

## THE POACHERS' CODE

*-- August, 1989*

Secrets never stay buried. Not treasure, guilt, or love. In every book Sadie Kessler had read by flashlight under the covers, those patient, slippery secrets always worked their way to the surface. Even so, as she, Daniela, and the Summer Kid dragged a body across the small, rocky island, Sadie clenched her tear-streaked jaw and searched for a place to dig. A place to bury a secret.

They took turns shoveling, prying rocks out, and untangling tree roots from the damp earth. As the sun climbed, Sadie dug faster, clawing at the earth with bloodied fingertips. Her parents would be home soon. The island grudgingly gave up eighteen inches of soil, just deep enough to produce a dull thud when they rolled the body in.

Daniela dropped to her knees, her back to the Summer Kid. She wrapped one arm around Sadie's calves and leaned her head against Sadie's thigh. With her other hand she separated rocks from the loose dirt and stacked them into a carefully balanced cairn. The tick of each newly placed stone, the shush of the Summer Kid's shovel in the dirt, left Sadie dizzy and breathless.

A muggy breeze poured through the oaks and maples and pines on the hourglass-shaped island, carrying the iridescent taste of fear across the shallows of the cove, beyond the vastness of the lake, and up into the White Mountains where the scattered fragments of Sadie's childhood took refuge in the fissures—and waited.

—*August, 2016*

If gravity pulls from the center of the Earth, from the dense fist of its nucleus, through the churning magma and the impenetrable crust, it seemed reasonable that the higher Sadie climbed the mountain, the further she removed herself from the core, the looser gravity's grip would be. It tugged at her heels and stole the oxygen from her lungs as she pushed higher. Only on Mt. Jefferson's peak, did Sadie feel the lightness in her chest. She stood untethered.

She lowered her pack to the ground and plugged her cell phone, dead for more than three days now, into her solar charger. Wind whipped her hair across her face carrying traces of pine and the reedy flute of a distant hermit thrush. Stretching out like a starfish on the granite, she soaked in the morning sun and let it settle into her dusty, neglected corners.

Her cell phone woke with a rapid fire of missed text messages.

*They found him.* A day-old message from Daniela flickered by.

It took several minutes before she understood who had been lost. Who had been found. The ache in her fingertips and the pain on Daniela's twelve-year-old face rushed back. She bit down on the silence at the summit, an island of stone in the low hanging mist. If only time would stop. Right here. Right now. She threw a stone off the ledge and counted to eight before it struck the slope below, unleashing a torrent of cascading stone.

*They're questioning my dad again,* Daniela wrote.

The fiction of Sadie's childhood, carefully rewritten and edited so she could sleep at night,

was coming undone.

Wind stretched the clouds below her like raw cotton on a comb, allowing the rusty tips of dead pine trees to peek through. Sadie pulled samples of pine bark from her backpack and lay them out on the rock next to her phone. The invasive Mountain Pine Beetle she had spent the last five days hunting, had carved lacy lines into the bark. The pea-sized creatures were killing off trees and leaving them as kindling in the parched New Hampshire woodlands.

She couldn't abandon her research, not now.

Her thumbs felt thick and clumsy as she typed and retyped a response.

*Just saw your texts. On my way home.* The tacky layer of sap, which after five days of climbing trees, felt like part of her skin, stuck to the screen as she typed, leaving gummy fingerprints. *It's time to tell the truth,* she added and hit send. But the fleeting signal had already dissipated. Sending. Sending. Message Failure. She added three rocks to a cairn at the top of the granite ledge. An offering. A prayer. The chilled morning air telegraphed the metallic peal of mineral against mineral, broadcasting her location into the valley.

Smoke blurred the edge of the mountaintops to the west. Mt. Griffin rose from the mist, green on the north slope and charred on the south. When fire crews started thinning the beetle-infested pines, she would salvage a few trunks to turn into floorboards for her home. If she ever stayed still long enough to own a home. The grooves carved by the beetles would feel good under bare feet, better than the slick linoleum in her one-bedroom apartment. From the mountain top, home felt distant, as if it might not be there when she came down. Time moved slower in the woods. She rapped a finger on her phone, encouraging her message to fly. With a chirp, her promise lit off.

As she hiked down, four packets of dead beetles in her pocket shushed against each other

like seeds waiting to be planted. She beat a small tambourine against her thigh while she walked. Alone in the woods for days as she collected samples, she marked time in elevation, ounces of water, and the rhythm of tiny cymbals against her leg.

A wisp of distant smoke scratched at the back of her throat, teasing open the prickly memories of racing breathless through the woods behind Daniela. She swallowed down the ashy air with a mouthful of iodine-tinged water which did little to ease the cottonmouth clinging to the creases of her lips.

She dialed Thea, her research director.

“Are you watching the fire? It’s moving close,” Thea said.

