Mabel as vaguely insensitive that Becky had asked

for a picture of all the great-grandchildren—“We never have *all* the great grandchildren together,” she’d said—but life went on.

Charlie and Amber had buried a daughter, Janet a granddaughter. Becky hadn’t known how to respond, and after that first terrible Christmas, which even now played like a nightmare, she’d talked little of the child. It was in every way the wrong thing. Mabel saw that, but she did not know how to tell her daughter, and, even more, did not trust her to understand. So she watched the gulf between her two girls grow wider.

“These pictures may be out of date soon,” Amber said, and there was an edge to her voice that Mabel couldn’t read. Without meaning to, Mabel glanced at the girl’s stomach, flat beneath her fitted sweater. She couldn’t imagine Amber putting herself through it again, carrying another child. Amber followed her eye.

“No, no,” she said. “Not like that. But Charlie and I have news for you.”

Mabel listened as the girl whispered to her that they were working on adoption, two little girls whose mothers couldn’t care for them. It was hard for Mabel to process this information, all so new, all so life-changing. She stumbled to think of what questions to ask. The thought of a new great-grandchild, one who was not of her blood and did not look like her children and grandchildren, was strange to her, but not unwelcome. She was searching for something to say when Amber said, “Janet doesn’t know yet. We’re telling her tonight.” There was a conviction in the girl’s voice, the way she emphasized *tonight* that made Mabel understand that there was more to this than she was gathering, that this evening would color all the days to come.

Mabel could recall days that seemed to carry the weight of a lifetime, the fullness of her experience packed into a flash of life. Lightning had struck Mabel's house once, and she'd thought the night would last forever, that it would shape every night that followed. Leeland had been gone, away on business. He rarely traveled, so it had seemed fated to Mabel that she was alone with the girls when lightning came through the clock. She hadn't known what to do when the everything went dark, smoke floating through the house and rain pounding outside. She didn't trust herself to carry her baby, Becky, to the car in the dark, and she couldn't carry both the girls, nor could she leave them in the dark, alone. "Run to the car," she'd told Janet, "and turn on the headlights." How mean she had been, to send a child into the cracking darkness. But Janet had done it, and as the beams cut through the carport, Mabel carried the baby to the car. What a child Janet had looked, hunched in the driver's seat, barely four years old. *She is just a baby*, Mabel had thought. *I have two babies*. She'd had to yell at Janet to open the door.

Mabel's hands shook as she drove to her parents' house, Janet quiet beside her, the baby crying in her lap. She was afraid of what her father would find when he came to the house. The crack had been loud, blinding. The house wasn't on fire when she left, she knew that. But it could catch fire. And she didn't know what had already been ruined. She felt shame as she drove, shame that she had sent her child into the darkness, though it seemed like the only thing to have done.

As Mabel drove through rain that beat the windshield in sheets, she thought that nothing would ever be the same. She sat in her parents' driveway honking her horn, scared to get out with both girls. It was several minutes before her father woke, charged onto the porch. When he saw her car, he had run, a full sprint in the rain with nothing to

cover him. He went back for blankets to cover the kids when he realized they were okay, and they ran into the house, the same as it had ever been.

“The baby will get pneumonia,” Mabel’s mother, Ruth, had repeated, and Mabel’s heart had frozen. Maybe the baby would get pneumonia and die, and that’s why the night had seemed so fated, so full of meaning. Mabel had clutched the baby to herself and not let Ruth hold her, understanding, somehow, that it was all her fault, that if she had made different choices everything could’ve kept right on as it had always been. “She’ll be all right,” Ruth had said, stroking Mabel’s hair, but Mabel turned away, thinking that she would look back on this moment, on how she’d known with certain dread that from then on, everything would unfold. But her mother had taken the baby from her, unwrapped the blanket to find Becky surprisingly dry and sound asleep. “Look here,” Ruth had said, “She’s fine. She’s just fine.” Janet had climbed into Mabel’s lap, looked up at her with fearful eyes, and Mabel had praised her, how brave she was and how smart.

Later, Mabel had lain awake nearly until morning, feeling the heaviness of the night. But when she awoke to the baby crying, she realized it had changed little. An electrician re-wired the house. She and Leeland stayed with her parents for little more than a week, and then they were back home, the panic forgotten. Mabel told and retold the story to Leeland, but it was difficult to articulate how she had known, just known, that it was a night that would be long preserved, especially since, as life moved further and further from those moments when she was alone in the car, they seemed to matter little.

Janet had gotten a birthday cake from the Kroger bakery, the same white cake with chocolate icing they got for every party. Earlier, Mabel had seen Becky give Janet a check to pay for half of it. She didn't understand why her daughters were so formal with each other, so quick to settle debts. There were nine candles on the cake, one for each decade, Janet said, though Mabel reminded her that eighty-nine was not quite ninety. "For each decade you've *finished*, then," Janet said, and Mabel felt a flash of dread at the thought of a new beginning, at starting, a year and a few days from this very day, a brand new decade, with all of its mysteries. Even so, this was a happy day. She enjoyed listening to her children and grandchildren, hearing their voices and laughter weave together like a familiar dream.

Becky sat next to Janet on the couch and looked over her shoulder as they scrolled through the morning's pictures on Janet's laptop, laughing at the shots where the kids weren't looking. They both had the same distinct chin, Leeland's chin, and their laughs, too, were the same. There was something comforting for Mabel in seeing this, and she thought that perhaps she should be more hopeful about their relationship, what it would look like when she was not there to hold it together.

She settled herself beside them on the couch, though the pictures were not clear to her on the screen, a blur of faces. She enjoyed hearing her daughters talk, how natural their conversation sounded. Mabel saw Amber whispering something to Charlie, and she was startled to realize that she had forgotten, momentarily, what Amber had told her about the girls. How strange that such a thing could pass from her thoughts, but now it was back, and she was nervous when she realized they were about to tell it, nervous for them and for herself.

How different this was than the night Charlie had come to say he and Amber wouldn't be going to Africa as missionaries. They'd been planning it for two years but had decided not to go two months before they were supposed to leave. Mabel never heard the whole story, had never asked. Charlie had come alone that night and sat in Janet's living room looking like a broken man. Mabel had understood that it was Amber, not Charlie, who had been behind it. But she hadn't asked. Janet, too, had recognized how much was left unsaid, and she'd been angry with Amber. It wasn't right for Amber to change her mind when Charlie had worked so hard for it, Janet had said, even though she'd never wanted them to go to Uganda, never understood their talk about God's calling them.

"Amber and I have something we want to tell you," Charlie said, lowering himself into Janet's recliner and filling the whole space. Amber settled onto his lap, looking more comfortable than Mabel had seen her in years. Charlie's eyes were anxious, and Mabel wanted to get up and give him a hug.

He told them about these two girls from the mission church where he and Amber worked. They were cousins, evidently, one eight and one nine. The girl's mothers were into drugs, he said, didn't have the money to care for them. The state was going to take them away. Amber and Charlie had known the girls for years, at the church.

The room was quiet as Charlie finished talking.

"Who are these little girls?" Janet finally asked.

Amber pulled two pictures from her purse. They were precious children, she said. Sweet girls. Karlyn and Jessica.

“But why you?” Janet asked. “Aren’t there foster homes and places for kids that have nowhere to go? Why your house?”

The girls’ grandmother loved and trusted them, Charlie said. And besides, hadn’t God called his children to care for orphans?

“But what about the boys?” Janet asked.

Charlie and Amber’s boys, grade-schoolers themselves, sat on either side of Janet. Mabel realized, suddenly, that they shouldn’t be talking in front of the boys.

“We should talk about this later,” Mabel said, “when it’s just the adults.”

“It’s okay,” Amber said. “They know all about it.”

The boys were excited, Amber said, about getting “the other room” ready for the girls. It would have to be Ellie’s room, the girl they had lost. Mabel couldn’t imagine Amber letting these girls live in her daughter’s room.

Mabel watched Janet’s face, baffled, struggling to understand all this. She was startled when Janet began to cry.

“Why can’t you just enjoy your two boys?” she said. “Why can’t they ever be enough?”

Amber’s face was white, and Mabel realized she had been right, they should’ve stopped talking.

And then everyone was moving, Becky scurrying the boys outside, everyone else slipping into other rooms. Charlie sat beside his mother on the couch and talked to her quietly, while Amber walked outside. Amber had left the pictures of the two girls on the table, and Mabel slipped them into her pocket.

After the party, Mabel asked Becky to drop her by Esther's house instead of taking her home. She and Becky were both quiet in the car.

"Janet wasn't trying to be coldhearted," Becky said. "They shouldn't have told her in front of all of us."

Becky was right, but Mabel couldn't fault the kids for it.

"They're excited," she said. "They wanted everyone to be excited for them."

"They must've known it would be hard to wrap our minds around," Becky said.

"I think it's a good thing," Mabel said. "It'll be good for those kids, and it'll be good for Charlie and Amber, too."

"Maybe," Becky said. "But it'll take some getting used to."

That was true. Mabel felt an uneasiness settling over her. She thought about asking Becky if they could drive by the old Pentecostal church, sit in the parking lot for a few minutes. But she thought it might make her feel lonely, the way the moans themselves had sometimes. And Becky wouldn't understand. Mabel thought better of it. She was quiet until Becky dropped her off at Esther's, helped her out of the car and stood at the end of the driveway, watching Mabel walk to her sister's door.

The night Josie was born, their mother in the hospital, Mabel and Esther had stayed with a neighbor who didn't have any children, a house they'd never spent the night. Light played in strange ways across the wooden paneling, and Mabel felt afraid. The voices talking about her mother and the baby were unfamiliar, and she couldn't make



out what they were saying. Esther had slept beside her, curled toward her just as she did at home, her thumb in her mouth and her feet pressed cold against Mabel's leg, which Mabel usually didn't allow. That night, she hadn't kicked Esther's feet away. She grabbed a fistful of Esther's thick curls, planning to pull them and wake Esther up so she wouldn't feel alone, but holding her sister's hair brought comfort.

And then she'd felt a dread of the baby coming, a realization that she and Esther wouldn't be the only sisters, that someone else would intrude upon their inner world. And she had hoped, for the first time, for a boy, so that their sisterhood would not be broken. But of course there was a sister, and then another sister. And the intimacy had expanded, malleable and elastic. But now it was just Mabel and Esther again, like it had been in the beginning. And somehow seventy years of being two of four blended into a dream, and she and Esther shared the jealous intimacy of only sisters. The thought of being the last one left was hideous, a loneliness deeper than even the loss of Leeland. Her own children and grandchildren were profoundly irrelevant as she imagined herself without Esther to call. She sensed again the desire to cling to her. And she felt, with certainty, that once Esther was gone, hers would be a long wait.

Mabel wanted to tell Esther everything that had happened, Amber and Charlie, and those two little girls, the one with woven braids. But she could not find the words and she suddenly felt a creeping exhaustion. She would tell her later, when she could think about it more clearly. Instead, she told Esther what she had been wanting to tell her all morning, something that had been playing across the back of her mind.

“We didn’t do right by Ronnie,” Mabel said to her sister, “when she got sick when she had the baby.”

Ronnie had gone into a deep depression with her second child. She had shriveled up into herself and disappeared. As if when Dudley, the baby, passed outside her body, something essential to Ronnie had accidentally gone, too. And Ronnie wasn’t herself anymore. That’s what Mabel had repeated to her, during those days when Ronnie sat, vacant-eyed, talking about the end of the world, while Mabel held the crying baby. “You’re not yourself,” Mabel had told her, as if that somehow excused Ronnie’s absence, even as she sat in the very same room. Ronnie didn’t like to hear it called post-partum—though that’s what her sisters called it, because why else would Ronnie have disappeared like that?—because she thought of that as something that made mothers hurt their children. She loved the babies, told Mabel she felt shame when she looked into their faces.

Dudley had been born in late December, right after Christmas. A Christmas present, Ronnie had called him. It had been a cold February, a long February, as February’s go. By the time March faded into April, much of the strangeness of the winter seemed like a dream. When spring flowers began to open and the grass burned a deeper green, Ronnie was herself again. But they had been more careful with her after that. Hadn’t told her everything, as if she had a weaker constitution, as if that long winter had changed her in some irreversible way. Mabel regretted that now. Ronnie couldn’t help it. When she was well, she was well, and they shouldn’t have been different toward her. It felt, now, like an intentional exclusion, cutting Ronnie out of their sisterhood like they had done sometimes as children, when they called her Baby Ronnie and begged their

mother not to let her follow them to school. Mabel felt a flash of shame at the memory, and a deeper shame as she thought of how they'd been careful with Ronnie after that depression, had whispered conversations. Maybe they were being punished, maybe that was why she was taken away early, breaking their sisterhood. It was hard to remember that some thirty years had passed between the December when Ronnie had her second baby and the March when they laid her to rest.

“We never did wrong by Ronnie,” Esther said. “We stood right by her side through all of that mess.”

“But we were different to her after that, didn't tell her everything,” Mabel said.

“Just right at first, while she was still getting well.”

“But remember, when Daddy was so sick, we didn't tell her how bad it was.”

“She knew he was sick,” Esther said.

“But she didn't know how soon he would be gone.” Mabel looked at her sister, whose eyes were a lighter blue than they had once been, sunspots spreading across her face. Esther looked older than Mabel did, a realization that knotted Mabel's stomach.

“She was the youngest,” Esther said. “Her kids were little. She didn't need that worry on her.”

“We should have told her, though, we never should have kept anything from her,” Mabel said.

“Why are you troubling yourself? Daddy's been gone forty years. We did just fine by Ronnie.”

Mabel and Esther often talked about the past, but Esther didn't like to rehash old times, to think how they could have acted differently to bring different outcomes. She

liked to think of the past as closed, talking of it as you might a movie you'd once seen, whose script had been written years ago and whose possibilities were closed but could still be enjoyed, could still stir the emotions. For Mabel, the past was becoming more and more alive in the present, more and more open. It seemed to circle through her daily life, to question and electrify her choices.

Josie was dead. Mabel got the news from her sister's oldest daughter, who waited until precisely 7:30 a.m. to call. Mabel had been awake nearly two hours, had quietly read the newspaper with a magnifier while Josie's body was carried out of her hospital room by strangers. It seemed a subtle cruelty that Tara, her niece, had waited so late to call. As if Josie's death were less urgent now, after those months of being somehow dead and alive at the same time.

Pneumonia, Tara had said. Not uncommon for patients who can't move, who lay still and flat as Josie had since she collapsed in her kitchen while slicing an apple. Well, then. It had just been a matter of time.

Mabel watched the wind moving the old maple outside her living room window and waited for the next call. Within twenty minutes, Esther was on the phone, her voice tearful and weak. They didn't talk long. Esther needed to call her kids, old friends, her Sunday School class. She was sure Mabel needed to do the same. And of course, Mabel did, she supposed, but when she hung up, she made no other calls. She thought of Josie as she'd been the last time she saw her before the stroke, her hair dyed a dark brown,

darker than it had been in her youth, but pretty on her, still. She'd looked good, for an eighty-year-old. Didn't look a day over 60, Mabel had told her, making her laugh.

When Mabel visited Josie in the hospital, when she saw the unnatural contortions of her face and wondered how much of her sister was really there, she always thought of the Hughes boy who used to live across the street. The Hughes had three children, the middle one a handicapped boy who had never spoken. The parents pushed him in a wheelchair, his head strapped back with an elastic band across his forehead. He had beautiful hair, thick dark curls. Mabel heard people comment, often, how beautiful the boy would have been, if only. She wondered if this played across his mother's mind as she washed that hair, brushed it back from his forehead when she strapped him into his chair. The Hughes had two other boys, the oldest brilliant, always getting awards at school, just another reason for people to talk about the potential this middle child could've had, if only. And there was the baby, the blond, thick-framed boy, Dawson, who had seizures. He was smart, like the oldest, but had those awful seizures. Mabel saw him outside playing in a helmet, sometimes, and sometimes there was no helmet, and he looked like any other boy, any other beautiful child. They were always at church, the mother pushing the wheelchair, the father holding the blond boy, and the oldest walking between them with the serious gait of a child who knows he carries every hope and dream of his family, the possibility of redemption.

Charlie was training for the ministry when the Hughes were in town and had been interning on the church staff. He went to visit the family in the hospital once, when the

little boy “had a bad day,” as the mother called it. The seizures started again while Charlie was there, and he said it looked like he’d imagined an exorcism would, but the demon would not leave. It writhed and spasmed and controlled the boy as his father spread his arms wide over him and called upon Heaven to set the child free.

The Hughes weren’t in town long. Their house was empty now, but the wooden ramps they’d installed at every entrance were still there, weathered. It made Mabel sad to see them, and she wondered where the Hughes had gone and how big the little boy was. She imagined him in a larger chair now, one that didn’t roll as easily, and she wondered how the woman did it, the mother who never seemed particularly strong. Surely, she thought, once the parents were gone, it would fall to the oldest to care for the younger two, that brilliant boy, brother turned parent. He would care for them, as older siblings do.

Mabel’s decision not to tell her children that Josie was gone was not premeditated, nor was it well-reasoned. It came to her as the right thing to do, and she held to it, trusting it like some animal instinct. She could not admit that she, the oldest of four, who should have someday had three sisters standing beside her grave, now had one sister to her name. She wondered if her children would realize what she had known since Josie’s stroke, that the family of her childhood was slowly erasing itself, youngest first, leaving her the last to go. So far, the knowledge had felt like an invisible weight, but she wondered if it would begin to show, with this news of Josie. She wasn’t ready to acknowledge it yet, to see pity in the eyes of her children.

So when Janet stopped by, Mabel said nothing about the phone call. It was a shame, anyway, that her girls didn't call their own cousins more often, these grown women who got text messages from friends all throughout the day. She would keep it to herself for a little while, let the news settle over her, hardening her, the way her joints stiffened in the deep cold. Then, when she was ready, she would tell. She thought vaguely of what her girls would say, when they knew she had carried this secret, but it seemed a very faraway thing, and she did not give it much thought.

Besides, Janet was upset. She had come to talk, not to listen. She talked about the two girls—she called them “those girls,” but Mabel knew they were Jessica and Karlyn, had studied the pictures she got from Amber. When she wasn't looking at the pictures, she had a hard time locking the girls' faces into her mind. They kept fading into the school pictures of her own children and grandchildren, faces very different from those two little girls. But she had started to want those two children, to think of them as her own, though she didn't fully trust her desire. What a thing, to have little girls around. What a loss there had been when Ellie, her only young great-granddaughter, now dead three years, was gone.

“It will be something else next,” Janet said, and Mabel pitied the bitterness in her daughter's voice, because she knew Janet didn't recognize it. But even so, she sensed a certain truthfulness in Janet's words. What would it be? What next, to fill the void of that beautiful child who had been named after Mabel herself. Ella Ruth. Ruth, Mabel's middle name. For the first time, Mabel realized this might be wrong, not just for Amber and Charlie, but for those girls themselves.

“What's wrong with the girls' mother?” she asked Janet.

“There’s two different mothers. The girls are cousins. One of them is gone. The other is a wreck. You know, on drugs, won’t keep a job, doesn’t take care of the kids. I’m sure it’s true, that she’s unfit. But Amber has her own children who need her.”

So maybe it wasn’t wrong. Some homes were terrible, no place for children. Maybe this was one of them. But she feared, now, that she could not trust Amber’s assessment, couldn’t trust her to make the right choice. What a shame, for Amber to take someone’s child if it wasn’t the right thing, she who had lost a child herself.

As she listened to Janet talk about the two girls, Mabel thought of Josie and her other sisters and her parents, and she felt that surely it was a very bad thing to break up a family. She was surprised by the intensity of her feelings. She had already begun to imagine these two girls as somehow woven into the framework of her family, new faces that would take their places alongside familiar ones and bring joy where there had been such loss. But now, she felt with certainty, it was the wrong thing. Janet, of course, thought it was wrong, but she wasn’t as concerned about the girls. She had Charlie and Amber to think about, and their boys.

Mabel couldn’t sleep that night. When she was awake, she was not anxious, but as she began to fall asleep, her heart would race. What would her daughters say when they knew she had not told them about Josie? How long could she keep it from them? Josie’s funeral was coming up, in just two days. Apparently it had been long planned, all the arrangements made. She thought of Josie’s daughters planning these things while some strange shade of their mother lay in bed in front of them. She did not want to go, she



decided. There was no reason to; she'd already said her goodbyes. Could she keep her girls from finding out for two days?

