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**J U S T
L I K E
H O M E**

**S A R A H
G A I L E Y**

H
HODDER

CHAPTER ONE

The Crowder House clung to the soil the way damp air clings to hot skin.

Vera had anticipated that coming back to her childhood home would be difficult. She had almost refused, had almost made up an excuse: *I'm really busy at work. I don't have time to come watch you die.*

She shielded her eyes with one flat hand, trying to dampen the too-bright day enough to make eye contact with the windows of her parents' old bedroom. There was only so long she could wait.

There was only so long her mother would wait.

Vera stood with one foot on the lawn and one foot on the driveway, sweating, straining as if she might be able to make out the sound of Daphne dying inside. But the house was built to keep the wind out and the sound in. It stood there, patiently waiting for Vera to come inside, and it did not reveal a single one of its secrets no matter how long and hard Vera stared at it.

Her father, Francis Crowder, had built the house long before she was born, back when his marriage to Vera's mother was new. Back before everything else happened, before everyone knew his name. He'd built it with his two strong hands, built it right in the middle of his square patch of green land, built two stories above the ground and dug one below. He'd

built it for Daphne to live in and to die in. From the looks of things she was committed to doing just that.

Francis himself didn't stand a chance of dying in that house, of course.

Not anymore.

That was the only reason Vera was willing to come back at all—that, and the impossible reality of her mother's voice on the phone, rippling with sickness, asking her home.

Vera stood outside the Crowder House much too long, letting the late-spring humidity slide into her throat and choke her. The house was smothered on all sides by a sea of green. The entire block was an eruption of flowers and foliage, just like it always was in the last days before summer broke open and thundered down on everything spring had made. The air was thick with the smell of jasmine and lilacs and wisteria, overpoweringly sweet, so dense Vera wanted to bite into it. It was like trying to breathe fresh sap, relentlessly *spring* in a way that reached down into Vera's lungs with clawed fingers and nested there. Being outside was almost as impossible as going inside.

Almost.

Daphne had never asked Vera to come home before. Not once in a dozen years. Vera knew better than to let this development give her hope, but she couldn't seem to shake the feeling; it bubbled up like a blister and stuck like a scar.

She had come home in spite of that hope and she couldn't make herself go inside until she had sloughed it off. She couldn't afford to bring it inside with her.

Hope was a liability at the Crowder House.

Vera's ostensible task was to clear out the house and to watch her mother die. And after that—after that, she'd get the chance

to sort things out. But she couldn't do either one of those things with one foot on the lawn and one foot on the driveway and her eyes full of sun and her lungs full of syrup.

Vera made herself take one step toward the house. The grass underfoot was thick and springy, dense with clover, drunk on snowmelt. She pressed forward, one foot after another pressing the grass flat. It got easier and easier with each step until, just like that, she was right at the lip of the porch.

Tar-smell came off the wood of the stairs that led up to the house. These steps were made of brand-new redwood, nothing like the splintery white stairs that had been there a dozen years before. Nothing like the stairs her father had built. She knew those stairs with her hands and her feet and the backs of her legs, knew the places where Francis had touched the wood with thick-gloved hands and settled it into a shape that would bring the front lawn and the front door together.

Vera examined this new wood and tried to add it to the things she knew, the things that would rid her of foolish ideas about forgiveness and homecoming. Daphne'd probably gotten whichever parasite was currently living in the renovated garden shed to build the new porch for her. Those new stairs meant that she had known what was coming for a while, had been fixing up the house for Vera to eventually sell. She'd waited until the last minute to call her only daughter home.

Vera wondered if, in the destruction of the old front steps, anything had been found. But of course, the thing Vera hid there must have been destroyed. She would have seen on the news if they'd found what she tucked beneath those old boards so many years before.

It was always on the news when something fresh came to light.

The smell of fresh lumber gave Vera what she needed: a reminder of how things really were. A reminder of how little she had been welcome here until this moment. She breathed in the redwood smell and she spread the last of her hope out on those brand-new steps and she watched it die writhing, watched it without pity, watched it until it was still and cold.

It was the right thing to do, giving up that little bit of hope. It was the only thing to do. Some things, Vera knew, were made to die.

The fresh new stain on the wood of the stairs was tacky under the soles of her shoes, sucking her down. As she took her foot off the top step, Vera snapped the fingers of her right hand four times fast. It was an old habit—a childhood tic that she'd dropped when she left the house. She looked down at her hand with surprise, shocked that it would betray her like this, but her fingers did not apologize. They remembered what they were supposed to do to keep her safe, remembered from when she was young enough to develop a superstition without reasoning herself out of it. Vera's fingers knew that snapping four times had gotten her this far.

The front door of the Crowder House was, mercifully, the same as it had always been. It was the door Vera's father hung when he built the house, the door Vera had closed behind her when she left home for good so many years before. It was painted a deep velvety green, with a brass knob and a diamond-shaped window a foot above Vera's eye level. It'd been just the right height for her father to peer through when he'd wanted to see who was outside.

Her old key still fit sweet and snug in the lock. The paint on the door was warm under the flat of her hand. She wrapped her fingers around the smooth brass of the doorknob, and with just

a little pressure and almost no resistance at all, she was inside the house that her father built.

The door shut behind her without a sound.

It had been twelve years since Vera had last stood on the inside of that door. The sweat on her skin dried fast in the air-conditioned dark of the entryway, leaving her goosefleshed and sticky.

Without looking, she held out her hand and dropped her housekey in the bowl on the little table that stood beside the door; the bowl that was for keys and nothing else, the bowl that had been there since before she could remember, that would remain where it was until she sent it away along with all the rest of her mother's things. The key landed with a bright chime.

The house swallowed the sound immediately, because it was a house that knew how to stay quiet.