“It’s the beetles, just like I thought.” Sadie’s breath came heavy as she stutter-stepped down the gravelly slope. “I don’t care what anyone says. They’re here. Those beetles are killing off the pines, and with this drought, it’s all going to burn.”

“You lost the grant.”

Silence as deep as the dying forest surrounded Sadie. Thea coughed, waiting for a response.

“But I’ve got proof now. Bags full of dead beetles that everyone says aren’t here yet.” She stopped and rubbed her fingers over a series of popcorn-like resin tubes dotting the trunk of an afflicted tree. “It’s just like California and Colorado. You want me to pretend nothing’s happening because I don’t have a grant?”

“Write a paper, maybe you’ll pick up more funding.”

“By then the whole fucking state will be on fire.”

“You need to come down. Stop by my office tomorrow. We’ll talk.”

“I have to go home for a few days.”

“You can’t just disappear for days, run down the mountain yelling fire, then go on

vacation.” Thea’s stubby fingernails cantered against her desktop in the background. “Show up tomorrow with the samples or I’m done defending your research.”

Sadie’s backpack grew heavier, compressing her knees, her spine, as if she might crumble into the dust and rock under her feet. She had hoped the summer fellowship would morph into a full-time university position so she could escape the dead-end teaching job, where her community college students just wanted an easy science credit. They wouldn’t give a shit about her beetles either.

This beetle. This drought. This spate of fires. She could slow them if someone would just believe her. The anticipation of being right, of being the hero, had lulled her to sleep the past several nights in her one-person tent. She imagined the accolades. Maybe a Ted Talk.

“Fine. I’ll be there.” Sadie hung up.

Her phone buzzed as another text from Daniela came through. *We can NEVER tell. I need you here.*

Sadie imagined the words in Daniela’s childhood voice and didn’t restrain a sob that burst out with the velocity of thirty years of compressed guilt. Maybe she had always hoped the truth would rise one day. Or maybe she had convinced herself that the deeper she hid in the woods, the more gently she walked on this Earth, the more likely it was their secret would stay where they left it—where they left him. Buried.

Her ache swirled up through the canopy of dying pine needles, searching for a place to hide among the brittle branches. The embers of her cry drifted back to the ground and settled into the hollows and the moss and the decay. She scratched at a scaly pine trunk and patted it with her open palm as if it were a horse’s flank.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into the breeze.

A blast of steamy air hit Sadie's face when she opened the back hatch of her minivan, the only vehicle parked in the trailhead parking lot. The dipping sun cast lanky pine shadows across the pavement. Her watch read 6:30 pm. She could still meet Daniela at the cottage by nine if she hurried.

She had descended too fast. Sliding down rocky trails, skipping lunch. Her water ran out hours earlier but she hadn't bothered to source any more. She opened a jug of warm water from the back of the van, and gulped down several mouthfuls. The sweet, fresh water—free of iodine tincture or cloudy particulates—spilled down her chin, throat, and chest.

She scratched her fingernail over a wedge sliced from a dead tree stained with the Mountain Pine Beetle's telltale blue fungus. The color of Civil War soldiers and the autumn sky just before sunset. The color that meant death to a forest. She held the sample to her face and breathed in the aroma of freshly-cut wood. The tang of sap should have rushed in. But dead trees don't bleed. They burn.

She tore the hand-written field notes out of her journal, photographed each page with her phone, and stuffed them in a cardboard box with the packets of beetles to deliver to Thea.

She could save this forest.

Sadie put the key in the ignition, but only a click from the lifeless battery answered her. She got out and slammed the door. She kicked the tires and cursed the beetles, the trees, the battery. *You should always be prepared*, her father's voice echoed in her head as she rummaged through

the back of the van for the portable battery charger he had given her for Christmas. Sadie had wanted a new backpack.

As she attached the positive claw to the positive, and the negative claw to the negative, Sadie launched a plea up to the enormous expanse of sky. The truth she had spent decades hiding from swelled in her chest, bursting to get out. She needed to get home.

Sadie craved the rush of climbing impossible rock faces. She savored the slow fortitude of living alone in the woods. But this flavor of adrenaline—the anticipation, the hope—stung her blood vessels and pooled in her chest, threatening to drown her if she stayed still too long. She had to convince Daniela it was time.

The gravelly foghorn of a great horned owl startled Sadie just as she was about to try the ignition. It wasn't even twilight. The bird, with its saucer eyes and cloak of brown and white feathers, perched on an oak branch at the edge of the parking lot watching Sadie. It should have been curled up in a hollow with its head under its wing asleep.

The great bird bobbed its head and called out again *who-hoooo, who-hooooo*.

Sadie answered. *Who-hoooo, who-hooooo*.

She held her breath and turned the key. The van roared back to life. The owl took flight, its wingspan as wide as Sadie's van, and disappeared into the woods.