Maybe if there'd been the promise that she could see Josie all the way though, she would've felt differently. But they didn't lower caskets anymore. She'd have to walk away and leave her sister alone, in a casket above the ground, where anything could happen, and trust that someone was going to come back later and lower her when no one was watching, as if it were a shameful thing. She'd heard of one funeral where the ground froze over and the casket couldn't be buried for almost two weeks after the graveside service.

The first funeral Mabel went to where they didn't lower the casket was Ellie's, Charlie and Amber's girl. She'd thought maybe it was just because Ellie was a child, that whoever was in charge wanted to spare her parents the sight of seeing her lowered into the ground. She thought maybe Charlie and Amber had even requested that it be done that way. Mabel never asked—nobody asked questions of Amber in those days, because she was walking in a dream. The questions didn't come until later, when time had put other people's lives back together, and they wanted to see Amber put herself back together, too, but were met with resistance, an intentional resistance it seemed to Mabel, though who could fault the girl. Amber had been a child herself, still was. That's why Mabel didn't fully trust this business about the two little girls.

She would call Esther in the morning, give her a detailed account of how she would get to the funeral, try to make sure Esther wouldn't need to call Janet and Becky. The only real guilt Mabel felt was that Esther would want her there. Esther was getting increasingly sentimental in her age, as most of Mabel's friends had proven to do. It would

hurt her to say goodbye to Josie without Mabel. Mabel felt ashamed to think of it, so she didn't let herself.

Instead, in her wakefulness, her thoughts returned to the two girls. She wouldn't know for sure until she saw for herself. It occurred to her that she could do it, that she could go to the trailer and see where they were living, find the mother and talk to her. In the night, as she lay awake watching the ceiling fan make its slow path, as she had done many nights before, it seemed a very alive possibility. She saw herself knocking on that mother's door—Sarah, wasn't it?—talking to her, assessing things.

Mabel didn't want to stand in some unfamiliar muddy cemetery, leaving her sister in the care of people she didn't even know, saying goodbye to her when she'd been gone for months. She would stay here, where she could do something that mattered, something that needed doing. She wondered if it would seem less possible in the morning, for her to interject herself into the middle of this thing.

But in the morning, she felt the same urgency she had the night before. It was energizing, to think of herself as having some role to play in all this. Within an hour of waking, she was in the car. Her hands shook as she drove, and she thought of the night she'd driven in the cracking lightning her parents' house, two babies curled in the front seat, how her hands had shaken and how she'd felt the full responsibility of the night, those children in her care. She was alone now, but not lonely. She felt a touch of fear as she drove, the nagging threat of reality sneaking up against this new confidence. She felt the risk that she might give in to it, might remember that she was an old woman and drive

back home, call Becky and Janet and tell them about Josie, and give up all this business about the little girls. The threat felt very real, so she tried to push any thoughts from her mind and think only of the road in front of her. She drove slowly. She was not afraid of the road, but she was afraid of herself, afraid her eyes would fail her, forget to show her something right in front of her.

Degeneration was a relentless word. When Mabel had gotten her driver's license renewed, and, blessedly, the woman at the DMV had not asked her for an eye test, Mabel's daughters had been appalled. "Mother!" Janet had said, "Your macular degeneration!" "Everything is degenerating," Mabel had replied. Janet had to know it. She was old enough, she had to see her own body betraying her, turning in to something very different. It had been more of a surprise, really, for Mabel to see her daughters losing their beauty than when she realized she was losing her own. But Mabel's eyes had been the worst thing, worse than any looks, than her physical strength, the firmness of her body. Her eyes were fading still, even today.

She'd promised her girls she wouldn't drive out of town and that she would never get on the highway. Only back roads, to church, to the grocery store, to the post office. She didn't even do much of that. Usually one of the girls came to get her, but there was freedom in knowing she had the license, could drive if she wanted to. Lakeshore, though, the trailer park that was home to Charlie and Amber's mission church, was outside of town a bit, a few miles down the highway. Traffic moving the other direction blurred into a colorless streak, and Mabel tried to lock her eyes directly in front of her. She could usually count on that: whatever was right in front.

Ridiculous, that she was afraid to drive to a neighborhood five miles from her house. But she made it, relieved when she pulled off the highway onto the gravel road leading into Lakeshore. She felt a tenderness for Charlie and Amber when she saw their church, those three trailers grouped together, the middle one with a steeple that was a different color than the building, a donation from another church. Mabel had visited the church a few times, when Janet had driven her. But most days Janet went to her own church, the big church in town, and Charlie and Amber couldn't come get Mabel because they drove buses through the neighborhood to pick up all the kids. Mabel would've liked to be out here more often, listening to grandson preach, and she felt guilty now that she hadn't found a way.

She saw a man walking and pulled alongside him. He was young, dark-eyed.

"I'm looking for a woman named Sarah," she said. "She has a little girl that's gone. Do you know where she lives?"

Something in the man's face changed, and Mabel realized how absurd she must look, how out of place. She felt the threat of reality pushing in again.

"I'm trying to help her get her girl back," she said. The words sounded insincere, though she wasn't sure they were.

"Don't know her," the man said.

She drove slowly on. There were two boys walking together, but she felt it would be wrong to ask the children. There was another man riding a scooter, making Mabel think of the Hughes boy and his chair. She saw a woman ahead of her, talking on the phone on the side of the road. Mabel pulled alongside her and changed her story, this time saying she was Sarah's grandmother, come to visit.

The girl pointed to a trailer three lots down without getting off the phone. Mabel parked in front of it and went to the door, walking carefully on the gravel. The trailer was mounted on blocks, and the concrete steps to the door were uneven. Mabel leaned a hand against the wall to steady herself. It occurred to her that she might fall, and that if she did, the three or four foot drop might break her bones. But she thought of Josie dead and gone and knew that her sentence was a long one, that Esther would go first.

There was a screen door, but no interior door, and Mabel didn't know what to do.

She knocked on the edge of the screen door but felt sure she couldn't be heard.

She tried to open it, and it was unlocked.

"Hello?" she called into the dark trailer, opening the door.

"Who is it?" a voice answered, not angry, but not particularly interested.

The question caught Mabel off guard. "Mabel Rodgers," she said, because she could think of nothing else to say.

A very pregnant woman stepped into the doorway, thick blond hair tied behind her head. Her face was thin, with dark green eyes set wide. Her frame was small, except for the belly.

"The lights are getting turned back on Monday."

A strange disorientation washed over Mabel. "I'm looking for Sarah," she said.

"I'm Sarah."

"I'm Mabel Rodgers. Charlie Thomas, the pastor of the little church down there, is my grandson."

"Why are you here?"

“I came to see about you. I’ve heard about everything that’s happening with your girls. Just wanted to see about you.”

“Like I said, the lights are getting turned on on Monday.”

She thinks I’m here to check things out, Mabel realized, see about the house, the conditions. She was partly right.

“I’m afraid Amber’s doing a bad thing,” Mabel said, feeling the first stings of betrayal. Sarah’s face softened, and she invited Mabel inside.

They sat in the dark, and Mabel listened as this woman talked about her daughter, how Sarah was putting her life back together and was ready to take care of her. Mabel struggled to think of questions to ask, but she suddenly felt very far away from anything familiar. She did not ask many questions.

The main thing she heard was that yes, this was the girl’s mother. And yes, she wanted her daughter. And she seemed sane enough, reasonable. That’s what Mabel had come to see. Sure she had problems, but who didn’t? There were worse things than poverty, worse things than drugs. It was no small thing to separate a child from her mother.

Mabel sat on an air mattress across from Sarah, who sat on the floor. Sarah’s own mother was gone, she told Mabel, had left after everything blew up, after Sarah found out she’d signed custody over to Amber. They’d all been living together: the grandmother, Sarah and her sister, and the two little girls. Now Sarah was by herself.

“I came to see if I could help you, to see if you needed something,” Mabel said.

“I don’t have a car,” Sarah said.

“Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“To see my lawyer. And to the DHS office.”

Sarah’s hands lay across her stomach as she talked, and Mabel had trouble not staring at her belly. How strange that Amber had not mentioned the new baby, with all of that talk about the two girls and how they needed a good home, someone to care for them. There was no talk of this child that now rounded Sarah’s stomach and looked as if it could come any time.

“The baby?” Mabel asked, gesturing toward Sarah’s stomach.

“They’re trying to take him away, too. Amber wants me to go to this place where he can stay with me, a rehab place, but I don’t need to. I’m not using any more.” The woman spoke the words too quickly, and Mabel did not trust them.

Amber didn’t want a baby boy, Mabel realized. She wanted a little daughter.

Mabel felt it suddenly hard to get her breath in this trailer, the room so suffocatingly hot. Without doubt, it was no place for children. There were people dying on the news, every night, heat deaths. The seventh heat death of the summer, the reporters would say. What a thing to count. She felt a little weak, suddenly, and she thought of her car, and the air conditioning.

“Are you staying here until Monday?” Mabel asked.

And before she knew it, she was offering her house, asking this woman to stay there, this woman Charlie and Amber were so firmly pitted against. Mabel had felt that her betrayal was only toward Amber, and that even that was for her own protection, to keep her from making a mistake that would surely grieve her for a lifetime, but Mabel thought now about her kind grandson, who looked so like her husband did when he was young, who she could trust to do only what he thought was right.

It was too late, though. She had offered her house, and how could this woman refuse it, this woman who leaned with her back arched against the hard wall, hands across her stomach. It would just be for the weekend, until her lights were turned on, and the air back on. She couldn't stay here in this heat, with that baby.

As they moved to the car, Mabel felt exhausted from the conversation and the heat. Sarah held a hand under her elbow, steadying her.

“Would you mind to drive?” Mabel asked, and she felt something like fear. Not fear exactly, maybe a realization that she should be afraid, but she wasn't.

Half an hour later, Mabel sat in the parking lot of a lawyer's office, trying to fend off thoughts of Josie and her daughters. How much longer until they found out? What would she say to them? There was no way to make them understand.

Mabel and her sisters had all felt the sting when Ronnie, the youngest sister, moved with her husband to Virginia, gone to raise their children where they would not grow up playing with their cousins. When Mabel's girls had been very little, they sometimes forgot Ronnie when they named their mother's sisters. Ronnie's phone calls were peppered with the names of strangers. This neighbor, that friend, that friend of the girls'. Mabel tried to keep it all straight, wanted to be able to navigate her sister's life, but it was all very foreign. She talked to Ronnie nearly daily and grieved that her girls would not know her like they did the other aunts. She would teach them to love her, but they would not feel it, even as they opened the expensive presents she sent. In those years, it had never occurred to Mabel that Ronnie would be buried in Virginia, that her



grave would be a faraway place. Of course, Ronnie was the youngest and death was a faraway thing, and Mabel had always thought she, herself, would go first. But then there was the winter of the strange sickness, and Ronnie had died and her husband had buried her in a lot in Virginia, a beautiful cemetery in a canopy of trees. Idyllic, Esther had called it. In this idyllic cemetery, Mabel, Josie, and Esther stood beside each other and watched Ronnie lowered into the ground. Mabel and Esther talked, sometimes, about getting themselves to Virginia to visit the grave again, but they knew it would never happen. They could barely get themselves to Little Rock to see Josie in the hospital.

Mabel knew what Josie would've wanted. She would have wanted Mabel and Esther at her funeral, side by side, like they'd been at Ronnie's, stories of their childhood rolling between them as they leaned on one another in grief. Josie had always had a possessive streak—selfish, Esther had called her in their younger days. When Mabel told Josie she was pregnant with Janet, the first grandchild of all the sisters, Josie had been afraid that being a mother would make Mabel somehow less of a sister, and, even worse, had told her so, so that Mabel felt a twinge of betrayal when her stomach started to bulge. At Ronnie's funeral, Josie had made the grief, itself, somehow more hers than theirs, since she and Ronnie were the closest in age, "like twins," she'd repeated. Conversations for weeks had revolved around how Josie was handling the loss, how she was getting along, and she leaned on Esther and Mabel as if they, too, hadn't lost a sister. Surely, then, if she'd been that possessive about Ronnie's death, how much more so would she have been about her own? That's why Mabel had been so insistent on getting rides to Little Rock, even when she knew Josie was unaware of her presence. She knew her sister well. In case any part of Josie was there, Mabel wanted her to know that she was indeed

mourning at her bedside. Josie had a way of looking out for herself. But she was a good sister, and funny. The funniest of all of them. Mabel felt an ache for her now, but she had mourned her, mourned her in a cold hospital room in Little Rock. There was no need to go sit through a funeral, pretending like Josie's death was new.

Mabel wondered how Sarah would pay for this lawyer. She told Mabel she'd used him before, that she knew him and he would let her pay when she got the money. The sign above the door said "Rollen and Rollen, Attorneys at Law." Mabel had known some Rollens when she was younger. The granddad had been a lawyer, too. They'd always had money. When Mabel and Leeland were young, they ran around with the Rollens some. For years, they talked about how the Rollens wouldn't come get the milk off the porch when the milk man brought it. Sally Rollen, the wife, was the laziest woman there ever was, Leeland always said. She'd let the milk sit there and spoil. Her parents got her a cooler for the milkman to leave the milk in, so it wouldn't spoil, and even then they'd leave it too long, sometimes. Too much money, Leeland always said. Don't value anything. And Mabel had felt a hardness toward the woman, though Sally was always light-hearted and Mabel enjoyed her company. It was a slight to her own poverty, to know that Sally let her milk spoil. But maybe it had been a good thing. Maybe this new young Rollen, whoever he was that was helping Sarah, had learned from his parents not to worry too much about the money and didn't mind helping Sarah if she couldn't pay. Or maybe he was different anyway, saw the value in things more. Maybe he saw value in Sarah, in these girls. Who knew? People could change, Mabel knew, could turn out

different than their parents and grandparents before them, break the mold of their family. It didn't happen often, but it could.

Sarah came out with a smile and talked rapidly to Mabel about how this man would help her—Rob, she called him. Rob was very hopeful she could get Jessica back. Guardianship had been turned over to Linda, Sarah's mother, four years ago, the first time Sarah went to jail. She'd never gotten it back. It had never been an issue, with them living all together, and in a way, she told Mabel, it had made her feel better to know her mother was ultimately in charge of the girl. But she was ready now. Ready to put herself together and be the mother, the only mother, to her daughter. Rob had told her they could fight what Linda did, argue that the switch of guardianship should have clearly been temporary, that Sarah was the child's rightful guardian.

Mabel listened. She didn't know enough about the legal end of it to know if Rob was giving Sarah false hope. But she realized that the little boy Sarah was carrying hadn't been in the care of Sarah's mother, hadn't been hers to sign away. That's how Amber didn't end up with him. She started to wonder what would happen if all of this was successful, somehow. If Sarah really did get custody back of her little girl. Would she take her back to that dark trailer? Would the lights and air be back on Monday? If she gets her back, Mabel decided, then she would have done it anyway, without me. She'd have found someone else to give her a ride. But she thought of Sarah sitting in the floor of that dark room, head in her hands, and she wondered if that were true.

Someone gave Mabel a potted plant when Leeland died. She didn't remember who. There had been so many potted plants, so many casseroles, so many cards and flowers. But one of them had lived, ridiculously, for years. For the first few years, Mabel kept waiting for it to die. She watered it and kept it by the window, but she had assumed the plant was temporary. Incredibly, it was still living, stubborn thing. It was an ugly plant, with long greenery that draped to the floor like dry hair. For over forty years, it had sat in her living room window on a concrete plant stand. Mabel figured her girls would throw it out as soon as she was gone. That when they were cleaning out her refrigerator and closets, it would end up tossed out, with the trash. It was, after all, an ugly thing. But it had become familiar, and she reached for it now, stroking through the greenery, which was brown and yellow in places, as she watched Sarah get acclimated to her living room. The plant had almost died once, when the stand fell over and it lost most of its dirt. But Mabel had repacked it, and here it was.

Sarah sat on the edge of the sofa, as if afraid to lean back into the deep cushions.

Mabel followed her eyes to the pictures hung over the fireplace, a careful display of each of her children and grandchildren, however outdated. Sarah stood and walked closer to the pictures, with the walk of a woman who was accustomed to being watched, though not necessarily admired—wide, confident steps, her back deliberately arched back. Sarah stared into Amber and Charlie's wedding picture, and Mabel again felt a sliver of guilt, as if she were displaying Amber's inner world to this strange woman who despised her.

“This is the girl?” Sarah asked, pointing to Ellie’s second grade photograph. Ellie’d had a third grade photo, but it was taken only a few months before her death, and Mabel could never bring herself to swap the pictures.

“Yes. That’s Ellie.”

“I never knew her. Never even saw a picture. My daughter knew her, was her good friend. They played all the time at the church.”

Mabel could think of nothing to say in response.

“Pretty girl,” Sarah said. “Looks like Amber.” There was no anger in her voice as she spoke of Amber now, and Mabel wondered about the fullness of their relationship, how much more there was than she knew.

“The boys look like Charlie,” Mabel said, grasping for something to get the conversation back to safe territory, though there seemed to be none. It was true, anyway. They did look like Charlie, and Charlie looked like Leeland, her husband, the grandfather he’d never known. It was the strongest resemblance in the family. Leeland and Charlie and now those boys.

“I bet they’re not too sure about getting two new sisters,” Sarah said, and the edge was back.

“These are my kids, remember.” Mabel said. “I mean to do right by them. I’m trying to help you because I’m afraid there’s more to this than they can see. But Amber is trying to do what she thinks is right. I believe that.”

Sarah continued to study the picture, and when the phone rang, Mabel felt that she had been caught. Her heart raced. But she was a grown woman. What did she have to be afraid of? It was Esther on the phone, and Mabel told her, as she’d been planning all

morning, how she had made arrangements to ride with Janet, how she would meet Esther in Little Rock, sit with her at the funeral.

Esther's voice cracked and she talked about Josie and Ronnie being together now, rejoicing, dancing, how they would be together forever. And here we are, Mabel thought. Just the two of us. And her chest tightened to imagine Esther joining them soon, the three of them together in a blissful sisterhood, oblivious to all things below, to Mabel living out those long days on her own. Mabel felt the closest thing to grief she'd felt since she got the call about Josie. She talked to her sister for a few minutes, listening to Esther tell stories about Josie so familiar that they bordered on cliché, except that Mabel had lived those days, too, and the truth of each story resonated, however distantly. She listened to Esther and laughed when Esther wanted her to laugh and cried when Esther wanted her to cry, because she knew that's what her sister wanted her to do.

When she hung up, she had forgotten, for most of the conversation, that Sarah was in the living room—what a thing to forget. Mabel was sliding between worlds that were incongruent; she couldn't walk in them both at the same time. She noticed the flashing message light on the answering machine but did not listen to the messages before she walked back into the den.

“Did you lose a sister?” Sarah asked.

“Yes, yes. But it wasn't a surprise,” Mabel responded.

“I'm sorry to hear it.”

“Thank you.” Mabel felt a flash of panic in confiding Josie's loss to this stranger when her own children and grandchildren didn't know.

“Doesn’t sound like you’ll have time to be running me around tomorrow. If you could just give me a ride the DHS office in the morning, that would help.”

Mabel had imagined herself sitting up late into the night talking to this young woman, helping her sort her life out, had imagined that it would be a night that would change everything, but she realized now that she had very little to offer, no idea where to start. She hoped the DHS office was the right place to go.

“Are you sure that’s where you need to start?” Mabel asked.

“Yeah. Some of my friends have been telling me what to do, ones that have had their kids taken away before. A lot of them got the kids back.”

Mabel felt the clarity of the morning returning to her.

“Are you going to be able to take care of your daughters?” she asked.

“Only one of them’s mine. And I’m going to get cleaned up. See if they have any programs for me where bigger kids can come, too. Amber came by one day talking about one of them. They’ve got people that can help you find work.”

“What about the other girl?” They were cousins. Mabel knew that, had been told it a hundred times, but she kept forgetting. She thought of them as sisters.

“She’s my sister’s.”

Mabel realized for the first time that the girls could be separated from each other. What was worse—to separate sisters or to separate a mother from her child? And this woman, Sarah, had a sister of her own, the mother of one of the little girls. She was gone, too. It was a shame.

Sarah wanted to leave for the DHS office early in the morning. She was convinced she could get it all straightened out, get guardianship of her daughter back, and then her mother would have no right to sign custody over to Amber. The lawyer had told her everything to say, had given her some papers. Listening to Sarah talk about it all made Mabel feel tired. She fed Sarah breakfast: homemade cinnamon rolls that she kept frozen for when the kids came over. Sarah ate four, hungrily, like they might disappear from the plate in front of her. Mabel didn't want to make the drive to the office, sit in the waiting room all day and see all those people with sad stories of their own. She would rather be here, in her own home.

“You can take the car,” she told Sarah.

“Are you sure?” Sarah asked, staring at her.

“Yes. I'm not feeling well today. I don't want to ride.”

“I'll bring it back this afternoon. Soon as I'm done. Might be awhile, though. Lines are usually long there.”

“It's fine,” said Mabel. “I have nowhere to be.”

She watched the car pull out of the driveway, saw it slowing to a stop at the end of her street and imagined that's what she herself looked like on mornings when she ventured out, exhaust trailing out of the tailpipe of the gold Buick. What a strange morning.

Mabel sat in her chair and watched out the window with the feeling that something was slipping away from her. She had fallen asleep when she heard someone beating at the door, unlocking it with a key.



“Mother!!!” Mabel rose from the chair as Becky and Janet rushed through the door, jumping back, startled, when they saw her.

“Are you okay? Where have you been? Where in the world is your car? Why haven’t you been answering your phone?”

They were both talking at once, staring at her as if she were something very unfamiliar, and Mabel felt the weight of the last two days pressing down on her. She tried to think of answers.

“I’m fine,” she said. “The car’s been needing some work. I had the body shop come pick it up this morning.”

“We tried to call you all day yesterday. We were worried sick,” Janet said. “Why didn’t you call us back? Where *were* you?”

“Mother, I talked to Aunt Esther this morning,” Becky said. “Why didn’t you tell us about Josie?”

So it was over. Mabel wondered if she could’ve bought herself one more day, long enough to miss the funeral, if she had just called the girls yesterday, checked in with them. Why hadn’t she thought to do that? They’d called Esther to see if she’d heard from Mabel, and then they’d heard it all. Well.

Mabel stumbled through a reply, how she was going to tell them but was gone all day yesterday, how the car had given her fits at the grocery store and she sat for awhile while a young man worked on it, how she’d been exhausted when she got home, fallen straight asleep, had just gotten up to call them this morning but so far hadn’t been able to get them on the phone yet. Their lines had been busy. (She imagined that part was probably true, both of their lines had likely been busy all morning.)

They were still staring at her like she was something very strange, and Mabel felt the beginnings of fear.

“Why didn’t you call me from the grocery store?” Becky asked. “I would’ve come to get you.”

“Or call us before you went?” Janet said. “Mother, Aunt Josie *died*, and you didn’t even call us.”

Mabel wondered if Esther knew, if she realized Mabel hadn’t told her girls.

“I am sorry, Mother,” Janet said suddenly, pausing to hug her mother. “About Aunt Josie.”

Becky’s face, too, changed. “Yes,” she said. “We’re very sorry.”

Then the looks on their faces were different, though still strange. Mabel thought of how they whispered about Esther, talked of dementia when Esther began to forget things and get confused. It was true, Esther was confused, some days more than others, but she was still herself. Mabel wondered if they would begin saying these things about her, doubting her. If this would be a story they would tell as proof of how she’d begun to slip away.

Janet and Becky settled in the couch on either side of her and began to make arrangements for the funeral. Who would pick Mabel up tomorrow, what time. What she needed to wear. There was a kindness in their words, and Mabel felt some measure of relief but no comfort. So she would be going to the funeral, watching the farmlands of east Arkansas fade into the city, one last trip to Little Rock to see Josie. Hadn’t she known she would go all along, in her heart? She couldn’t have really done it, as tempting

as it was—couldn't have let Esther bury Josie alone. But what a day it had been. Mabel thought of the gold Buick, motoring somewhere around town.

## Chapter Four (*Amber*)

Jackson was coming to Parkin. Before she loved Charlie, Amber had loved him. When she met Charlie, she decided that love should be deep and sustaining and true, not maddening. But she was sure, somehow, that she had loved Jackson. He had come to Parkin once before, when a tornado destroyed much of downtown. He was running for Arkansas state senate then, and Amber and Charlie had watched him on the news at night, shaking hands in a Parkin Tigers raincoat. “You going to hear him?” Charlie had asked. Amber said no, and meant it. But something in Charlie’s face changed, and she’d realized her conviction had hurt him, that her no had been too emphatic. Still, he’d said “I wish you wouldn’t.” And she hadn’t.

But that was years ago, before Ellie was buried. Jackson was still in the state senate, supposedly contemplating a run for Congress, and Amber had known he would come, with the recent panic about Parkin drying up. He was going to speak on the courthouse lawn about the factory closing and the schools consolidating and the same things everyone in town had been talking about for months. It did not feel like an offense to Charlie now to go hear Jackson speak. Amber was sure he wouldn’t question her.

It was curiosity, more than anything, that compelled her. She remembered banging on Jackson’s door one early morning after things turned sour between the two of them, demanding he talk to her face to face. Could she have been yelling? Could she have begged? People had seen her, and she hadn’t cared. It was fascinating, that she could have been driven by such intensity; it didn’t seem that it could have been her.

The morning of Jackson's visit, Amber was careful not to turn on the local news. If Charlie had heard that Jackson was coming, he hadn't mentioned it. Amber stood in her closet and picked out a pair of jeans, the same ones she wore a couple of days every week. Only a few of her shirts were presentable for leaving the house. She alternated between them when she had to go to the boys' school. When Ellie died, Amber had gotten rid of most of her own clothes. She couldn't stand the thought of putting them on, walking around in them like she was the same person who'd worn them before. Charlie had taken her shopping a few weeks after she gave her clothes away, but she didn't want anything, and they'd both sat in the dressing room and cried. She'd bought clothes since then, of course, but never very many, never enough to resemble a whole wardrobe. She was intentional about that, but she wasn't sure why.

The pin-striped pants and grey button down shirt she'd bought for the mission board interview—the ones that were supposed to make her look sensible and mature and trustworthy—hung at the front of her closet, but they made her stomach knot. A few clothes she'd bought for Africa hung in the back. They hadn't been planning to take much with them; she'd imagined herself going to busy markets once they got there and buying colorful skirts, sandals made of rope. But it had felt like a dream when she thought of it, like someone else's life, so she'd bought a thin blue cotton dress that tied around the back of her neck and another short bandana dress, hoping they would make her and Charlie's plans seem more real, make her want to go to Uganda. She would take the dresses back. Seeing them in her closet made her nervous. She shoved them to the back of the closet and chose a black sweater for the day, one that hugged her hips.

Once Charlie was out of the bedroom, Amber straightened her hair in front of the mirror and put on eye-liner with a carefulness that was not routine. She wondered what Jackson would think of her, if she would still command his attention. Her body was fuller—someone else’s body, it felt like—but her face was still young—still, ironically, unchanged. When she finished her make-up, she was surprised to see how much she looked like herself, her old self. She would’ve been ashamed for Charlie to see her tending to her appearance so carefully. But she just wanted to hear Jackson because he was a friend from the past, to remember what she had been like, before. She would fix herself up for Charlie that night. Start being a wife again.

The night before, Amber had unloaded dishes in her mother-in-law’s kitchen while Charlie talked to his mother and grandmother in the next room, another version of the same conversation that had been rolling around for the last two weeks, since Amber and Charlie told the family about their plans to take custody of Karlyn and Jessica. Janet couldn’t understand it. Amber and Charlie had two boys, after all. Why couldn’t Amber be satisfied taking care of them? Amber had sensed the question in Janet’s logistical inquiries (*Where did these girls come from? Where will they sleep?*), but Janet had finally voiced it that evening (*Why can’t your own sons ever be enough for you?*) and Amber’s heart had turned cold toward her.

Everything had a precise place in Janet’s cabinets, even dish towels folded in careful stacks. Amber resented Janet all those uninterrupted years, decades of stacking

forks neatly in the fork drawer, in control of everything around her—those seamless years of motherhood.

“Don’t you think you should give yourselves some time?” Janet asked Charlie.

“You’ve been through an ordeal. You need time to settle.”

Charlie hadn’t told his family what happened, how Amber lied in their interview with the mission board—he was too gracious. Instead, he said they’d changed their minds, after the year-long application process. *But you’ve worked so hard for this, Charlie*, Janet had said. *I don’t understand it.* Amber knew Janet suspected that it was her fault, this thwarting of Charlie’s plans. And now there was this “adoption business,” as Janet called it, and she blamed Amber for that, too.

“It’s a big thing, Charlie,” Charlie’s grandmother, Mabel said. “I’d hate to see you rush in to it.”

Amber had hoped Mabel might rise to her defense, argue that it was, after all, the right thing they were doing. When Ellie died, Mabel had wept in the hospital lobby and repeated “poor Charlie, poor, poor Charlie,” and Amber felt a deep tenderness toward her. Mabel had loved Ellie, too, had prided herself that Ellie shared her middle name, but she’d mourned Charlie’s grief first.

“We’re ready to move on,” Charlie was saying. “It’s time.”

*Is it?* Amber could almost hear Janet thinking.

“Amber’s still struggling, Charlie,” Janet was saying. “She’s still having a hard time, you know, being a mom to the boys. I can’t imagine you guys taking on two more kids. You’re just one man, Charlie. You’re not superman.”

“Bless her heart,” Mabel said. “Two little girls.”

Amber walked into the living room, feeling her face flush.

“I can hear you,” she said. “Do you not realize I can hear everything you’re saying?”

Charlie looked at her, face blank. Mabel turned toward her, too, but did not speak.

“I was—” Janet started to say, but Amber walked outside, letting the door slam behind her.

She stepped onto the back porch, where her boys were playing. There, she couldn’t hear the conversation inside.

“What are y’all doing?” she asked, settling into one of Janet’s iron chairs. She looped her fingers through the designs in the iron, like she always did.

David came over and crawled into her lap. “Just playing.”

Amber held his head to her chest and combed her fingers through his hair. Both of her boys had thick, dark curls like Charlie. And they were tender boys. She kissed his forehead.

“Are you having fun?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m ready to go home.”

“Me, too,” Corey said, curling in the chair beside Amber’s and laying his head against the armrest.

“What are they talking about?” Corey asked. The boys had strategically avoided any kind of adult discussion since the interview. They’d witnessed some, and Amber was sorry for it, but they seemed to be able to tell when the air had tensed, and they disappeared.

“Just about the girls staying with us. They’re almost done talking,” Amber said.



They'd told the boys that Karlyn and Jessica would be moving in before they told anyone else. *We're going to be a family for girls who don't have a family*, Amber had told them, and her heart had ached when she thought of Sarah, Jessica's mother who had been her friend. But Sarah hadn't been a mother to her daughter. When you have a daughter, you have to be her mother. It was Sarah's fault. It couldn't be helped. The boys had been excited—more kids to play with. “Will they be our sisters?” David wanted to know. Amber could tell he was afraid to ask. “No,” she'd said. “They won't.” In truth, there was talk of adoption, in the future. She should've said “Maybe some day.” But she couldn't bring herself to. She just said no. *They're just living with us*, she'd said. *We'll be their family. But they won't be your sisters*. How much would they, now six and eight, remember of Ellie, their real sister? They'd been so young when she died, five and three. Amber talked about Ellie to them, showed them her picture, but she was afraid it wouldn't be enough. That their new memories of playing t-ball and going to school would take the place of their memories of that other life, when Ellie was there.

“Why don't you go in and tell your daddy you're ready to go home?” she asked Corey. He slipped inside and she rocked David, enjoying his weight against her.

“You're still my baby,” she said, and he let her kiss his forehead again.

A few minutes later, Corey was back outside. “He said they're still talking,” he said.

“Okay,” Amber said. “Come here.”

Corey crawled into her lap, beside his brother, and they sat outside and waited for Charlie to finish.

When Janet called the next morning, the morning of Jackson's visit, Amber was grateful for the distraction. She assumed Janet was calling to smooth things over from the night before, apologize without apologizing. Instead, Amber heard Charlie and his mother talking about Mabel. Apparently Janet couldn't get Mabel to answer the phone, had driven by her house and hadn't seen her car. Where was she? She had told Janet, just the night before, that she would be home all day. Mabel's eyesight was leaving, and Janet didn't trust her driving. Why hadn't Mabel called her this morning? Let her drive her wherever she was going? And where had she gone? Janet had been suspicious of Mabel, ever since she'd put off telling Janet and Becky about her sister's funeral. Amber wasn't concerned; it amused her to think of Mabel sneaking something past Janet.

"Mother wants me to drive around and look for Grandma," Charlie told her, stepping into the bathroom where Amber was putting on her earrings in front of the mirror. She met her eyes.

"Okay," she said. "Are you worried? I'm sure she's fine."

"Yeah, I'm sure. I told her I'd look for her, though. Are you going somewhere today?"

Amber felt suddenly transparent. "Just taking the boys to school. I may go in and help with David's class for a little while this morning." As soon as the lie was out, Amber felt the day—these plans to go see Jackson—becoming more significant than she wanted it to be.

"Call me if you hear anything about your grandmother," she said.

Amber was sure Mabel was fine. Janet worried over her like she was a child, even though Janet had never really worried over the children, always assuming everything would be fine, that things would keep going on just as they always had. Amber was the worrier, and it irritated them all, even Charlie, sometimes. Overprotective, they called her.

When Ellie, Amber's oldest, started kindergarten, Amber wouldn't let her ride a school bus on field trips unless Amber or someone else in the family went with her. The busses didn't have seatbelts. If there were an accident, Amber wanted someone there who would worry about Ellie first, instead of the fifty others. Even Mabel had gone, once, sharing a seat with Ellie on the way to the zoo. "When Ellie gets older, she's not going to stand for it," Charlie had said.

Amber hadn't fully trusted the happiness of her and Charlie being in love and having a home and those beautiful children. When Ellie was a baby, Amber got up several times a night to look at her, make sure she was still breathing. And then the boys were born—first Corey, and then David—and all of it had begun to seem okay, familiar and comfortable, and Amber had allowed herself to relax. And then, Ellie went to sleep and didn't wake up. An ideal death, but for an eighty-year-old, not an eight-year old.

It shouldn't have been Ellie. In the months after Ellie's death, Amber imagined a million scenarios. If someone had to die, it should've been someone else. Amber herself, maybe, dying in a car wreck and leaving Charlie to raise the children, as he would do beautifully. But, really, it should have been Mabel. Perhaps Mabel had been baby-sitting Ellie, as she sometimes did, and maybe she collapsed and Ellie was in danger somehow, maybe Mabel had left something too hot on the stove and it was beginning to burn or

maybe she had left Ellie in a bathtub (here, in Amber's mind, Ellie became a much younger version of herself, the gap-toothed two-year-old she couldn't turn her back on) Yes, it should've been her, Mabel, who'd had eighty nine years on this earth, who had woven her life into a hundred other lives and could leave the earth knowing that she would live on.

At Ellie's funeral, Amber had known Mabel knew it, could tell by the way she eyed the small casket. Mabel had to know the grief at her own funeral would've been different. Sorrowful, yes, and deep and honest, but not wild and maddening. Mabel should've been the one that had to leave them. And they could've talked of her with her sisters in Heaven, the sisters she thought of so often and talked about with a longing that made Amber ache. Instead, Amber wondered if Ellie were lonely. She'd envied Mabel, watching the stiff curve of her back and knowing that she would join Ellie maybe half a century before Amber herself did. She'd envied those years. But then it all washed away when she thought of Mabel saying "poor Charlie, poor, poor Charlie," and Amber had prayed that God would spare her own sons, that they'd suffered enough and that they would grow to be men whose lives would be peaceful, with healthy wives and children and death in their sleep at the end of a long life, and that she would never have to watch them bury anyone they loved.

A few hours later, Amber stood amidst the crowd on the courthouse lawn. Jackson's voice over the speaker was the same as ever: his political voice, Amber had called it in the early days, when she would ride with him to events, reading his notes

aloud as he mouthed the words to his speeches (even practicing hand gestures) while he drove and Amber scratched his back. Before Amber met Charlie and married him, before Jackson won his first election. His political voice, different from his real voice but still familiar.

When she realized he had noticed her, when his eyes kept returning, Amber felt something of what it had been to be alone, to make choices that did not cast shock waves across a family, a kind husband and his lookalike sons. When the speech was over, Jackson's aids spread out in front of the stage with copies of a petition against the school consolidation. Similar petitions had been going around Parkin for months, but Amber didn't imagine any of them would be effective. She hadn't signed one; she couldn't make herself feel for the town, though it seemed she should have. She wanted to stay here—had staked everything on staying here—but it did not feel monumental to her, what happened with the school or the factory, or even Parkin itself.

She heard Jackson behind her before she saw him.

“Can you give me an hour?” he said, touching her back. “In one hour, I'll be right here. We can go talk.”

“Okay,” she said.

He touched her hand and was gone again in the crowd. She wandered, trying to look as if she had a reason for being on the courthouse lawn other than her reason for being there. It was so public, her waiting for Jackson in the open. How embarrassing for Charlie. But no one would know. When people looked at her, they saw a mother who'd lost her daughter. It was hard to see more than that, to imagine there had ever been more. It was hard, even, for Amber to remember.

Just after it all blew up over Uganda, in the quiet days before they decided, for sure, to take in the girls, before Charlie agreed that he was ready, that it was right, Amber had begun imagining a life without Charlie. It had been the cemetery—that grave—that kept her here, out of Africa. But she'd pictured herself, in those strange, still days, to have gone somewhere wholly unfamiliar, taking her boys with her. She would find a new job—maybe campaign work, like she used to do—and she and her boys would make a new life with people who never knew about Ellie or Charlie or Africa. But, after all, that was not what she wanted. The life she wanted had been buried with Ellie. She realized that, and Charlie had finally realized it, too—that Amber could not (she preferred “could not” to Charlie’s “would not”) move forward with him into the life he wanted. But then there'd been the promise of the girls coming, those beautiful girls who Amber loved, and she'd felt the world begin to change.

Amber and Charlie still had friends from school who mentioned Jackson from time to time, telling news of him in front of both of them, as if the years that had passed and the fact that Amber and Charlie were married made the past obsolete. It made Amber uneasy. In college, when she and Jackson had been together, she felt superior to the other girls she saw him with. He always had people around him, always lots of girls. But she'd been confident that she was the one he really wanted, the one that mattered. They'd never slept together. He teased her about refusing him, being a goody goody, laughed about her trips as a summer missionary. He stayed the night often, even though they didn't have

sex. Sleeping curled against him, she would think *He has to love me. He has to.* She'd convinced herself none of the other girls mattered—she was what he really wanted. But then she'd seen him on campus with a girl with shiny black hair, the kind of thick, shiny hair Amber had always envied, was always tempted to touch. Jackson walked with his hand on the girl's lower back, the way he walked beside Amber. And that was the beginning of the end.

Shortly after things blew up between the two of them, Jackson joined the reserves and left for boot camp. He wanted a service record for his political career, he'd told her, not quite joking. He came back over the summer with hard arms and sat beside her on her bed, laughing when she showed him her engagement ring. He'd twisted it around her finger so that the diamond pointed down. "A joke right?" he'd asked. And she'd felt a certain satisfaction at the deadening of his eyes, but also a certain sickness.

She hadn't seen him since she'd been married. They started talking once, for a few weeks, when he called, wanting her to come work for him, write speeches for him like she did in the beginning. She'd known, from the beginning, that she wouldn't do it. She and Charlie were too anchored to Parkin to move to Little Rock, where she'd have to work. And Charlie would never want her to work with Jackson. But they'd had several conversations, during the day when Charlie was at work. She'd told Charlie, finally, one night when the oldest two were in bed and Amber was rocking David, the baby.

"When did he call?" Charlie asked. Amber had to admit it had been a week, that she'd talked to him a few times, that she hadn't mentioned it at first.

"I'm assuming you said no?" Charlie asked.

"Of course."

She'd sat up for over an hour after that, rocking the baby long after he was asleep. There were only a few more calls after that.

The crowd was clearing, and Jackson motioned for Amber to come talk to him. He was sitting in front of one of the tables where the petitions had been set up. A few people had gotten their pictures made with him. Amber sat down beside him.

"I couldn't believe you didn't come the first time I was here," he said.

"That was a long time ago."

"So? I looked for you. I knew you lived here."

"I came today," Amber said.

"Yeah. Thanks," he said.

He was smiling at people who were still looking at the brochures on the tables, waving when he caught their eye.

"I was sorry about your daughter, by the way," he said, turning to face Amber.