Ceramic dust from her mother's pottery and the traces of her father's oil paint clung to the interior of the van and pulled at Sadie's gut with a plaintive twang. It smelled like home. Her childhood home. Sadie tried to conjure a desire to return to the cottage. To see Daniela. Although hidden in the corners of her childhood bedroom, she still sheltered tender, ginger-scented treasures, the cottage had long since lost the warm embrace she used to feel when she burst through the creaky screen door after school.

Now, whenever she returned home she felt the invisible resistance of two magnets with the same poles. She could get close, but never connect.

She unclamped the charger, half expecting the car to fall silent. But the charge held. Before getting back in the van, Sadie pulled a granite stone from the bottom of her backpack. She brushed off the dirt and spit shined a small circle to see what colors the stone hid. When she built her own house, the stones she collected would form the skirt around her hearth. Pieces of every hike, markers of time. The stack of stones—at least thirty by now—formed a cairn in her apartment. She often wondered if the weight was too much for the poorly maintained building to support, if one day it would all come crashing down.

She climbed back in the driver's seat and caught her red-rimmed eyes in the rearview mirror as she was backing up. Dirt smeared across her forehead.

The van crept along the Interstate, cutting through channels blasted out of granite mountainsides. She pressed down on the gas, urging the vehicle to speed up, but the air around her pushed back on the van as if the roadway, the mountains, even the clouds, wanted her to turn back.

A female deer lay on the side of the highway, motionless. Its flat eyes stared at oncoming traffic. The fires had been pushing animals out of the deep woods into neighborhoods, parks, and highways for weeks. The number of fox, deer, and moose struck by vehicles just in the past month already surpassed the previous two years combined. The deer looked like it might get up at any moment. No blood, no visibly broken bones. It just lay there with open eyes.

Sadie's knuckles turned yellow, then white, as she strangled the steering wheel. Her research and samples would be enough to warrant attention. But she would only be a footnote on the presentation that Thea would likely let someone else make if Sadie didn't show up the next

day. All her work, her lab hours, her reputation, it was all going to burn.

She beat her fist on the wheel and bore down on the gas pedal. Sadie turned down the twisting James Taylor Road that wove through woods past two maple syrup farms with ramshackle sugar shacks built of ancient field stones. Her mother had always called it the James Taylor Road because she liked to listen to his mellow, rolling voice on the mellow, rolling road. Sadie hummed to her mental soundtrack, but sped up the tempo. She was in a rush to get to the cottage before Daniela. Auction and foreclosure signs popped up on three farms within a five-mile stretch of road. Sadie had heard a rumor a developer was planning to build a retirement development on one of them.

Weathered barns tilted at severe angles, sheep wandered pastures, and stretches of towering hemlocks wrapped around the road she and Daniela once soared down on their bikes, focused only on the wind and their next adventure, fixated by maps and rescuing the Summer Kid. And secrets.

Deep secrets—not the kind that draw heads together in fluttering whispers, but the the stuff that moves between two bodies like shared blood—those secrets bind souls closer. Or repel them. She could feel Daniela getting closer as she approached the cottage.

The spice of pine needles and forest decay flooded through the car window as Sadie crept down the driveway. The screen door remembered her touch and swung open weightlessly. Her breath hitched at the familiar scent of musty newspapers, lavender, and paint. With her parents away for her father's residency in Barcelona, the house felt hollow.

She tugged the chain attached to the naked light bulb over the kitchen island. The wrought iron trivet which read "Kissin' Don't Last, But Cookin' Do," hung, as it had forever, on the wall above the sink. She slumped into an oak chair at the table. The seat's caning had cracked with

age. Sharp edges pushed through her jeans, enough to notice, but not enough to make her get up.

She needed Daniela to calm her and tell her everything was okay, like she always had. She unwound her long, red braids and stepped into the icy shower. It would take hours for the antique water heater to kick in, but she needed to wash the layers of dirt away.

Wearing one of her mother's T-shirts and a pair of baggy sweats, Sadie was still towel drying her hair when she heard the crunch of gravel on the driveway. A string cinched around her heart restricting her blood with a pinch.

Daniela knocked, but did not wait for a response before walking in. She wore light blue hospital scrubs. Her thick black hair was pulled back in a ponytail. In one hand she carried a six-pack of beer and in the other a half gallon of mint chip ice-cream.

"I couldn't decide which kind of night this was going to be." She dropped her provisions on the kitchen counter and pulled Sadie into an embrace that warmed the residual chill from Sadie's cold shower.

Daniela's aches always felt deeper than Sadie's. She had this way of smiling with her mouth but not her eyes when she wanted people to think she was having fun or interested in a conversation. Seeing the disconnect on Daniela's face caused a lump to rise in Sadie's throat.

"They haven't identified him," Daniela said. "We can't say anything. You understand that, right?"