She hadn't heard from him when Ellie died. It was strange, all the people they heard from. High school friends, college friends, old teachers, professors, members of the churches where Charlie had served. People wrote long, emotional letters, people she hadn't talked to in years. She didn't know how it spread so fast, how somehow news of Ellie's death traced its way back through all the circles Amber had ever walked and all these voices of the past were rising up, sending their condolences, begging Amber to call them if she ever needed anything. She had wondered if Jackson would write. It seemed that everyone who'd ever mattered to her wanted a say in her grief, wanted her to know



they remembered. She'd gotten letters from people who hadn't even known she had a daughter, people she hadn't thought of in years. Charlie's ex-girlfriend, the only significant girlfriend he'd had before Amber, had written a long, feeling letter to both of them. It was deeply kind and sincere, one of the few Amber responded to. She'd written again near the first anniversary of Ellie's death. But nothing from Jackson.

"I saw her picture in the paper," Jackson said. "She looked like you."

"She did."

This was not the conversation Amber wanted to have.

"Why did you come today?" Jackson asked, when she was quiet for a few moments.

"I don't know. To see you. To say hi."

"Did Charlie know you were coming?" he asked.

"We didn't talk about it."

"I'm sure he wouldn't love it."

"Maybe not," Amber said.

"He's a good man," Jackson said.

"He is."

"I heard somewhere you were going to be missionaries, move to Africa or something like that."

The crowd was getting thinner. What would happen when the last people left?

"We were," she said.

"Well, why are you still in Parkin?"

"I decided I didn't want to go."

“And Charlie?”

“There wasn’t much he could do about it.” The coldness in her voice was insincere.

“I always knew you didn’t need to be a missionary,” Jackson said. “You should come work for me. You’d be good at it. You could do something that mattered.”

When she first met Jackson, Amber had loved his ambition. She’d believed in the things that drove him—he wanted to help people, to make a difference, to serve the poor. And she had always known he would. But then she’d met Charlie, and he wanted to change the world, too, to save it, and his was a ministry to the poor. He did his work in quiet moments in people’s living rooms, when Jackson was at a microphone. And Amber had seen her plans for herself begin to change—she wanted to be in the living rooms, with Charlie, and she had been, until Ellie died.

“I am doing something that matters,” she said. “We’re adopting two girls.”

She explained to him about Linda and Sarah and the girls, how it would all be happening soon.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” he asked.

“Their mothers are drugged out,” she said, “Both of them. The grandmother can’t take care of them any more. They don’t have anywhere to live.” Amber couldn’t convey the years that had passed between all of them, when she had become friends with Sarah, when she had held Jessica’s hand and walked her home from church.

Jackson laughed. “Doesn’t sound very original, Amber. Come work for me. You can do something that matters for more than just those two kids.”

He traced her arm with his fingertip, a light, comfortable touch.

“Will you meet me later?” he asked her. “So we can talk without all of these people around?”

His brazenness irritated her, but it was somehow appealing that he was not put off by her grief. Charlie was careful with her, treating her like a very delicate thing. He had asked her one night, after Ellie died, if she thought they would ever be the same, the two of them. She knew what he meant, and she’d said she didn’t know. A month or two after that, he had put his arms around her at night, kissing the back of her neck, and she’d felt him hard against her. She’d stayed still, staring at the wall, pretending to be asleep. They both knew she was awake. Some time later, he had scratched her back, his fingers cool against her skin, and she had turned to face him. That’s how they came to it these days—he would scratch her back, as she lay facing away from him, and sometimes she would turn over, and sometimes she would not. They never talked about it.

She imagined going into a room with Jackson, how he would have expectations that even her own husband did not, her husband who loved her but who now feared her, stepped carefully around her. She was nothing delicate to Jackson, she realized. She would go. She didn’t think past that, to what would happen next or what if Charlie found out. She just imagined Jackson walking in the door, his expectation.

Amber was making her way through the crowd—headed to the car to go meet Jackson—when she saw Mabel’s Buick. She’d had a text from Charlie that he hadn’t found Mabel anywhere but that he’d calmed his mother and would let Amber know when they did hear from Mabel. Evidently he hadn’t driven here.

Amber headed toward the car, parked in front of a lawyer's office just next to the court house. She felt her head beginning to clear as the sight of the car anchored her. If she didn't make it back before Jackson left, she knew, his day would continue just as it had before.

The car was empty, and Amber felt a flash of fear. Janet liked to imply that her mother was "starting to slip," but Amber didn't believe it. Here was this empty car, though. What if Mabel had gotten confused? Or what if someone had—? It was too terrible to think. Amber considered calling Janet, but loyalty to Mabel stopped her. Maybe Mabel had a reason to be downtown, something she didn't want Janet to know. Amber felt a kinship to Mabel; Janet was always planning things around both of them, managing them.

She was trying to decide if she should go in the lawyer's office and look for Mabel, when she saw Sarah walking out of the building. Her stomach had rounded since Amber had last seen her. What would happen to this new child, Jessica's baby brother, that until now had not felt altogether real? Sarah's hair was freshly cut, and her clothes looked new. Amber was staring at her, wondering what to make of it all, wondering if she should approach her, when Sarah walked to Mabel's car and opened the door with a key.

"Sarah!" Amber yelled, startling herself. Sarah turned and saw her.

"What are you doing?" Amber yelled, a wave of fear washing over her. Whatever this was, it could not mean anything good. "Why are you in Mrs. Rogers' car?" Amber could never bring herself to call Mabel "Mabel," though she thought of her as such.

"She let me borrow it," said Sarah.

"What? Why? How do you know her?"

“She’s helping me,” Sarah said. “Helping me get back on my feet and work through some of this.”

It didn’t make sense. “Charlie’s grandmother is helping you?” Amber asked.

“Yes.”

“How do you know her?”

“She came to my place,” Sarah said. “To check on me.”

It was true, then. Mabel must be losing her mind. There must’ve been more to Janet’s talk than Amber and Charlie had realized. Why would Mabel have done such a thing? But she had listened so quietly. *What about the girls’ mother?* she’d asked Amber at least three times. And Amber had explained it all. How the mother, Sarah herself, was an addict, how she’d neglected her daughter, had, in fact, already lost her in court. Amber felt an anger rising inside of her. Until the last few years, she’d never felt comfortable being angry. It was an emotion she tried to shed quickly, one she never felt fully entitled to. Recently, though, anger had come to settle over her comfortably, a familiar cover, and she felt herself more fully present in the conversation now.

It occurred to her that Sarah could’ve stolen the car. Not likely, but Sarah was desperate.

“Where is Mrs. Rogers?” Amber asked.

“She was at her house when I left.”

“And she just let you take her car? To go around doing what?”

“To see my lawyer and get some paperwork taken care of. To get my daughter back.”

Sarah's eyes looked hard into Amber's now, and Amber felt the slightest touch of shame. She understood the new clothes, suddenly, the hair and the make-up. Wasn't this what she had always wanted for Sarah? Confidence? A new start? She'd taken Sarah shopping before, driven her around to look for jobs. But wouldn't it end? Didn't it always? And then what would happen to the girls? Those girls whose room Amber was already arranging? They'd boxed up all of Ellie's things, finally, Charlie doing most of it, packing them away in Rubbermaid bins to keep in the attic. I can get them down any time, Amber had told herself, any time I want. They'd ordered beds already, dressers.

"Think about what's best for the girls," Amber said.

"Go to hell, Amber."

Sarah got into the car with her things—could that have been a briefcase? Amber couldn't tell—and drove off. Amber chased her for a moment, instinctively, before she realized how absurd she looked, running after a moving car. She was out of breath by the time she called Charlie.

"Hey," he said. Charlie always answered her calls, even when he was in meetings.

"Charlie! Sarah has your grandmother's car. I just saw her. Your grandmother has been helping her ....."

"What? Where are you?"

"I'm at the courthouse," Amber said. "She was down here at the lawyer's office, Rob Rollen's. Come home, now."

"What are you doing at the courthouse?"

Amber was quiet. She hadn't expected the question.

"I heard he was coming," Charlie said, voice flat.

“Just please come home. We have to figure out what’s going on with your grandmother. I don’t know what Sarah’s been telling her,” Amber said.

“I’ll meet you at the house.”

She was running to her car, out of breath again, when she saw Jackson.

“You don’t have to run,” he said. “I’ll wait for you.” His smile irritated her. He’d been looking at his phone. They had been together before iphones, but there had always been other people lurking, other things on his mind. What would it would be like now, with all that access, those interruptions? She felt a surge of loyalty to Charlie, who she knew to be ever-loyal.

“I have to go,” she told him.

“I thought you wanted to stay. I thought you were coming to see me. ”

“I have to go home. Long story. I just saw Sarah, the lady I was telling you about. She was at a lawyer’s office, trying to get some paperwork for the kids. I have to leave now.”

“For her own kid, right?” Jackson said.

“Never mind. It’s complicated.”

Amber started to walk away, and he grabbed her hand.

“You’re not even going to say goodbye?”

“Bye,” she said. “It was good to see you.” She felt deeply sad, suddenly. It had been good to see him. He wouldn’t be back, and if he were, she wouldn’t come.

“I’ll see you again,” she said. “Next time you’re through here. Or next time you’re through wherever we end up. You’re always everywhere, right?”

“You’re really leaving? And not coming back?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I need to go. I just wanted to see you today, to say hello.”

“You really are crazy, Amber. This thing with these girls, it’s crazy.”

“Good luck with everything,” she said. “We always vote for you.” Charlie had never voted for Jackson and would likely never vote for Jackson, but Amber felt herself fully as part of a “we,” now, aligned with Charlie, needing to leave this place.

“I’m glad you came today,” Jackson said, still holding her hand. “It was good to see you.”

“You too.” She leaned in to hug him and kissed his cheek, then she was on her way, her hands trembling as she drove.

“My grandmother is at home,” Charlie said when she walked in the door. He was sitting on the edge of the couch. “My mom went in with her key. Grandma said she was having more repair work done on her car, that the body shop had come to get it. She said she didn’t hear her phone.”

Thankfully, he’d apparently lost sight of Jackson and was now focused on the Sarah fiasco.

“It’s not true. Sarah had the car. I saw her. She said your grandmother gave her the keys,” she said.

“I know.”

“Did you tell your mom?” Amber asked.

“No.”

“Why? This is crazy. We have to do something.”



“Let’s go talk to her ourselves, first. See what’s going on,” Charlie said.

Amber’s hands were still trembling in the car. This time, Charlie drove.

“It’s not the first time,” Amber said. “I think your grandma has been taking Sarah places a lot. She said she was having repair work done the other day. Remember? When your mother couldn’t get her on the phone? The day her sister died and we called her all day? And we couldn’t find her anywhere? She was home that day, too, without her car.”

Charlie was quiet.

“Why would she do it?” Amber asked.

“Only because she thinks it’s the right thing to do.”

Charlie was easily convinced of people’s goodness, and Amber herself had believed in Mabel’s goodness, but people could surprise you. Amber had learned that.

Mabel’s car was still gone when they got to her house. Where had Sarah gone next? Did Mabel know?

Charlie knocked on the door and Mabel threw it open, as if she’d been waiting for their knock. Her face changed when she saw them. She had been expecting Sarah, Amber realized.

“Charlie!” Mabel said, not backing up to make space for them to come in. “How are you?”

“Can we come in, Grandma?” he asked. “We were hoping to talk to you.”

“We know Sarah has your car,” Amber said. “Why did you give it to her? Why did you go see her?”

There was a pause and then Mabel opened the door, waved her arm for them to come inside.

“I wanted to see for myself,” Mabel said, when they were seated on her couches. She’d grabbed Charlie a Dr. Pepper out of the fridge, like she always did. “I didn’t want you kids to do something you would regret, something reactionary.”

Amber’s daughter had been dead for three years. She wondered how long Ellie would have to be gone before people quit thinking of Amber’s actions in terms of her reaction to Ellie’s death, before she herself quit thinking of them as such, before they ceased to be.

“It’s a big thing, to take a child from her mother,” Mabel said.

“Do you think I’m doing this on my own?” Amber asked. “That I could’ve just walked in and taken the kids for no reason? Sarah didn’t even have the girls. They weren’t even hers to make decisions for.”

“Amber!” Charlie said. “Let her talk.”

She hated his passivity, suddenly, his willingness to watch all of this happening, his slowness to anger.

“Don’t you care?” she asked him. “Don’t you care what happens to the girls? They don’t need to be back with Sarah.”

“She needed to see for herself,” he said. “What did you think, Grandma, after seeing her?”

Only Charlie would ask that, open the matter up as if everyone had an equal say in it, when Charlie and Amber had watched this family for years, spent hours in their home, and Mabel couldn’t have known Sarah longer than three weeks.

“Are you sure you want to do it?” Mabel asked.

There was a tenderness to the question that startled Amber.

“They need us,” Amber said. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“But there are other places they could go. You don’t have to put yourself through it.” Mabel was speaking directly to Amber now, with a compassion Amber couldn’t quite place.

“You’ve had enough on you,” Mabel said.

Amber was struggling to find an explanation for all of this, something besides the fact that Mabel didn’t want them to have the girls. Mabel had just lost a sister, Amber reminded herself. The sister that had actually been gone for years in a hospital in Little Rock, lying still in a bed and being turned over for people to change her sheets. So maybe there was something else driving her, something Amber couldn’t understand.

Amber had never had sisters. There had been two step-brothers, brothers themselves who shared whole worlds between them and didn’t need a sister. She had never wanted a real brother—she saw the way they argued, how they teased her—but she had ached for a sister. Her parents had divorced when she was small, and there was never anyone but her, travelling between the two homes, the two different worlds. She had been jealously protective of her relationship with Ellie, that child version of herself. She’d started calling Ellie “Sissy” when she first found out she was pregnant with Corey, Ellie’s baby brother, those years of loneliness redeemed through this blond-haired little girl who could’ve passed for Amber’s own sister. She loved the stories Mabel told about growing up with the three other girls. She’d thought she and Ellie could have that, their own little world.

“Why don’t you give us a minute, Amber?” Charlie asked. Amber had gotten too loud, she realized. She always talked too loud when she was crying. But this was not an ordinary day. Still, she did as Charlie asked and went outside, sitting on the front porch. She didn’t close the door completely, so she could still hear their voices. Here she was for the second time in a week, listening to Charlie have a conversation that she should’ve had a place in. It really is his family, after all, she thought, and felt a pressing loneliness.

“I just can’t believe she did it. Behind our backs,” Amber said, an hour later when she and Charlie were back in the car, headed now to pick up the boys in the car-rider line at school. Charlie and Mabel hadn’t come to any conclusions, he’d told her. Mabel had explained herself but not apologized. She hadn’t agreed to stop helping Sarah. Mabel wanted Amber to come talk to her, just Amber.

“She’s almost ninety years old,” Charlie said. “Give her a break. She had her reasons.”

“She still shouldn’t have done it,” Amber said. “She should have talked to us first.”

“You have to let things go sometimes,” Charlie said. “Even big things.” Amber sensed there was a lesson in what he was telling her. She felt him distancing himself from her with his carefully chosen words, his controlled tone.

He was telling her that he’d let a big thing go—they hadn’t talked about the interview since the first day they were home, how Amber had thrown their dreams of Africa away. She couldn’t say that she would take it back. She still didn’t want to be in

Africa, knew it would have been a mistake to go when she wasn't ready, when she was just pretending, when that grave in Parkin was pulling on her like a magnetic force.

Amber reached for Charlie's hand and circled her fingers around his wrist, a habit from the early days of their relationship. His hands stayed stiff on the wheel, and in a moment, he moved his hand, knocking hers away.

"Why did you go to the courthouse today?" he asked.

"I wanted to see what the rally was all about."

"Tell the truth. You went to see Jackson. Why?"

Amber thought of her reasons, how she had wanted to feel free and wanted, somehow, like a different version of herself, a self that had risen up from a different lifetime. She didn't know how to say this honestly without being hurtful. She considered telling him the truth, that she had gone out of some nagging curiosity, some old desire, and that she had changed her mind. That she wanted him, Charlie. But she didn't trust him to believe her.

"Why?" he asked again.

"I don't know," she said. "He was a friend. From a different time, before all this."

"Do you want to get out of 'all this'?" Charlie's voice was neutral and controlled, the voice she'd heard him use in counseling sessions when couples were fighting, his voice for reasoning with the unreasonable. She wanted him angry and out-of-control and real.

"Why are you wanting to bring those girls into our family if you don't even want to be here yourself?" he asked again, and something caught in his voice.

“I do,” she said, honest now. “I want to be here. With you and Corey and David. And the girls.”

“How long did you talk to Jackson?” Charlie asked her.

“Not long. Just enough to say hi. I saw your grandmother’s car right after that.”

“What if you hadn’t?”

“I don’t know.” She felt a freeing honesty, a desire to confess it all, how her urge to leave with Jackson had been almost tangible, how she had seen herself in some different place, some other life.

“We have a family,” said Charlie. “Two boys who need us and maybe these two girls. I need to know if you’re in this or not.”

“Yes,” she said. “I am.”

“I don’t want you to see him again. If he comes back, I don’t want you to go. Or talk to him or call him or anything.”

It was an arbitrary agreement. Amber knew Jackson wouldn’t be back, at least any time soon. If he did pass through, some time later, she wouldn’t see him. There was nothing there, nothing real and holding. She thought of how he had held her hand, how he’d been the same as ever, how she was ready to leave with him, to meet him, before she saw Mabel’s car.

“Okay,” she said, and she felt relief but something ached inside her, too.

“What if Sarah gets it stopped?” she asked. “If she gets to keep Jessica?”

“I don’t know.” Charlie’s voice was toneless now, and they were quiet until the boys got in the car.

The next day was a Friday, Charlie would be headed to the river to fly fish before dawn.

“What time do you want to leave in the morning?” Amber asked him.

“I’d rather go by myself tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? I’d really like to come.”

There had been mornings when she did not want to go, many mornings when she in fact did not go. And on those days, Charlie had begged her, pleaded with her, feeling an acute need for the two of them to be together alone, to try to make a marriage again and do something normal, something they had done before Ellie died.

“Seriously, I’d rather be by myself tomorrow,” he said.

Amber had wished for freedom from the church, freedom to let their grief play out however it may without worrying about everyone watching, and she wondered now what Charlie would’ve been like if he’d done that, if he’d given himself that freedom. She felt afraid.

She almost begged him to let her go with him, desperate to make things between them be like they had been before. She was afraid, now, that it had all gone too far. She thought of beating on Jackson’s door that morning so long ago, remembered the desperation. She did not ask Charlie to go again, but she woke up when he left and lay awake until the sun came up.

## Chapter Five (*Mabel*)

In the late fall, when Leeland was in harvest, Mabel would serve him supper as late as midnight, in a kitchen she'd cleaned hours before. The girls would've already had their dinner, would already be in bed, and Mabel and Leeland would talk in whispers while he ate. Some days Mabel got up and packed Leeland's lunch the next morning, before he returned to the fields at sun-up, but other days she kissed him goodbye and stayed in bed until one of the children called for her. When fall faded into winter, nature betrayed Leeland and allowed him to rest, like a useless man. Mabel would awaken to his moving beside her, checking the clock, turning on his side as if to go back to sleep, though she could tell by his breathing he lay awake. The first winter after his death, Mabel would wake in the early dark as Leeland had done, anxious for daylight. How nervous those mornings had been, and how she had ached for Leeland, her loneliness reverberating in the drip of the faucet, the murmur of the heater. But the habit had faded, as had so many from their life together, and sleep had come easy again.

But here she was, since she'd met Sarah and gotten herself involved in this mess, waking in the night with an anxiousness that reminded her of those early days of widowhood. How foreign the house had seemed, then, and how empty. The girls were still there—Becky was only in seventh grade when her daddy died—but Leeland's absence had deflated the house. Fixing coffee in the mornings, Mabel thought, "This house will never be the same." She'd intended to sell it, but the girls wanted to keep it—it had been their only home, after all, their home with their daddy. Mabel had conceded, and here she was, all these years later. She'd considered selling it again, after the girls graduated and moved out and the loneliness became oppressive. If she heard a noise at night and felt afraid, she called loudly for Leeland *Leeland, did you hear something?*



*Come and see*, so that whoever was in the house would hear her calling his name, a man's name, and retreat. But in time, her aloneness had become a comfort, a companion in itself, and she'd learned to depend on it—to crave it. She loved having her children and grandchildren over, but it was something of a relief to be alone again, afterwards. The past week, with Josie's funeral, had been exhausting—someone always around. Mabel had stayed a few extra days to visit with Josie's daughters, had just gotten home the night before. She was glad to be home, but Sarah was staying with her until the utilities were back on in the trailer, and it was strange, sharing the house again.

Mabel walked quietly past the extra room where Sarah was sleeping. She usually stayed in her own room when she rose early, but she needed to get paperwork together. She had to renew her drivers' license, of all things, and was headed to the DMV today. In the midst of Josie's getting sick and dying and the whole business with Amber and Charlie and these two girls, Mabel had turned eighty-nine. On the way home from Little Rock after Josie's funeral, Janet slapped the steering wheel and said, "Mother! Your birthday!" And they'd both laughed. How they had talked about it, before. They'd celebrated early, so everyone could come. Then Amber and Charlie made their announcement—had it only been two weeks ago?—and the world had changed. But, finally, eighty-nine. Mabel didn't feel any different. How she and Leeland would have laughed to imagine themselves *eighty-nine*. He was only forty-nine when he died, she forty-seven. How old she had felt—"A forty-seven-year-old single woman," she'd said to her sisters. "I'll never remarry."—but what could she have known then, about age?

There was a tightness in her chest at the thought of going to the DMV, asking to renew her license. It was expired now, since her birthday was actually yesterday. She'd

have to pay a fine. The last time she went, three years ago, the woman who renewed her license hadn't required Mabel to take an eye test. Her daughters had been horrified, but Mabel laughed, called it her lucky day. She might have passed the eye test then. It was macular degeneration, after all. Her eyesight had been better at the time, was getting worse every day. She knew she couldn't pass now. Maybe she could talk to the woman, distract her, make her forget again. But that wasn't likely. Mabel didn't drive much, at her daughters' insistence, but she drove some, and she knew that she could. If she walked out of the courthouse without a license today, Mabel would lose something essential to herself, something she could never get back.

"Are you okay?" Sarah's voice startled Mabel. She had stepped into the living room and was leaning against the doorframe, watching her.

"Oh! I didn't hear you. Yes, I'm fine. You're up early."

"Are you sure you're okay? Do you feel bad?" Sarah asked.

"No. Not sleeping well, but I'm fine."

Sarah studied her. "How was the funeral?" she asked. She'd been in bed the night before, when Janet dropped Mabel off. Janet had walked inside with Mabel and looked around, trying to find some trace of Sarah, begging Mabel to come stay at her house. She didn't feel comfortable with Sarah staying at her mother's. Sarah was a desperate woman, Janet said, who could do *who knows what*.

"It was a funeral." Mabel was embarrassed by the tremble in her words. It took her voice awhile to steady in the mornings.

"You look nice," Mabel said. Sarah was dressed in one of the new outfits she'd gotten with the money Mabel gave her, a purple sweater that stretched across her middle.

Her stomach looked rounder than it had two days ago, like she could go any time. The baby wasn't due for another month, but Mabel felt a creeping desperation at the sight of her, a sense that all of this needed to be resolved, and soon.

"There's a hearing today," Sarah said. She'd been back to the lawyer, that Rollen boy who was helping her for free. She hadn't talked about it much, but Mabel knew she'd been to see him a few times. He was hopeful, Sarah said now. Courts preferred the biological parents. And Sarah was willing to do whatever was asked of her—she would go to rehab, had already applied for jobs, was working on finding a new place for her and her daughter. That was all in her favor. She told Mabel these things like she was telling her that she had been to the grocery store, might go to the bank that afternoon. Mabel marveled at her calmness, how casually she spoke.

"He thinks we'll know something today," Sarah said.

"Know something?"

"He thinks we'll get a decision. About Jessica."

This hearing was bigger than Mabel realized, she understood now. It was what she had been waiting for, a convergence of all this.

"You mean, you think you'll know today who's getting custody?" Mabel thought of how Amber had sat on Charlie's lap the night they told the family about the girls, the lightness in her steps. The tightness in Mabel's chest grew.

"That's the point of it," Sarah said. "For the judge to decide."

"Do Amber and Charlie know?"

"They'll be there. Amber's testifying."

Mabel was stunned. It really was a hearing, then. All these people coming together, these people Mabel loved who moved so strangely around her. All of this had transpired, apparently, in the days that Mabel had been in Little Rock. But Janet had brought her home just yesterday and hadn't said a word. Did she know? Would she be there?

"Mama's going to testify, too," Sarah said. "Against me." Her voice caught, and Mabel ached for her. Sarah was so hard—that's the only word Mabel knew for her. *So hard, so hard*, she thought, every day, as she watched her. Mabel didn't want to see her cry, for Sarah's sake. How terrible, to listen to your mother tell a roomful of people that you were unfit, that she would rather see her granddaughter raised by people who weren't even family than by her own daughter.

The lawyers had taken a statement from the child, Jessica, too. They'd asked the girl questions about Sarah, what kind of mother she was, and about Amber, what it might be like to live with her. When Sarah came home from the lawyer's office, the day she read Jessica's responses, she went straight to the guest bedroom and shut the door. Mabel didn't see her all night. "She's just a kid," Sarah said, later. "She's confused." Would Sarah have to hear Jessica's words today, whatever she'd said to hurt her, in front of all of those people? Mabel felt a surge of pity at the thought of Sarah sitting alone, with that kid of a lawyer, while Amber and Sarah's mother and—would Charlie go?—who knows who else sat across from her, waiting to see her fail. Sarah shouldn't have to do this alone. Mabel caught the words—"Do you want me to come with you?"—just before she got them out.

No. She couldn't do that, so publicly pit herself against her own kids and grandkids. But wouldn't it be something to hear it all for herself? To know if she had been right to trust Sarah, to believe that Sarah was ready to change and give her child a new life, or if Amber and Charlie were doing the right thing, and Mabel had gotten it wrong?

Mabel found, sometimes, that people stirred remembrances in her, that she felt deeply close to them only because they reminded her of people she had known years before. A young woman at her church, Cassie something, the girl who collected money before supper on Wednesday nights, reminded Mabel of Alice Perkins, her friend from college. They'd taught together right out of school, always running to Memphis on the weekends. Mabel just visited with Cassie in passing, but how dear she felt to her, and how intimate. Cassie's hair was thick and blond like Alice's, though she wore it long, and her eyes were the same dark brown. She laughed often—Alice had always been laughing—and when she did she would hold her hand to her mouth, a gesture so familiar that sometimes Mabel would catch herself thinking *Alice has grown her hair out. It suits her*. But of course Alice hadn't had thick blond hair in years, had been gone from Parkin so long that Mabel didn't know if she was alive or dead. She was probably dead, like everyone else from those days. Surely this was part of growing old, the way people from her past kept slipping in, surprising her in her present. Not something worse, not some sign of "slipping" as her girls said about Esther. She'd made a joke to the girl, Cassie, once, something Alice certainly would've thought was funny, and the girl had laughed,

but only to be kind. Of course Mabel knew she wasn't Alice. But she couldn't help feeling close to her, that Cassie was someone very dear. There were others, too—the checker at the grocery store who looked so like one of Leeland's friend from the service (Benny, the one they'd always double-dated with) that Mabel teased with him and always waited to go through his lane, even if other lines were shorter. Yes, it must be a part of growing old, of having so much of life stretching behind you that it tended to circle up and surprise you, sometimes, disguising itself as a new step.

But there was never anything of Sarah that struck a chord with Mabel. She found her so entirely strange, so different from anyone she had known. Even her mannerisms were different, the gruffness of her speech. How she talked so frankly about losing her children. Mabel felt a hardness toward Sarah when she remembered that her little girl was even now living with strangers because Sarah hadn't cared for her. But other times, she felt a wave of compassion so heavy it nearly choked her, a thick thing that rose from her stomach and climbed all the way up her throat. And she would have done anything to help Sarah, then, to help her get her daughter back and start the life she should've had all along. That was how she felt the day she first went to Sarah's trailer, when she found her alone in that terrible heat. And it was how she felt now, as she imagined the events of the day. But she felt another compassion rising up for Amber, just as strong, just as suffocating.

At Josie's funeral, Mabel saw Amber for the first time since the day Charlie and Amber walked through her front door without knocking, Charlie sitting on the couch

beside Mabel while Amber stood, confronting Mabel about helping Sarah. Charlie had been so civil—but wasn't there something distant about him? Would he ever feel the same toward Mabel?—and Amber angry, eyes dark and voice shaking. Charlie and Mabel had done most of the talking—Charlie explaining why they'd been willing to take the girls, Mabel explaining why she'd gone to find Sarah—but not much was resolved. Mabel had asked Amber to come back later so they could talk, just the two of them, but Amber hadn't. At the funeral, Amber patted Mabel on the back and said "I'm sorry for your loss," her touch stiff and formal. After that, she floated ghostlike through the weekend. Mabel would notice her and think *She's here* and then seconds later, when she glanced back, Amber was gone. Mabel didn't know where she was drifting away to, but she was painfully aware of Amber at all times, of her presence and her absence. There was a stillness in the girl's features, a careful holding of her face just so, that rendered her quite unfamiliar. When Mabel asked Charlie if Amber was okay, he'd said "I suppose," with a hardness that startled Mabel.

But then, at the graveside, when the pall bearers laid their yellow corsages on Josie's casket, Amber had sobbed—sudden, violent cries. Was it her first funeral since Ellie's? Someone—maybe Mabel herself—should've told her, she realized, not to come, that it was okay. She thought of how Amber had dropped to the ground at Ellie's funeral, so suddenly. She'd been sitting on the front pew, facing the casket, and everyone had whispered how well she was holding up, thanking God for giving her strength. But then, after Charlie laid his own corsage on the casket and the service was over and everyone was supposed to leave, Amber had fallen to the ground, refusing to leave, her screams animal and sickening. Janet had taken the boys away, as she would do so many times in

the next weeks and months, and everyone else had left, leaving Charlie there, and the minister, to get the girl off the ground, into the car, back to her house, to begin a life without that child.

Bless her. Amber had been a child herself. Still was, just over 30 years old. Mabel felt the fresh weight of it when she heard Amber crying at Josie's funeral, the cruelty of that beautiful little girl just leaving them, being taken. And those other two girls, Jessica and Karlyn, whose mothers hadn't even raised them, and Amber had to see them, every day, motherless. Amber couldn't help herself. Of course she couldn't. Mabel felt a deep shame in the remembrance of that raw grief, shame for getting herself in the middle of this thing, when she knew how Amber and Charlie ached.

Mabel hadn't been able to look at Amber at Josie's funeral, when she heard her crying. She felt Janet leave her side, walk over to Charlie and Amber. She saw Charlie leading Amber away, an arm around her waist as they went to the car. *Charlie loves her* Mabel thought, and she felt relief, because she'd been afraid for the two of them, when she'd seen them so strange with each other. But she also felt fear, because even though Charlie was so gracious and kind, had talked to Mabel so reasonably about helping Sarah, he did love Amber. She was his wife, after all. Mabel didn't want to lose Charlie. And besides, Mabel loved Amber, too. How her heart had broken for Amber when she watched Charlie loading her into the car. Mabel heard Janet crying beside her, and as she watched Janet weep for the girl, Mabel wondered what different people they might all have been, if Ellie hadn't left them. She'd prayed, for the first time, for Janet and Amber, in the same way she prayed for her own two daughters, for reconciliation and friendship, that some day they might wake to find they loved and enjoyed each other and that this



loss did not circle and circle and circle between them. Maybe it was Mabel's job, somehow, to make it all happen. Maybe that's why she was the last to go, when her sisters were all leaving this world. But how she had blown it, getting mixed up in this business with Sarah. How she had made things so much worse.

A few hours later, Mabel stood at the DMV, listening to woman behind the counter offer to make her a government-issued ID, the kind that came with no privileges other than to identify you. She'd failed her vision test. It crossed Mabel's mind that one of her daughters might've called the courthouse and told them to make sure and test her vision. But of course the test was standard. She'd known it was coming.

So she wouldn't have a license. How her daughters would patrol her. She'd have to ride with them to the grocery store, to the post office, to the bank. She pictured the girls having lengthy phone calls with one another, making her schedule.

"Do you have someone to call to come pick you up?" the woman asked. Her nametag said Terry and was in the shape of the state of Arkansas. Mabel had always thought they were a nice touch, those nametags. Terry was kind, Mabel could tell.

"I can call my daughter," Mabel said. "She'll be here in a few minutes. May I borrow your phone?"

She wanted to make Terry feel less suspicious, but Terry probably assumed that Mabel had a cell phone, like everyone else. She dialed her own number and talked into her answering machine, pretending to be on the phone. "Hey, are you in the middle of anything?" she asked. "Could you come pick me up at the court house?... Some

problems with my license...I'll tell you about it when you get here." Terry was pretending not to listen.

"Thank you," Mabel said.

"Sure," Terry replied. "I'm sorry about the test."

"Just doing your job."

Mabel would sit outside for a few minutes, she decided, pretend like she was waiting for someone, and then she would drive herself home. They should have better precautions, anyway. Surely anyone who drove herself here drove herself home. What a strange thing, to have to wait for someone to drive her. When Leeland died, Mabel had missed having him to drive. It felt strange to drive herself everywhere, especially on long trips. But since his death, she had done it for years and didn't feel comfortable now, being a passenger. She and her sisters had gone up to Iowa to visit family once, and she'd driven them the whole way, all three of them who had husbands and were used to being driven. They'd joked about it for years, Mabel the chauffeur. Well.

On her way out, Mabel saw the court chambers, where the hearing would be today. She imagined them all in there: Amber, Charlie, Janet, Sarah. What would come of it all? None of the outcomes seemed right to Mabel—there was something deeply aching in any of the possibilities. She couldn't just stay home while all of it was happening. She would go, she decided, no matter.

When Mabel got home, she called Janet to tell her she'd been out running errands but would be home, now, if Janet needed her. Mabel didn't mention her trip to the DMV

or anything about the hearing. She was checking in with her daughters more often now, trying to relieve their suspicions before the girls ever became suspicious. Ronnie's husband had done that, in the months when Ronnie doubted him, before she found out, for sure, about the other girl. Ronnie called Mabel, saying she felt bad for being suspicious—Darren, her husband, had started calling from work a couple of times a day and coming home at lunch to see her. He knew she was worried, Ronnie said, was trying to reassure her. "Well there you go," Mabel had told her, "Everything's going to be all right. I know he loves you." But it had nagged at her—why wasn't Darren irritated with Ronnie, if her suspicions were baseless, instead of catering to her like that? Darren had always been the defensive type; Mabel couldn't imagine him humbling himself, just to pacify Ronnie. But she hadn't said anything to her sister, had tried to push back her doubts. Mabel had been boiling potatoes in her kitchen, twisting the curly phone cord around her finger and covering her ear to block out the children's voices when Ronnie called and said, "We were wrong. It's the girl at his office. I knew it was. I knew it was." Mabel had seen the girl before, younger than Ronnie and small, with slick, slick hair. Mabel and her sisters had never had good hair, not one of them. It was passable but always a little frizzy, never smooth and slick. They'd all four envied girls with shiny hair. And here Darren was, sneaking around with one. Mabel herself felt the sting of it. And she felt guilty she hadn't alerted Ronnie, hadn't told her when she was suspicious. But it was just as well. That wasn't the kind of thing you needed to hear from your sister. "Poor Ronnie, poor poor Ronnie," Esther had said to her later, and that was all they'd talked of it. When Ronnie came and stayed with them for a few days, after it first blew up, they'd talked about it with her, some. But never after she left. Too humiliating. But then it had

gone away, suddenly, and Ronnie never talked about the girl again. Mabel was sure Ronnie's boys didn't know. They'd spoken at Ronnie's funeral of how their father loved their mother, how he'd doted on her. And Darren had loved Ronnie, but Mabel had thought of that phone call, of Ronnie's voice so far away, and how she'd wanted to call her own mother and ask what to do for Ronnie, but her mother was already gone. Darren must've thought of the slick-headed girl, too, when his sons praised him. How Ronnie must have raged. She'd always had a temper. Darren called from time to time, still, just to chat. Mabel was glad when he did. He'd been a brother for a long time, after all. She'd seen him just last week, at Josie's funeral, for the first time in years. He came all the way from Virginia. His daughter had driven him.

Mabel hoped Janet wouldn't be suspicious of her phone calls, wouldn't see them as an attempt to cover something—after all, what was there to cover? It had all been discovered: Janet knew Sarah was staying with Mabel, mindblowing as she found it. Everyone knew Mabel was helping Sarah, had sought her out. And of course, Mabel's girls knew she'd delayed telling them about Josie's funeral. What else was there? But she felt their suspicions in the way they spoke carefully, now—slowly—as if Mabel were not herself. Wasn't that what they said about Esther—she wasn't herself today—when they started to whisper about dementia, her “starting to slip”? They were worried for Mabel now, she could sense it, but they shouldn't have been—she was as much herself as she ever was, wasn't she?

Mabel felt the change as soon as she saw Esther, as if ten years had passed since Josie's funeral, instead of a handful of days. Esther's eyes were darker underneath and not as bright, and she leaned forward on the couch, elbows on her knees, as if the weight of her own body were a burden. Sarah had been gone when Mabel got home, and the quiet of her house unnerved Mabel as she waited for the hearing, still two hours away. She'd driven by Janet's house, and then Becky's—hands tight on the wheel, leaning forward to see, more nervous about driving, now—but didn't see either of their cars. Where were they all? Where did you go to wait for such a thing to unfold? So Mabel had decided to visit Esther. She didn't want to be alone.

“Esther!” Mabel had a key to her sister's house but never had to use it. Esther and Roger had kept their door unlocked since Roger's knees went bad. It hurt him to walk to the door, so they would call “Come in!” and whoever knocked would let herself in. For awhile, Esther even kept the wood door open, just the screen closed, to let fresh air in. She'd gotten out of that habit now. Their kids worried sick over it, that *anyone* could walk in that door, into the living room where the two of them sat helpless on the couch. Mabel had never worried much about it. It didn't seem a thing that could happen, someone coming in on Esther and Roger in that peaceful living room. But she supposed it could've. Esther's kids tried again when Roger first died to get Esther to lock the door, but she wasn't worried and never had.

“Are you okay?” Mabel asked her, walking inside and turning on the overhead lights. She couldn't stand a dark room.

“That took it out of me, the trip to Little Rock,” Esther said. That's what Esther's daughters always said—“took it out over her.” They'd asked Mabel to stop picking

Esther up and driving her around town so often because “it took it out of her.” Mabel still did some, when Esther wanted to, which wasn’t often.

“Would it make you feel better to get out of the house for a little while? We could go for a ride. I could ride you down by the river,” Mabel said. Esther had always loved the river, like Mabel did. When Roger passed away, they’d driven downtown, where the river cut through Parkin just behind Front Street, to smell the water and feel the wind. Some days they would get out of the car and sit on the bench and watch it, beneath the water oaks, and other times, they would just stay in the car with their windows down. Esther could’ve gotten out of the car—she was plenty able, then—but she didn’t want to see people, hear their condolences.

“I think I’d rather just sit here,” Esther said.

Mabel felt suffocated, with the doors closed and windows down. Esther didn’t run much air conditioning anymore. She was always cold.

“Mind if I open a window?” she asked. “Let in some fresh air?”

“Just as long as you close it before you leave.”

“Sure.”

“Josie sure looked good, didn’t she?” Esther said.

“She did.” Mabel hadn’t thought so. She never thought so. People always said someone “looked good” if she looked like herself. Josie had maybe looked like herself—like she’d looked in those final days, in that bed—but she didn’t look good. Mabel didn’t think Josie would’ve wanted them saying so.

“I thought she looked beautiful,” Esther said.

“Yeah.”

Mabel started to tell Esther about the hearing, but she remembered that she hadn't told her about any of it, Sarah and those little girls and all. It was strange, keeping something from Esther. But she was afraid of what Esther would say about her own part in it all.

"The girls and I had a lot of time to talk on the way home," Esther said. "I think I'm ready to let go of the house." When Roger died, Esther had talked about selling her house and moving into a retirement home, but she wasn't ready. She didn't want to leave the house. Her kids and grandkids had gathered there, for a year or two, at the holidays, but in the last few years, they'd taken to going to Karen's, Esther's daughter's house, in Wynne.

"Where would you go? Crestwood?" Mabel asked. It was the only nursing home in town with "independent living," though Mabel saw little independent about it. Lots of her friends had gone there. Mabel had spent countless afternoons visiting at Crestpark, and she guessed she would be spending even more hours there, now. She felt the loss already.

"You shouldn't do it a day before you're ready," Mabel said. "You could always do that later."

"What will Josie think of it?" Esther asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What will Josie think, when I tell her? Oh, she'll think her sisters are getting so old."

Mabel watched her sister carefully, looking for some sign that Esther realized what she said, that she'd just misspoken. Esther had been having slips lately, when she'd

get a little confused with past and present, maybe make some reference to her daughters living at home. But Mabel had thought it was just a result of Esther being alone with her thoughts so often, that she sat and watched her life play out in her mind and forgot, sometimes, where she was in the movie. She hadn't believed what Esther's daughters and ever her own daughters had been suggesting, that Esther was losing herself. And she felt the ache of it now, that they were right, and that's why Esther's daughters wanted her in Crestwood.

But Esther was here for now.

"You know what I keep thinking about?" Mabel asked, desperate, now, to have as much of her sister as she could, be as close to her as possible. "When you and me and Josie drove out to see Ronnie, right before she got sick, and we drove up to Washington D.C., just the four of us?"

"Wasn't that a good time?" Esther said. She talked all about the trip, remembering everything, and Mabel felt relief. But the knowledge was there, sharp and tender at the bottom of her heart—Esther was going away, sooner or later.

The hearing had already started when Mabel returned. Somehow, she'd expected the courtroom to be full. The hearing would change so many lives, after all. Wouldn't there be a crowd, to hear how it all played out? She was planning to slip in late and sit on the back row, then slip out, unnoticed, at the end. But when she walked into the courtroom, it was, for the most part, just them. The parties in this case that she knew so well. Sarah sitting with the Rollen boy on one side, leaned forward, reading something.



And on the left, Amber and Charlie and a lawyer Mabel recognized from town, the one who'd done Roger's will. There was another woman with them, who Mabel expected, from her the back of her hair—coarse and grey—and the way she held herself, to be old. When then woman turned to face her, she was younger than Mabel expected, but her face was lined and taut, her eyes familiar. Sarah's mother, Mabel realized.

It struck her, for the first time, that this woman—Linda, wasn't it?—would be losing her granddaughters. Mabel had been so focused on Sarah's losing her daughter, but this woman would be losing the children, too, by choice. And from what Mabel understood, she was the one who had raised them. Could it really be so bad? For Sarah to have her own child?

Janet wasn't there. She should've been, Mabel realized. Amber and Charlie shouldn't have been sitting on that bench like they were alone in the world. Janet should have been with them, if for nothing else, to show that she knew it mattered. Even if she didn't think it was right for them to take the girls, even if she didn't understand. Amber held her head straight up, and Charlie's hand was on her back. It comforted Mabel, to see Charlie touching his wife. The danger felt very real that all of this might break apart: Amber and Charlie's marriage, their family, these girls coming to stay. It had all seemed to be holding together so finely but she felt, suddenly, that it could crumble and fall, even now.

A few people were seated at the back of the courtroom, and Mabel took a seat among them. At first she thought they might've been there to watch, but they whispered to each other and held their cell phones in their hands, and she realized must've been waiting for their own hearings. People's lives up in the air all day long—young people,

most of them. Mabel's young days had been smooth and predictable, and she felt thankful now. There was a loneliness, sometimes, in the steady going on and on, but surely loneliness is better than fear, which she recognized on many of the faces. Janet's life, too, had been smooth smooth smooth until Ellie died, and now she didn't know what to do with all this. She hadn't been prepared for it. But she should've come to the courtroom today. Mabel felt an urge to go sit beside Amber and Charlie now, as a show of support, but that would've been a cut to Sarah. And after all, hadn't this come about because Mabel herself had gotten in the middle of it? Because she thought Amber was wrong? Mabel looked for the two little girls but didn't see them anywhere.

The hearing had started before Mabel arrived, but she couldn't hear what was being said, people around her rustling through their purses and whispering on their phones. She got up and moved several rows forward, just a few rows behind Amber and Charlie.

The benches for the audience were low to the ground, and Mabel had trouble lowering herself into her seat. She landed heavily, and Amber looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes met Mabel's—There was something in them that Mabel couldn't read: not surprise, and not necessarily anger—and held her gaze for a moment. She did not smile. A flash of heat washed over Mabel. Amber whispered something to Charlie, and he turned to look at Mabel, his face more surprised, more revealing. Then, of course, Sarah. She saw Mabel from the other side of the courtroom and waved, a quick, stiff wave. *What was she doing here?* Mabel knew they were all wondering. Well, what *was* she doing here?

The judge was reading a statement from Jessica, Sarah's daughter. Mabel was sure it was the same statement Sarah had already read, the one that had upset her. Mabel tried to imagine the voice of the child as she listened, but she could only envision a miniature Sarah, all that hardness in a tinier body. The words were gentler, though, the words of a child. The lawyers had asked specific questions. Questions about Sarah, first. The girl's answers were not unkind. Mabel could tell, in hearing them, that she loved her mother, and Mabel felt a surge of confidence, that maybe what she had done wasn't so bad after all. Has your mother ever treated you cruelly? Have you ever been afraid of your mother? No, No, No. But then, "Who cares for you?" "My grandmother," the child had written, "I don't see my mom every day." If you could choose who you would live with, who would you choose? My grandmother. And if you couldn't live with your grandmother, would you want to live with, your mother, or with Ms. Amber and Mr. Charlie? I don't know. Maybe at Ms. Amber's house because my mom has to leave a lot, and she's sick a lot, and I have to go to school. But maybe my mom could come over there, and maybe she could live there, too.

Mabel's heart ached at the words. Sarah's head was down now, rested on her arms. There were questions about Amber. How long have you known Ms. Amber? Where do you see her? How much time do you spend with her? She helps me with my homework, the girl said. She comes to my house to check on me, she takes me to church, she takes me to get ice cream. It stunned Mabel to imagine all of that happening, this private world of Amber and Charlie's outside the family scope. She was encouraged to hear that Amber had done those things—Mabel hadn't thought Amber had it in her,

anymore. Maybe there was more hope for Amber than there seemed to be, more hope that Mabel felt now.

And then, even worse, Sarah's mother took the stand, said her daughters were both on drugs, had been on drugs for years. The woman looked very small as she testified, her hands trembling and her voice weak. She did not look well. Mabel wouldn't have been surprised if she'd passed out, fallen from the chair to the cold tile floor. Couldn't they have taken a written statement from her, too, like they did from the child? It seemed a great cruelty to have her testify.

"I'm an old woman now," Linda said. She'd given her age, earlier, as sixty-five. Mabel thought about herself as a sixty-five-year old, going to the mall to shop for prom dresses with Becky and her daughters. She didn't remember feeling old at sixty-five, certainly not as old and desperate as Linda looked. Life had not been kind to her. Charlie and Amber's lawyer stood near the stand, nodding. Overdoing it, Mabel thought.

"I can't take care of my granddaughters. I'm sick," Linda said. "I don't know how long I have. They need someone to take care of them. I can't even work anymore." She'd worked all her life, she explained. Couldn't anymore because she was sick, and her grown daughters had run through all her money.

"I'm going to lose my trailer," she said. "Karlyn and Jessie need a home. Their mothers won't work, don't take care of them. It's the drugs."

Sarah had told Mabel there were no drugs anymore, and she'd believed her. It was too hard to imagine that Sarah, a reasonable enough person, a person who was not unkind, who loved and wanted her daughter, would be taking drugs with everything there was at stake—her daughter, and that boy she was carrying. Mabel thought of her friend

from her Sunday School class, Mary Minton, who was always saying, “When they get on drugs, they’ll lie to the face of Jesus.” Her daughter had been on heroin for years, in and out of rehab. That was the worst thing Mary could think of, Mabel supposed, lying to the face of Jesus. But maybe there were worse things. And she saw the way Sarah held her head, how her feet bounced beneath her chair, and Mabel felt some of her trust leaving her.

Sarah and Amber both took the stand after that, saying things Mabel had already heard. But how much more painful, to hear their words over the microphone in that big room. How young they both looked, and how afraid.

Suddenly, Charlie was beside her, the court on break.

“Hey, Grandma.” She had fallen asleep. In the middle of this, this that would decide everything, sleep had stolen upon her. It was true then: she was getting old. Wasn’t that what happened? She’d seen it, oh she’d seen it—Roger in his rocking chair, in mid-conversation, then sleeping, without warning, mouth hung open, hands folded across his chest. Friends in her Sunday School class jerking their heads up, pretending to be awake. Mabel felt a deep embarrassment, as if she’d given something away, let it slip that her voice in this whole thing was not to be trusted, that she couldn’t be counted on. And hadn’t she gotten all of this started?

“How are you, Charlie?” She felt tears come to her eyes. How she loved that boy. How she’d always loved him. He was kind.

“I’m okay.”

“How’s Amber?” she asked.

“Alright. What do you think about this? After hearing everything?”

“I know your heart, Charlie. I know you’re trying to do right.”

“But what do you honestly think?” Charlie’s hands, gripping the bench in front of them, were strong hands, brown with long, thick fingers, red at the knuckle. A man’s hands.

“I think Sarah’s girl needs to be with her. Sarah’s got problems. But she’s her mother.”

“Maybe so.”

“Are you sure you’re up for all of this? You’re just one man.” But there was more she wanted to say. He was just one man, but he was a good, good, man. And this shouldn’t have fallen on him. Mabel had sat in the bleachers at Charlie’s baseball games and watched him drumming his hands against his thighs, leaned forward, knees bent, the way the boys did when they were on base and wanting to steal, watched him slicing his bat through the air, waiting for his turn at the plate. And she’d said, how many times, “Oh, I wish Leeland could’ve known him.” Leeland never did have a boy. It was hard not to think of Charlie, sometimes, as her and Leeland’s boy, her very own boy, out there running those bases, hugging her after the game. Charlie had cried once, when he struck out—surely he was very little then, so little that maybe Eddie, his dad, was even the one throwing the pitches—and Eddie had pulled him into the dugout and talked to him quietly, very close to his face. On the way to the car, afterwards, Janet had said “It won’t always go your way, Charlie. You can’t cry. You have to take it.” And those brown eyes had watered, red to the rim, the way they were now.

“Are you okay, Grandma?” he asked. “Do you want me to find someone to take you home?”

Did he know about her drivers’ license? How did he know she couldn’t drive herself, just like she’d driven herself up here? And then Mabel heard herself sniff, realized she was crying, another thing old people do. Mabel had never been a crier. She’d always marveled at how little she’d cried when Leeland died, and even when Ronnie died. Certainly, she had grieved, but there weren’t always tears. She’d cried when Ellie died, cried all through the night, for so many nights, but she was older then. And older even now.

“I’m alright,” she said. “I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

“It’ll be over soon. I think the judge will be back any time with a decision.”

And he was. It was all faster and simpler than Mabel could’ve imagined

“The court finds that it is in the best interest of the child, Jessica Jarrett, to be with her mother. The court awards custody of Jessica Jarrett to her mother, Sarah Jarrett.” There was a sob, loud and sudden—Mabel wasn’t sure from who—and then silence. In front of her, she heard Amber suck in her breath.

“The court also orders Ms. Jarrett to a twelve-month drug and alcohol treatment facility. Any further drug offenses or probation violations, or failure to complete the twelve-month treatment program, could result in reversal of the custody decision.”

The judge continued talking about the treatment program. It was residential, apparently. Sarah would go somewhere and live and take her daughter with her. Evidently she had failed a drug test? And was currently in violation of her probation? Mabel didn’t know how to process that information as she watched Sarah weeping,

loudly now, face in her hands. She was not so very hard. Mabel would go to her. Because there was no one else to. Maybe that's why she had come—for this moment, when Sarah wept into her hands and Mabel sat beside her.

Mabel wasn't comfortable with physical touch. Leeland had been gone so long, and her own daughters weren't ones to touch, very often. Mabel always tried to avoid the women at church who wanted to hug, hug, hug. But she put her hand on Sarah's back now. Her back was arched slightly, supporting that heavy belly. Mabel could feel the lines of Sarah's bra under her shirt, and she felt a flash of what it had been like to be pregnant, have all that weight pulling forward. She saw herself, pregnant, bending over to pick Janet up out of the floor, bounce her on her hip. She caught Leeland looking down her shirt, when she leaned down, and they'd both laughed. "They're huge," he said, cupping a hand under one of her breasts, and she'd felt so happy to have her family and be at the very center of it, the very very center of it.

The judge was explaining the technicalities of the decision. Sarah had voluntarily signed custody of Jessica over to her mother, before she was sentenced to jail. It was clearly intended to be a temporary arrangement. And custody would now be awarded back to Sarah, the mother. Linda didn't have the right to make custody arrangements any more; the child was no longer hers. Linda was crying loudly, covering her face. She wouldn't live long, Mabel thought. She hadn't seen Sarah look at her mother or Amber and Charlie at all.

"It's in the best interest of the child to be with her biological mother:" the words reverberated in Mabel's mind and confirmed what she'd felt, instinctively. Yes, it was best. Mabel wasn't crazy. She wasn't so old that she couldn't see. The child needed to be



with her mother. And she would be. This place Sarah was going for twelve months was a place where mothers could have their children, where they'd live together, under supervision. Renewal Ranch, the judge called it, and Mabel felt a spark of hope at the word—renewal.

Karlyn, though, the other child. Alex's parental rights had been terminated years ago, when she'd left her daughter unattended for hours. The girl was eventually found by a mailman, toddling in the street. Mabel thought of the empty trailer, imagined the child alone there, finally walking outside, and felt a revulsion for this woman, this Alex who was such a mystery. Linda had full custody of Karlyn, had for years. It was within her power to sign custody over, and it would be done today. Amber and Charlie would walk out of court with custody of that girl, whom Mabel had never seen.

At Leeland's funeral visitation, Mabel had stood and greeted guests until she couldn't do it any longer, then she'd sat down and laid her head on the pew in front of her. Someone came behind her and touched her, and the steady pressure of the hand against her back was a comfort. When she'd raised her head, finally, and turned to look, it was one of her sisters, as she'd expected. Josie, who was much more comfortable with her own grief than with the grief of others. She didn't say a word but took Mabel's hand and led her back to the front of the church, where the family was greeting visitors. And Josie said, to each of them, "Thank you for coming," so Mabel didn't have to. And Mabel had leaned against her, grateful she was there. Mabel kept her hand against Sarah's back

and ached to feel Sarah lean against her now, to show, somehow, that she knew Mabel was there and took comfort in her presence, but Sarah did not.

“Can you give me a ride home?” Sarah asked, raising her head, but still looking down, not at Mabel. “To your house, I mean?”

“Sure,” Mabel said, knowing that she would let Sarah drive. She was trusting herself less and less.

“In a few minutes, then? I’ll meet you at the car. I need to talk to my lawyer first, just for a minute. But I’m ready to leave.”

While she was waiting for Sarah, Mabel went over to the table where Amber and Charlie sat during the hearing. They were still there, had made no moves to get up. Amber was writing something, quickly. She’d tied her hair back in a pony tail, and her eyes were dark. Charlie sat beside her, his face tired.

“Well,” said Mabel. She wanted to say something but didn’t know what. Congratulations, maybe, but that didn’t feel right, and she couldn’t make herself say it.

“God bless you,” she said, finally. Because wasn’t it a huge, beautiful thing they were doing? Taking on a child?

“Thank you, Grandma,” Charlie said, his eyes red at the rim. Amber got up without saying anything and ran to catch the lawyer, who was already on his way out of the room. Mabel couldn’t hear them talking, once she caught him, but Amber was gesturing with her hands, clearly frustrated. She came back with tears on her face.

“He says there’s not much of a chance we’d win any kind of appeal,” she said. “It’s not right. Jessie can’t go back with Sarah. She hasn’t taken care of her. She won’t take care of her.”

“Amber,” Charlie said. “It’s over. We were just granted custody of Karlyn. Do you realize that? We are in charge of a little girl. We need to go get her, talk to David and Corey. Jessica is going to live with her mother. That’s the best thing for her. You just heard it yourself.”

“It’s not! Are you really going to give up on her like that? Just let her go?” Amber’s voice was louder now, and Mabel felt the eyes of everyone in the courtroom, all that chatter quiet now, watching. The bailiff was walking closer to them.

“We can call Jackson,” Amber said. “He knows about this kind of stuff. And he has connections with people. I’m sure he can help us.”

“Amber.” Charlie’s voice was elevated now, too. Mabel felt a prayer rising in her. Lord, help. Lord, help, Lord, help.

“Let’s please call him now,” Amber said. “He told me I could call him about all this. He’ll be able to do something for us or at least tell us what to do.”

“We are not,” Charlie said. “Don’t you dare. Are you crazy?”

“Don’t be stubborn! Think about Jessica.”

“Call him, and you can forget all of this. All of it.” There was an aggression in Charlie that Mabel had never seen. He grabbed his keys off the table and walked past Mabel without glancing at her. Amber followed.

“Who’s Jackson?” Sarah asked, surprising Mabel. She stood beside her now, her purse slung over her shoulder and a folder in her hand. There was an air of confidence to

her that was new, made her look younger. Amber and Charlie had been that loud—Sarah had heard in the hallway, outside the courtroom, and come to see.

“I don’t know,” Mabel said.

“I bet she calls him,” Sarah said, and Mabel recoiled at the meanness in her tone.

“Those are my kids, you remember,” she said, and Sarah was quiet.

Mabel leaned against the passenger window of her own car. Would she drive again? She had felt such confidence, driving to the courthouse, that she could drive just as well without a license as with one. But the ache of it all weighed down on her now, and she felt afraid that the woman might’ve been right, that she wasn’t able. Already, the world looked fuzzier. Mabel was watching out the window—all those familiar buildings downtown: the courthouse, the post office, the library—when she saw a man walking beside the road, his steps quick .

“Is that Charlie?” she asked, and then she saw, for sure. “It is, it’s Charlie. Stop the car.”

“It’s not the best time for me and Charlie to chat,” Sarah said, passing him without slowing down.

“It’s my car. Turn around and go back to him,” Mabel wasn’t sure what she would do if Sarah did not. She felt the full weight of her helplessness, that the car could go anywhere, anywhere, anywhere, and what could she do about it? But Sarah did it, turning so that it was Mabel’s window who was next to him, as she yelled, “Charlie!”

He stopped walking and looked at her, his eyes tired. “Hey, Grandma.”

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“Walking home. Or to the church. Or wherever.”

His house was a good three miles away, the other direction, and the church was at least five miles out of town.

“Why don’t you get in with us? Let us take you where you’re going?”

“I’m fine to walk,” he said.

“But it’s hot! And you’re nowhere close. Just get in.”

He looked at them, Mabel in the passenger seat and Sarah driving.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To my house. At least I am. Sarah has some errands.”

“I’ll go with you to your house. Mind if I drive?”

Sarah stared hard at him in the face, and then got out and got in the back, stretching her feet across the seat.

“Well, Charlie,” Sarah said, once Charlie was inside, driving. “You got Karyln. Are you sure you’re ready for her? She’s got a mouth on her. Just like her mama.”

Charlie was quiet, and they rode the rest of the way to Mabel’s house in silence.

“Mind if I borrow your car for a minute, Mabel?” Sarah asked. “I need to take care of a few things.”

Charlie opened the passenger door and helped Mabel out of the car, putting an arm beneath her elbow and helping pull her to her feet. She saw Sarah watching and thought Sarah looked surprised. She never seemed to remember that Mabel was, after all, eighty-nine. It was somewhat refreshing, her forgetting.

Mabel followed Charlie inside. He looked around the living room, as both of her daughters had done when they came in, seemingly for any evidence of Sarah, then he sat down beside Mabel. It was the first time she'd been alone with Charlie since all of this happened.

"That little girl is blessed," she said, "to be coming to your home. Couldn't go to a better place."

"Thanks, Grandma."

She searched for something to say to bridge the distance between the two of them, to show that she hadn't meant to hurt him, to question him, to make things difficult with him and Amber. That she wanted him to be happy.

"Charlie, I'm sorry about the way all of this happened. I didn't mean for it to..." Mabel couldn't think of how to finish the sentence. Because she really had meant for it to happen, just as it had, to keep Charlie and Amber from raising Sarah's girl. But she hadn't been able, before today, to think about those little girls as separate from each other. It had felt like whoever got them would have them both. It was still settling over her, in waves, that the girls would be separated. Something inside her ached to think of it.

"Are you going to be okay? You and Amber?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "I hope."

"Who's Jackson?" As soon as she spoke, Mabel regretted it. She didn't know why she'd asked.

"Jackson Davis, the state senate guy. I'm sure you've seen him on the news? He's running for Congress."

“I didn’t know yall knew him. You don’t think he could help you?”

How strange to talk about him “helping” Charlie, since helping him would mean getting Jessica back, undoing what Mabel had helped do.

“I don’t care if he could or not,” Charlie said. “He’s Amber’s friend, not mine.”

There was a hardness in his voice, and suddenly Mabel understood what he was telling her.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it,” Mabel said. “I’m sure she wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh, she was.”

“She loves you, Charlie.” When Mabel heard herself say it, she believed.

And then, when he didn’t respond, “You’ve been through a very hard time.”

She felt a fierce love for him rising within her, almost choking her. She couldn’t have loved him more if he was her own son. All the years seemed to collapse, and there he was, the dark-headed boy that she had rocked to sleep, her very first grandchild.

“Esther’s sick,” she said, surprising herself.

“Mom told me,” he said. “How bad?”

“Not too bad yet.”

“I’m sorry, Grandma.”

“I went to renew my license this morning.”

“Yeah?”

“They gave me a vision test. I don’t have a license anymore.”

“I’m sorry...you know Mom and Aunt Becky can take you anywhere you want to go. And I can. And Amber.” The last one was tacked on, an afterthought, though he’d tried to sound sincere.

“It’s not the same,” she said, not sure why she was telling him, in the middle of everything else.

“I know.”

“That’s what happens when you get old, I guess,” she said. “When do I get to meet Karlyn? When is she coming?”

“Soon, I think. The lawyer said we should be able to go get her in the next day or two.”

“I’ll be glad to meet her,” Mabel said, meaning it. “How are David and Corey? Are they okay with it all?”

“Seem to be.”

There would be a little girl after all. A little girl in that house. A girl for Amber to talk about, shop for, take to birthday parties.

“Amber’s coming to get me,” Charlie said after a moment, looking at his phone, texting like they all did.

When Amber pulled into the driveway, Mabel watched Charlie walk into the carport, get into the car. She hoped to see a smile, a hug, a touch, but she saw none. What would happen if they divorced? Would the little girl go with Amber? Or back to the state? But surely it wouldn’t really happen. Mabel was waiting for it all to fall back into place, for life to be predictable again. Ronnie had come to her once, in the middle of the ordeal with the slick-headed girl, and said, “There’s never been a divorce in the family.”



She'd looked beautiful when she said it. Her skin was pale, the palest of the four, her hair dark. When she was sick or upset her skin looked paler and her hair looked darker and she was prettier than ever. Her eyes had been very dark, then, against her white skin, her hair falling across her face. And Mabel had said, "That doesn't mean it can't happen," and then she'd felt the cruelty of it—she hadn't meant to be flip. So she'd said, "Everyone will understand, everyone will support you." And then Ronnie had asked to talk about something else, and they'd talked about the kids, and Mabel taught her how to make chicken spaghetti. Ronnie had never been a cook—it was a running joke—and she'd made chicken spaghetti at least once a week after that, so she claimed, because it was something she knew how to cook.

Mabel thought of those two little cousins, Jessica and Karlyn, one who was well on her way to becoming Mabel's bona fide great-granddaughter. They called themselves sisters sometimes. Mabel had heard both Sarah and Amber say it. And she imagined the two of them on a playground somewhere, at this new school, in this safe town they were living in now, and she imagined the school counselor scanning the playground, looking for them, finally finding them, together, on the monkey bars. And she would tell them that they were going home, that it was over. And the girls would hug each other and smile, but then, once they were in the car, they'd ask more questions, and they'd realize they were not going together, that the smaller one was going to yet another new place with her mother, the bigger one to Parkin, to a whole new life. Lord be near, Lord be near, Mabel thought, which she'd taken to saying lately, though she never used to. Her mother had always said it. Mabel thought of her mother cleaning out her own refrigerator

after Leeland died, when it was overflowing with casseroles and pies, and Mabel had sat at the kitchen table and watched her, in tears. Lord be near, she'd said. Lord be near.

## Chapter Six (*Sarah*)

Jessica was coming. Sarah didn't know from where—from wherever she was living with a family of strangers, eating breakfast at someone else's kitchen table, wearing clothes Sarah had never seen to an unfamiliar school. But she was coming here, to Renewal Ranch.

That's what Sarah had been telling herself, what had gotten her through these first three days. Three of three hundred sixty five. That Jessica was coming. The world seemed to have disappeared, as if it had never been there in the first place, and Sarah was in some bizarre space where nothing had happened before and nothing was going to happen after.

There was a strict schedule to the day. Sarah met with three different counselors: a drug rehabilitation counselor, a family therapist, a life skills counselor. Life skills. As if Sarah had no skills for living. Well, maybe she didn't, because here she was. When she'd first arrived—only three days ago?— she'd felt a lump in her throat every time she tried to speak. The ache for Jessica was worse, almost physical, now that Sarah knew she'd see her soon. But then a numbness, a cool emptiness, had settled over her. Sarah's drug counselor told her it was normal, a symptom of withdrawal. A lack of dopamines, the man, Elliot, said, pushing his glasses up on his nose and leaning in toward Sarah, looking every bit the counselor. He looked younger than Sarah, and she'd looked, immediately for a wedding ring, out of habit. It was there, gold and shiny.

Sarah had said it so many times to her mother, to Mabel, to Amber—I'm not using, I'm not using, I haven't—that the words rolled smoothly off her tongue in her first meeting with Elliot. But now, in this new hollowness that had swallowed her, there was no reason to lie. Yes, I did. Whenever I could. No, not every day. There was no money.

And people weren't as inclined to give free smokes to a pregnant woman. Smoke or snort? Yes. Both. Whichever.

“Will I ever be the same?” she'd asked him. “You'll be better,” he'd said. “You'll be healthy and whole.” “But will I feel anything?” Sarah asked. “And how soon?” “It will come,” Elliot had told her. “It will come soon.”

Sarah's schedule was printed on the back of a lanyard that she was supposed to wear around her neck at all times. It listed out her day, hour by hour, until bedtime (10 p.m.). You had more free time once you'd been there six months, she'd heard. All of the residents were female, and many had children with them. Sarah had to sign a pledge committing to recovery, to following the honor code that was also printed on the lanyard. She'd even had to agree that she wouldn't have sex the whole time she was there, a year. Who the hell am I going to have sex with, she'd asked?

Sarah's apartment had two bedrooms, one for her and one for Jessica. The bedrooms reminded her of the college dorm rooms she and Alex had stayed in at church camp in junior high. They'd sat side by side on the bottom bunk, sharing the peanut butter crackers their mother had taken them to Wal-Mart to buy and whispering—there were curfews then, too—about boys they'd met, their plans to meet up the next day. They'd spent most of the week pretending they were in college. It'll be just like this, Alex had said. So much for that.

There would be opportunities for adult education classes at the ranch, Sarah's life skills counselor had told her. She could get her G.ED., then, who knows, maybe college?

The counselor ended all of her words at a high pitch, with peppy inflection, as if the future were so full of possibilities that even her words themselves were bursting with potential, floating up, up, up. It all seemed very far away to Sarah, a movie of someone else's life.

The apartment felt very cold, empty, like no one had moved in to it yet, even though Sarah had been there for days. She hadn't brought much with her. What was there to bring? She'd brought the few maternity clothes she had, but that was it. Before Sarah left for treatment, she'd taken Mabel's car to the trailer to check it one more time, make sure she hadn't left anything she needed. She could tell someone had been there. Some of the clothes were gone, and there were fast food wrappers on the floor. Whatever. Sarah might've done the same thing herself, given the opportunity.

She really wasn't sure why she'd gone back—she'd known she hadn't left anything. But there was some part of her that thought maybe Alex would've come, left some kind of message for her. Sarah knew Alex wasn't going to come back for Karlyn. She was too far gone. Hadn't her mother had been saying that for years?—“She's so far gone, so far gone.” But Sarah thought Alex would've at least wanted to leave a message for her—for her, Sarah—and maybe a message for Karlyn, too. But there was nothing. And she'd wondered about word from Dexter, if maybe he'd gotten in touch with someone, if he'd sent anybody by to leave a note. But no.

So she'd moved from a trashed out trailer to an apartment that was new and clean and furnished. But it was hard to feel like she'd moved up in the world, when her loneliness seemed to echo worse on the blank walls and cool tile floors.

Jessica's room was the one part of the apartment that Sarah enjoyed. She'd gotten to pick out Jessica's bedspread—her life skills counselor, cheerleader that she was, had taken her to the housewares supply room, and Sarah had chosen a bright yellow one, with lacey white trim. She'd even chosen a few decorative pillows—one round yellow one, and one white, with a smiley face—and she'd arranged them on the bed, just so. She'd gotten to pick one extra thing, and she'd chosen a wire butterfly, green with blue wings. All the young girls loved them, the counselor said. Sarah hung that on the wall, just over Jessica's bed. Surely Jessica would be excited to have her own room, to walk in and see that cute little bed. Surely she would want to stay.

Sarah ate all of her meals in the cafeteria, alone. When she'd carried Jessica, like she was carrying this baby boy now, she'd felt so important walking through her high school, had known she was never alone. Sarah ached for her daughter now, so ready for that she could've screamed out her name at the cafeteria table. She wondered if some of it was beginning to come back, her feelings, her self.

Jessica would get to come as soon as soon as Sarah entered "recovery phase." She was still in detox now, everyone kept telling her, She would feel better when she entered recovery. And she would always be in recovery. Elliot had said that several times, looking her in the eye, even as she'd tried to lose his gaze. You will always be in recovery. Was that supposed to make Sarah more motivated—that whatever this was, that had started, would last forever? Forever.

The family life skills counselor kept suggesting that Sarah write Jessica a letter. Apologize to her for ways she had let her down. Tell her how excited she was that Jessica was coming to live with her. Sarah couldn't do it. She and Jessica had never talked about things like that. Jessica knew she loved her. There wasn't anything else she could say. Jessica was a little girl—how could she understand any of this? All Sarah could tell her was that she wanted her. And surely Jessica would know that, if she knew Sarah had gone to court to get her.

Linda was living in a nursing home. An “independent” home, Mabel kept calling it. Mabel had heard that from Amber and Charlie, and she was the one who told Sarah. She'd said it calmly, passing over it quickly, and Sarah hadn't responded. But she kept thinking about it, picturing her mother in a tiny room with a little twin bed, like the one Jessica would sleep in here. Her room probably wasn't very different—It probably had the same concrete walls and tile floors. It was a shame they couldn't have been together. And Sarah felt the first twinges of sadness that she'd felt since this strange feeling had overtaken her.

The anger was gone, for now, the anger that had consumed her in that empty trailer, when she'd gone back to check, when she'd hit the wall so many times her knuckles bled, leaving three holes in the siding. Damn her mother for doing this, for taking the girls. For leaving. For sitting in that courtroom like Sarah didn't even exist, like she wasn't even on the other side of the room. Damn her for talking about Sarah using drugs and ignoring her kid, like she was some kind of monster. Linda hadn't even

looked at her that day in court. Sarah had tried to find her, afterwards, but she was gone. But all of that intensity had faded, now, and she wanted to talk to her mom. Cell phones weren't allowed on the ranch. Sarah had turned hers in when she first arrived, but it was just a track phone and most of the minutes had been used, anyway. There was a phone in the lobby, downstairs, that she could wait in line to use, but then anyone passing by could hear her conversation. Dexter had told her about waiting in line to make calls and only having five or ten minutes on the phone when he was in the military. He'd been in Iraq for awhile before they met, before he got all messed up. He had pictures of himself, then, strong and fit, with large, defined muscles. "I had my shit together before the war," he'd told her once, "What's your excuse?" He'd laughed when she got upset and said he was kidding, but it stung and it stung even now to think of it. Would Dexter ever see this baby? Did he want him? Did he want her, Sarah? She had no way of calling Dexter, in jail, but surely she could call her mother. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to, finally asking her family therapist. "I'm sure we can arrange that," the counselor said, this one an older woman with wide hips who wore a cardigan over her shirt every day. "You're allowed to make calls."

So it was being arranged. What did that mean? Surely Linda could receive calls. She wasn't in trouble. If the counselor was having trouble "making arrangements," Sarah assumed it was because her mother didn't want to talk to her. Would she ever? Sarah didn't know what she would say to Linda. She wouldn't apologize. And she didn't expect her mother to. But she didn't like the absence. And what did it mean, if even her own mother didn't want to talk to her? If even her own daughter didn't want to live with her? And her sister, gone too?



There was the baby boy, though. He was always there. Sarah had started to feel that possessiveness for him again, that deep desire. She'd already had an O.B. appointment since she'd been at the ranch, gotten to hear his heart beating. Devon, she'd decided to name him. Baby Devon. Wouldn't be too much longer now, the doctor had said, and Sarah knew he was right.

There was one other pregnant woman at the ranch, and she and Sarah had gone to the doctor together. On the way to the office, they sat in the back of the car together, like children. The other girl was younger than Sarah, her hands laid protectively over her stomach. First pregnancy, Sarah figured. Her belly was small.

"How far along are you?" Sarah asked the girl. Her face was freckled, like a child, and she wore her hair tucked behind her ears.

"Four months. I came here as soon as I found out I was pregnant." Sarah felt an indictment in this, as the girl eyed her big belly. Never mind. There was no point in trying to have friends here. Sarah turned her back to the girl and looked out the window, watching the city pass. She hadn't been to Little Rock in years. She remembered coming as a grade schooler to tour the capital, eating a picnic on the capital lawn. Sarah had sat on the steps of the building and felt the hugeness of the world, all those people walking up and down the steps, in such a hurry, carrying purses and briefcases. And they'd been so far away from Parkin and all of its problems. So far away from Lakeshore, which even then was beginning to close in on her, to choke her.

She'd shared a candy bar with Jonathan Altman, her boyfriend, but of course her mother had said she was too young for boyfriends and hadn't let her walk around the neighborhood with him. He'd sought her out at the capital, though, to sit with her on the steps. She'd been very deliberate in taking bites of the candy bar, making sure she put her tongue to the top of her mouth as she ate, so he could see it. She hadn't kissed anyone then, not really kissed them, but Alex had, and Sarah thought about it a lot, wanted boys to want her like they wanted her sister. She saw the capital again now, and it was as big as she remembered, just as impressive and official, but it made her feel small instead of hopeful.

She wasn't going to make it to her due date, the doctor told her. This baby was coming soon. Oh, please God let Jessica get here first. Sarah wanted time with her daughter, time to be Jessica's mother, just Jessica's mother, before this new baby came. She'd never been one to pray, but she begged, now, for Jessica to come. That was all she knew to say. Please let her come, soon, before this baby does. Sarah remembered hearing Amber pray many times—*Lord, you hear our prayers when we don't even know what to pray*—and her heart hardened, thinking of it.

When Wendy, Sarah's family therapist, the woman with kind brown eyes, told her Jessica was on her way, Sarah said, "Thank you, Jesus." She thought of Mabel when she said it. Mabel was always thanking Jesus, asking him to be near. Surely that's where Sarah had gotten it. She missed Mabel, had thought of her several times a day since she'd been here. She wrote her a letter during one of the group sessions, when they were

supposed to write to someone in their family, telling her about the ranch and her schedule and what they'd been serving for meals. Nothing particularly interesting, but she figured Mabel would want to know. On this day, though, she wrote her again, told her that Jessica was coming. Sarah imagined Mabel settling into her couch to read it, that her eyes would fill as she read those words and that she, too, would say, "Thank you, Jesus." Who else did Sarah have to tell?

It had been almost two months since Sarah had seen her daughter. When she opened her apartment door to see Jessica standing in the doorway, Wendy beside her, Sarah's breath caught in her throat, even though she'd known it would be them when she heard the knock. Jessica's hair was French braided, like Sarah had never seen it, and she looked like she'd gotten taller. She had a red duffel bag in her hand.

"Jessica!" Jessica wrapped her arms around Sarah's waist and laid her head against her stomach.

"I'll leave you alone," Wendy said, leaning in to hug Sarah and then stepping back, closing the door. It was just the two of them, alone in this apartment where they would be for the next year.

"Hey, baby," Sarah said, brushing her hands through Jessica's hair.

"Hey, Mama."

"How are you?" Sarah asked, and she felt a rising fullness of heart that this moment had come, that Jessica was here, right here in front of her.

"I'm okay. I missed you."

“I missed you, too,” Sarah said.

“Is this where we live now?”

“Yes. It’s a place to help me get well. And we’re both going to live here. Look, you have your own room.”

Sarah stood back as Jessica walked through the apartment slowly, stopping in her own room and running her fingers across the yellow bedspread.

“I like it. Is this my bed?” Jessica said.

“Yes. You have your own room.”

“Cool! But what’s wrong with you, Mama? Why do you have to get well?”

Sarah’s counselors kept telling her to be honest, even to her daughter. It will be hard, they’d said, but you need to tell her the truth. Sarah couldn’t do it. “I’ve just been a little sick. But I’m going to be okay. I’m doing better now. We’re going to stay here for awhile,” she said.

“Are you on drugs?”

“What did you say? Who told you that?”

“A lot of people. Even Grandma. She said that’s why you couldn’t keep me,” Jessica said.

It had never occurred to Sarah that her mother could’ve told the children they were leaving, before they’d been taken. Sarah had imagined that the betrayal had come as just as much of a shock to the children that it had to her. When had Linda had that conversation? How long had the girls known it was going to happen?

“When did she tell you that?” Sarah asked.

“She came to see us at school, the day the people came to get us to take us to Little Rock.”

Sarah’s stomach knotted to imagine Linda sneaking to the school, telling the girls goodbye. But it was over now. Jessica was back.

“Is Grandma going to come here, too?” Jessica asked.

“No.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s at home. In Parkin, I mean. She’s living at a new place, too.”

Sarah felt an ache, starting in her stomach and spreading up and down. She wondered how long Jessica would remember this conversation, if she would tell it in whispers to a boyfriend years from now in late night phone conversations. The first time she went to see her mom in rehab. Or if she would laugh about it in the high school cafeteria with her friends, a novelty from another lifetime. It might even be a joke, to explain her own craziness—you know, I was in rehab before I was ten. Or would this year be a shameful ache in her heart, pushed to the back of her memory? Either way, it was here, and it would play itself out, day after day.

“Where will I go to school?” Jessica asked.

“There’s a good school here. You’ll like it. All the kids do. You can ride a bus with the other kids. There’s lots of kids here.”

“Where’s Karlyn? And Aunt Alex?”

Sarah had assumed Jessica would have all of this information, that whoever brought her to the ranch would’ve told her. But apparently not. Sarah watched Jessica’s

face as she told her, trying to see if she was jealous of Karlyn, if she wished she were at Amber's house, too. She couldn't tell.

“Can we go see them?” Jessica asked. “Or can they come see us? I want to see Karlyn.”

“I don't know,” Sarah said, and the ache was sharper now.

When Sarah tucked Jessica in that night—after they'd walked around the campus so Jessica could see the cafeteria, the library, the gym—she pulled the yellow bedspread tight around Jessica's shoulders and kissed her, thinking she'd remember the moment forever. She had fallen asleep when she felt Jessica crawling in bed beside her. She was so used to being alone that it startled her, being woken up. She caught a scream in her throat.

“Can I sleep with you, Mama?” Jessica asked, her skin warm against Sarah's.

“Sure, baby.”

Jessica turned on her side, and Sarah curled around her, brushing her fingers through her hair.

## Chapter Seven (*Amber*)

Karlyn's teacher wanted to have a conference with Amber, alone. Karlyn had been at Amber and Charlie's house for four days, sleeping on a twin bed in Ellie's room. There was another twin bed in the room, empty, with a matching purple bedspread. They'd gotten matching dressers, too, but Charlie suggested they move one of them out, get Karlyn a little desk. Amber had never imagined they might end up with one of the girls and not the other. The girls were always together, had been since she and Charlie first met them, when they were just toddlers. Amber had loved the idea of watching them grow up together, as sisters—because hadn't she always wanted a sister? And it had seemed less a betrayal of Ellie to have two girls, because surely anyone could see that even two new daughters could never make up the loss of her first daughter. But to just have one, as if she'd traded? Replaced Ellie? Nothing would ever fill the ache, Amber knew. Nothing could replace her. But here Karlyn was, her hair blond, like Amber's, and skin freckled, so that she could've been mistaken for Amber's own. It had always been a comfort to Amber that no one could've made that mistake with Jessica—her dark skin and dark hair an outward sign that she wasn't really Amber's firstborn daughter but was a new piece to their family, one that would be there forever but that hadn't been there in the beginning, wasn't the one Amber brought home from the hospital, nursed in the late hours of the night. In fact, when Amber had imagined a life with the girls, before the hearing when it was all decided, it was Jessica she thought of, more often. She'd spent more time with Jessica, felt closer to her. It had always been harder to connect with Karlyn. She was older than Jessica, and tougher—Amber tried to push the phrase “more

like her mother,” out of her thoughts but it kept trying to surface—but who could blame Karlyn? Bless her heart.

Amber wanted desperately for Karlyn to love her, to feel tenderly toward her and be glad to be in their home. Karlyn had been sweet since she'd gotten to their house, but quiet. She'd cried when they first picked her up, hugged Amber tight and said she was ready, so ready, to go home, back to Parkin. But now that they were back, Amber couldn't read her. She'd tried, every night, to get Karlyn to sit up with her and talk, but every night she'd said she was tired, ready for bed. Amber wasn't sure if Karlyn had spoken, without being spoken to first. She'd always been comfortable with them, before. Never quiet like this. Amber had been dropping Karlyn off at school in the morning last, after the boys got out, so they'd have some time to talk, just the two of them, and picking her up first, but she just watched out the window. Amber had asked her if she wanted to skip school, take a day, just the two of them, maybe go eat ice cream or go to the mall, look for some school clothes. Thanks, Karlyn had said, but she'd rather go to school.

While Amber waited for Karlyn's teacher, in the school counselor's office, she read the signs on the walls about saying no to drugs, resisting peer pressure. Ellie had never made it to middle school. When her classmates promoted out of elementary school, Amber had ached to think about it—their first of many promotions, without Ellie. They would graduate high school some day, all go off to college. Every milestone for them would be a reminder of what Ellie would've been doing, should've been doing. Amber still got kind notes in the mail from some of their mothers, at the beginning of every new school year, and again, in October. But she couldn't think about that now.



Karlyn's teacher, Ms. Jeffries, came in and sat down next to Amber, a familiar face. Amber had seen her some when she'd been to school to check on Karlyn and Jessica but hadn't talked to her much. She was worried about Karlyn, Ms. Jeffries said. Karlyn was always *a little difficult*—Amber felt the woman watching her face, trying to see if this came as a surprise to her—but she'd been more aggressive since she'd been back, hostile with the teacher and angry with the other kids.

"It's not uncommon," Ms. Jeffries said, said "in dealing with students who've had a sudden change in their living situation."

*But we're trying to help her!* Amber wanted to say. *We're going to take care of her.* Couldn't the teacher see that? Couldn't Karlyn?

"Do you have any suggestions?" Amber asked, feeling a creeping hopelessness.

"Just listen to her. Give her every opportunity to talk about how she's feeling. Be patient with her."

"Okay," Amber said, feeling suddenly close to this woman, desperate to hear anything she could say that might help Karlyn.

"But she has to know that her recent behavior in the classroom has been unacceptable," Ms. Jeffries continued.

It took Amber a moment to realize she was waiting for Amber to respond, that it was Amber's job, now, to have these conversations with Karlyn. Yes, yes, Amber said. I'll tell her, and she felt a little sick to think of it.

Karlyn was waiting in the classroom, with her head on her desk. She raised her head when Amber walked in and looked at her, her green eyes wide, so like Sarah's. She looked more like Sarah than Sarah's own daughter did.

"Mrs. Jefferies told me you've been having trouble at school," Amber said, sitting beside her in one of the student desks.

"I'm not having trouble," Karlyn said.

"She said you've been acting ugly," Amber said, reaching her hand out to brush through Karlyn's hair, trying to soften her words and remind her *I love you, I love you, I want you for my own*. "Acting ugly," was the phrase Amber had used with her own children, when they were very small. As she said it, she realized she couldn't remember the last time she'd said much of anything to either of her boys, to correct them. But surely they'd said things they shouldn't have. Had she not noticed? Had she responded so carelessly that she didn't even remember?

"I know you miss your mother, and I'm sorry," Amber said.

"Why can't I live with her? Like Jessie's living with Aunt Sarah?"

"Your mom is sick," Amber said. "She's not able to take care of you right now."

"She's not sick," Karlyn said. "She's on drugs. I know about it."

"But that's a sickness," Amber said. And as she heard herself say it, she realized it was true. She felt sympathy for Alex for the first time. She'd always ached for Sarah, even as she was frustrated with her for not taking care of her kids and for putting such a strain on Linda, but she'd never felt for Alex. Alex had always been so calloused and brazen, yelling at the kids and slamming doors and disappearing. But surely she didn't want to be like that? Surely no mother did. Maybe Alex was a victim of all this, too, and

here Amber was, caring for her child. Amber felt an acute tenderness for Alex, an overwhelming compassion.

“I know she loves you,” Amber said. “But she has a problem, and she can’t take care of you now. You’re going to stay with us. That’s just how it is. Nobody can help it.”

“Is she coming back? Later? Or if she gets better?” Karlyn asked.

Amber heard Mrs. Jeffries open the door, start to come in but then close the door again, once she saw them.

“I don’t think so, baby.”

“Am I going to stay with you and Mr. Charlie forever?”

“You’ll be with us for a long time, sweetie,” Amber said. “We hope you’ll be happy with us.” Amber wondered if Karlyn recognized the desperation in her voice.

“You don’t have to say Ms. and Mr. when you talk to us, either,” Amber said. “You can just call us Amber and Charlie.”

“Will I ever see my grandma again?”

“Yes. She’s sick, too. In the hospital. But we can visit her. We can visit her tonight, if you want. We can go any time.”

“I want to see her.”

“Okay.”

“And can I see Jessie?”

“I don’t know, baby. Your Aunt Sarah is staying at a special place where she can get help and be able to take better care of Jessica and the new baby. I don’t know if we’ll be able to see them or not.”

“Why didn’t my mama go to a place like that?”

“She was already gone. But maybe she’ll go to a place like that some day. We can pray for it.”

Karlyn put her head back down and Amber sat beside her. There were still sitting side by side, quiet, when Ms. Jeffries came back in and gathered her things, leaving for the day.

Charlie had been cool toward Amber since the day of the hearing—normal enough in front of the kids, and never angry, but in no way familiar. After the scene in the courtroom, when he’d been angry, she hadn’t seen him for several hours, and she’d felt a rising panic. But he came home while Amber and the boys were eating supper and sat down with them, normal and calm. They’d told the boys, then, about Karlyn coming. But Charlie’s formality with Amber had not relented, even as they’d helped Karlyn unpack her things, eaten breakfast as a family.

That night, once the kids were asleep, the house quiet, Amber found Charlie on their back patio. He was sitting on the ground, poking a stick into their fire pit. He loved to make fires, in the fall. And fall would be here soon enough. The heat had already begun to break.

“Are you going to be mad at me forever?” Amber asked, pulling up a lawn chair and sitting down behind him.

Charlie was quiet.

“I’m sorry I said that the other day, about calling Jackson,” Amber said. “It was stupid.”

“I don’t want you to ever say his name again. Ever.”

“Okay.”

“I’m serious,” Charlie said, still poking the fire pit, not looking up.

“Me, too. I won’t.”

“What do you think, anyway? That’s he’s going to magically fix everything? And you’re going to be happy?”

“I’m sorry I said it. It was a stupid thing to say,” Amber said.

“It was. But you believe it. Like he’s some hero who could make all your problems go away.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Well why did you go that day? To see him? What if you hadn’t seen Sarah?”

Amber sighed. They’d been through this. “I don’t know, Charlie. I’ve said I was sorry a hundred times.”

“But you’ve never answered that question. What if you hadn’t seen her?”

“I don’t know. It was crazy. I just wanted to be wanted, I guess. And feel like myself, before.”

“Do you think I don’t want you? Do you really think that? And do you think he does?” Charlie said, looking at her, finally, his eyes angry.

“What else do you want me to say? I’ve said I’m sorry,” Amber said.

“Don’t ever mention his name again, for anything. Even if he’s the president of the United States. You’ll just act like you don’t even know we have a president. Okay?”

“Okay, fine. Whatever. He’s never going to be president.”

“That’s not the point.” Charlie stood and pulled up another chair, sitting beside her.

“Okay. I won’t,” Amber said. “I don’t even want to. It was just a crazy thing. It’s gone now.”

“For now,” Charlie said.

“Forever.”

Charlie leaned forward, holding his head between his knees. Amber reached forward and brushed her hair with his fingers. It was a familiar posture. She’d done it, so often, after Ellie died. He never held his head up and cried. Amber could cry looking straight ahead, had cried driving a car, talking to tellers at the bank, walking down the hall at Corey and David’s school. But Charlie’s grief was always more private, dropping his head. She twisted one of his curls around her finger.

“What are we going to do?” he asked.

“About what?”

“Everything. I don’t even have a job.”

“Yes you do.”

“No, I’m serious. I can’t stay at the church after this. Amber, we have custody of Alex’s kid. No one out there will ever talk to us again.”

“Some of them know it was right. They knew what was going on.”

“I don’t care, Amber. It’s over. You know it is. Be honest. I can’t work there anymore. We can’t be out there anymore, at all.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Amber said. “There are a lot of things you can do. You’re good at everything.”

“So I’m just supposed to start from the beginning and find a whole new career? A whole new job? In Parkin? There aren’t exactly a lot of opportunities.”

“It doesn’t have to be Parkin. It can be wherever.”

“So you’ll leave now?”

“Yes.”

“I wish you’d have figured that out a month ago. Before we got fired from the mission board.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie.”

“Are you really? You keep saying that, but it doesn’t seem like you give one shit.” His eyes were dark now, and Amber felt a rush of relief. His anger was welcome, after all the strangeness. It was something real.

“I really am sorry,” she said. “I know you wanted to go.”

“Wanted to go? It wasn’t a vacation, Amber. We were going over there to be missionaries. We’d been planning on it for years. Years! You said all along that you wanted to do it, that you thought God was calling us.”

“I did.”

“Then why’d you make a fool out of me in the interview? You should’ve told me the truth. And we wouldn’t have driven up there for the interview. You could’ve had enough respect for me to do that.” His voice cracked, and Amber felt sorry.

“I know. It was wrong. I can’t take it back, though, Charlie.”

“No, you can’t. You can’t take any of it back.”

“I’ll go with you wherever you want to go.”

“As long as it’s Parkin? As long as it’s not Kampala?”

“I’d go there, now.”

“That’s pretty phenomenal, Amber.”

“I just wasn’t ready then. I couldn’t have done it.”

“But you’re ready now?”

“I’d try.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say! I messed up. I messed everything up. But you’re still my husband, and I love you. And I love the kids. I’m glad we have Karlyn now. I want to take care of her.”

“We will. You will.”

“I’ll go wherever we have to go to do that.”

“What about Ellie?” Charlie’s voice was softer now, and the anger had left his face.

“I still want to visit her. I’d like to be close enough that I can come sometimes, during the day by myself. But I know I can’t come every day. I don’t have to.” Amber hadn’t been to the cemetery since Karlyn had been with them. She wanted to—she missed going—but the days had been so full. It made her a little sad that she’d gone so long without visiting the grave, that she’d been able to do it. Something had changed, she felt like, something she couldn’t clearly define.

“Sometimes I miss her so much I can’t stand it,” Charlie said.

“I know. Me too.”

“It wasn’t supposed to happen,” he said.

“But it did.” Amber said.



“I know. But I keep thinking we’ll wake up one morning and it will all be back to normal, the way it should’ve been all along. And she’ll just be here,” Charlie said, his voice catching. “I wouldn’t be one bit surprised to wake up tomorrow and find her asleep in her bed, and all of this was just a terrible dream. I keep expecting it to end and let us go back to our real lives.”

“It’s never going to,” Amber said. “She’s never coming back.” She leaned her head against Charlie and felt grief wash over her as fully and violently as it did in the early days, when it was still fresh, every day a strange fog.

“Not in this lifetime,” he said. “But we’ll see her again.” He squeezed her hand, tracing her wrist with his thumb, and looked her in the face, waiting for something. She nodded at him, to tell him yes, yes, she knew. It was just this lifetime that had to be gotten through. But lifetimes could be long.

“I’m not sure Karlyn wants to be with us,” Amber said, thankful to be able to talk to Charlie, for real.

“She’s been through a lot.”

“Everyone keeps saying that.”

“It’s true,” Charlie said.

“I know. But I want her to be happy. To want to be here. I want it to work.”

“We’ll have to give it time. She just got here.”

“Will you go fishing with me tomorrow?” he asked, when Amber was quiet. She nodded yes, leaning against him.

The next morning, before Charlie's alarm went off, Amber woke to Mabel's voice on the phone.

"Are you okay?" Amber said, sitting up in bed, trying to get her bearings. She hadn't talked to Mabel since the day of the hearing.

"Sarah's having her baby," Mabel said.

"What? How do you know?"

"She called me this morning. She started labor in the night. I don't think it will take long. She said her first two didn't."

Why would Sarah have called Mabel? Amber thought about her first delivery, Ellie's birth, when both her and Charlie's families had gathered, and Amber heard them laughing in the hallway, all those familiar voices, as she nursed Ellie for the first time. She'd wept to think of how blessed Ellie was, with so many people to love her. She imagined Sarah, waiting on her baby in some hospital room in Little Rock, alone, deciding to call Mabel.

"I'll pray for her," Amber said, meaning it.

"I want to go see her," Mabel said.

"I don't know if you can. If it's allowed," Amber said. Charlie had sat up now and was watching her.

"It is. She wants me to come. I'm going," Mabel said.

"How are you going to get there?" Amber felt the meanness as soon as she asked the question. Charlie had told her about Mabel's drivers' license. It was a defeat too painful to reflect on, and Amber had tried not to think about it. But even without a

license, Mabel couldn't have driven all the way to Little Rock. Surely she didn't want Amber to take her? Surely she knew it would be crazy to ask.

"I was hoping you might take me," Mabel said. For a moment, Amber felt that familiar anger, but then, before she could speak, it was gone, all in a rush.

"Why?"

"Who else? I can't ask Janet. We're her only friends. Me and you."

"I'm not exactly her friend. We just went to court over custody of her kid," Amber said. But she got out of bed and grabbed a pair of jeans from the closet, pulling a t-shirt over her head while still holding the phone.

"You were friends before," Mabel said. "And you have a good heart." Amber's eyes blurred to hear Mabel say it. She didn't care what Mabel thought of her—she had repeated that to herself during the whole ordeal, since she found out Mabel was helping Sarah—but she had cared before, had always thought they had a special connection, that Mabel loved her as something more than just Charlie's wife. She sensed Mabel appealing to that friendship now. Amber felt something in herself give way.

"What time are you trying to leave?"

"Now. As soon as you can."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Charlie put his arms around Amber when she hung up, hugging her tight. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"I guess you heard?" she said, putting her shoes on. She felt an urgency now, a rising nervousness.

"You don't have to do it. You really don't."

“Are you okay to take the kids to school today? And pick them up?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t forget about Karlyn,” she said.

“Good Lord, Amber,” he said. “I wouldn’t forget her.”

“I know,” she said. “But I wanted to make today special for her, since yesterday was hard. Maybe you could take them to eat supper or something. Or get ice cream.”

Amber felt her own absence as she said it, imagined Charlie and the kids sharing a dessert, laughing. How many nights had Charlie and the boys gone out without her? But didn’t she need to do this, drive Mabel? Amber was never sure where she was supposed to be. There was always a part of her somewhere else, usually with Ellie—and now, with Ellie still, but also with Karlyn, and with Sarah. She felt herself thinning like the air, stretching further and further over all of these people she loved.

Fifteen hours later, Amber sat curled against Charlie on the couch. He’d waited up for her, to hear about this day that seemed to contain several lifetimes. When Amber first answered Mabel’s call and agreed to drive her, she’d imagined that she would to drive Mabel to Little Rock and stay as long as Mabel wanted to stay, without ever actually seeing Sarah. Why would Sarah want Amber there, after all? But once they were ten miles out of town she knew she would go inside, if Sarah wanted her to, sit by her bedside, see the baby. And she had. The baby had already been born when they got there, was in the neonatal intensive care unit. Sarah was alone in her room when they saw her, afraid for the boy. He was less than four pounds, and they’d taken him, immediately, to the NICU. Mabel and Amber were there when the nurse came in. Low birth weight

was common when there had been meth use, she'd said, but everything else looked okay. His heart rate was good, his blood pressure. He was strong. They'd watch him, but she thought he was going to be okay.

Amber had turned her head away when Sarah wept, her hurt full, but Mabel sat beside Sarah, held her hand. "You heard her," she'd said. "They think he's going to be just fine." Amber herself had pushed Sarah's wheel chair down to the NICU window, where the three of them stood side by side and watched the baby in his incubator. So tiny, Mabel had said, her eyes moist, Such a tiny little thing.

## Chapter Eight (*Mabel*)

The night of Mabel's first date, her three younger sisters sat on the couch and watched their daddy open the door and greet Eddie Jackson, who'd come to take Mabel out for a hamburger. They'd laughed about it later, how serious their daddy was, and how stern. Had it scared Eddie? Had he said anything about it? All the boys talked about it, for years: the Rodgers' girls' big daddy. Mabel had heard her sisters drop a line every now and then, to straighten a boy up: "If my daddy ever hears about that....." And this girl, Karlyn, would be able to say it, too, and Charlie would be that daddy, Charlie with his good, good heart. It would all come to pass, somehow, Mabel could feel it.

One day some boy would knock, and it would be Charlie answering the door, looking just as Leeland would have, if Leeland had lived long enough. He would be gentle and kind, but his eye on the boy and his tone would be firm. And when Karlyn walked down the driveway and got in the car, it would be Amber looking out the window, anxious. Charlie would walk the girl down the aisle at her wedding, Amber beside him when he sat down afterwards.

Amber would ache for her first daughter, her true daughter, forever, and the girl's face would continue to smile at them from the walls, and in quiet moments when no one was watching, Amber would take photographs of Ellie out of her drawer and letters Ellie had written and pictures she had drawn, and Amber would grieve as if she lost her the day before. And sometimes Karlyn would ache for her own mother, would lie awake at night trying to recall her voice, and she might search for her, and she might find her, and the woman might come back when Karlyn was fifteen years old or when she was twenty-six or she might never come back, but despite it all, Amber and Karlyn would stand beside each other, mother and daughter, someday.

And Janet would be the girl's grandmother, and Amber might be angry with Janet for correcting the girl when she became a mouthy teenager, or she might be angry with Janet for not correcting her, for taking Karlyn's side as it were no big thing to disrespect her mother. But isn't that the passage of mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws? Of families?

And Charlie would find another little church to pastor, and Amber would sit on the front row and listen, her children beside her, and occasionally she would nod, and every once in awhile, she might whisper *Amen* and some day she might even say out loud, *Halleluiah, halleluiah, My God, who came to set the captives free. The grave could not hold him, Halleluiah.*

Oh, but wasn't it all a long time coming? Mabel imagined Amber, today, sitting across from Karlyn at breakfast, her stomach knotted with worry about the day ahead of them, trying to feel like the girl's mother but knowing that something was missing, not imagining that it might ever come. And Charlie walking heavily under the weight of that question—What do we do next?—and wondering if they'd made a mistake. And surely Amber was wondering it, too, even if she wouldn't let herself admit it, wondering if they did the wrong thing after all, made life more difficult for her two boys, whose childhood had been so strange.

Mabel could see it all clearly, maybe because she was so old, or maybe because she loved them all, even Sarah now, with a fierceness so thick and heavy it swallowed up all the days she'd ever lived and anchored her resolutely to this moment, to this day.

There were sad days to come. Mabel would visit Esther in the nursing home and she would enjoy her, and they would laugh about old times and talk about their two

sisters, talk about them so much that it would seem as if they'd all four been together. But then the good days would start coming fewer and fewer between—hadn't Mabel seen so many friends and cousins disappear and leave some strange shade of themselves speaking and moving and controlling their bodies? But even in those days, Mabel would visit Esther, just like she had done Josie, trying to catch a glimpse of her sister, waiting for days when Esther would be herself and oh, how happy Mabel would be on those days. She would call her daughters and say, "Esther was *herself* today, I talked to her, I saw *her*." Mabel might or might know it was the last good day, when that day came, but then Esther would be gone and there would be another funeral. Everyone would try not to watch as Mabel stood next to the casket and told Esther goodbye, and they would know that Mabel had to know her own time was coming, and soon. You can only live so long.

But there was plenty to be done. Mabel would go to Amber and Charlie's house tomorrow, and she would meet the girl, and she would try to help Amber see that everything would be okay, in its time. She would go see Sarah, eat lunch with her and Jessica in the lonely cafeteria. And she would talk to Janet, help her see that what had happened—all of it—had to happen. And in every day she had left, she would help make them all into a family—a family, like her family, that would carry on and on and on. She was not so very old.