Vera breathed in the windows-shut smell of the place where she'd been born. The place where she'd grown up. The place she'd abandoned.

The place where her mother was going to die.

CHAPTER TWO

In hindsight, Vera could see that she'd started turning toward home two jobs ago. She'd been doing data entry at a plastics manufacturer, and a coworker had seen Daphne on the news. That was a pre-deathbed Daphne, a Daphne who had no interest in her daughter, and she was on the news announcing her plans to host a new artist-in-residence at the Crowder House. There was going to be a series of paintings, an extended tour, a disgustingly lucrative auction. The coworker had seen the announcement and spotted the uncanny resemblance between Daphne and Vera (who wouldn't), and they'd put that together with Vera's last name and they'd figured out who she was. Who her father had been.

It wasn't a hard riddle to solve.

Then had come the usual fraught few days of office friendships disintegrating, emails going unanswered, the break room emptying as soon as she entered. Vera had presented herself at HR to save them the trouble of summoning her. They'd called it a redundancy instead of a layoff, which she thought was kind.

It felt like fate: her next job falling apart in just the same way, and then the lease renewal on her apartment coming up fast, and then Daphne calling just as Vera was about to start looking for her next new temporary life.

Vera told herself that a good daughter would go home after that phone call without hesitation. Besides, it would be a relief

to not have to find another furnished apartment, to not have to try to mold her spine into the shape of a new-old mattress and spring-stiff sofa. It wasn't like she had more than a few things to pack.

She'd gifted her three remaining fish to a nine-year-old boy who lived in the unit below hers. He'd promised to keep them alive.

Vera didn't give the fish great odds, but that wasn't her business anymore.

It had been easy to uproot her life and leave it behind. She'd done it so many times before. And because that part had been easy, and because nothing could be easy all the way through, she knew to expect this next part to be hard.

In Vera's memory, Daphne Crowder was a tall, thin, square-jawed woman with a tennis bracelet she never wore and a habit of biting through thread instead of cutting it. She was a woman who swept up broken shards of china and packed lunches in crinkling brown bags and frowned at the laundry as she folded it. She was a woman who had let Vera grow up for exactly seventeen and a half years before shutting the door behind her and bolting it for good.

Daphne had kissed Vera on the cheek that day without looking her in the eye, and then Vera had been outside of the house her father built with a dark blue duffel bag over her shoulder and a light blue suitcase in her hand. When she heard the bolt slide home she knew that the house her father built would never hold a place for her again. The way back, she knew, was closed to her.

Except now, the way was open again.

Vera stood under the arch that separated the dining room from the entryway, holding that same dark blue duffel and that

same light blue suitcase, and her head swam. The house was the same, but everything everything *everything* was different.

The dining chairs had been pushed up against the walls. The dining table had been replaced by an adjustable bed. In the bed was a woman.

The woman was looking at Vera with her mother's eyes. But this woman, who was made of paper and wax and seemed too small for her own skin, could not be Daphne Crowder.

A strange hot flush of mortification climbed Vera's throat. It was as if she'd interrupted her mother in the middle of some terribly private moment. Something like bathing or masturbating or digging a kitchen knife into the palm of her own hand.

Dying, Vera supposed, was even more personal than any of those things. She was gripped by the urge to apologize for intruding.

"You look tired," the woman in the bed said. She spoke with the same voice that had once told Vera the reason for the box of baking soda in the refrigerator, the voice that had told her what ovaries were for, the voice that had always been flat and loveless but had turned hateful the year Vera turned twelve.

It was her mother's voice.

Almost.

Something was different. The cold authority had drained out of Vera's mother like brake fluid from a cut line. She spoke slowly, carefully, as if she were pushing each word out with individual effort. Her dry tongue made soft sticking sounds against her lips, against the roof of her mouth.

Her tongue must be dry. The thought clicked the new thing into place between them. Vera wasn't home to visit. She had a job to do. A purpose. She set down her bags and crossed the threshold of the dining room.

"Do you want some water?"

"I have some, there," Vera's mother said, pointing to the sideboard. It was part of the dining room set Daphne and Francis had bought when they moved into the house, back when Vera was just an idea they were disagreeing about. The dining table and chairs and sideboard and china cabinet were all made of golden oak, carved with a grapevine motif that Vera had traced with her index finger as a kid.

There was a thick layer of hard, clear plexiglass on top of the sideboard now, screwed into place at the corners. A plastic hospital-pink pitcher sweated on top of the plexiglass next to a stack of waxed paper cups. Vera poured a splash of water into one of the little cups, filling it to the brim, and brought it to her mother. She wondered briefly if she should get a bigger glass—those little cups barely held a mouthful each.

But then Vera handed the cup over and noted the way her mother's wrists shivered at the weight of it and she understood: this was the most she could expect Daphne to carry.

Vera helped lift the cup. Some of the water dribbled out of the side of her mother's mouth, darkening the cotton at her throat. Vera looked around for a tissue, but Daphne waved her away.

"I've got it," she said, wiping the water away with the side of one hand. The thin, yellowed skin of her face stretched under the pressure of her touch. Her cheeks had caved in like a mid-November jack-o'-lantern—there had to be teeth missing, Vera thought. There was no way her mother had lost enough weight to hollow out her face like that. But then her fingers brushed her mother's hand when she took the little paper cup back, and she reconsidered.

Daphne's fingers had always been slender. Now they were

skeletal. Brittle. She looked at her mother's wrists and saw knobs of protruding bone. So much had been whittled away.

Vera felt the first pang of regret.

She should have come home sooner. The daughter she'd always wanted to be would have come home sooner.

Vera, though, had taken more time than usual settling her affairs, rehoming fish and packing up the few things she wanted to keep and staring at herself hard in the mirror for long stretches of time. She had spread the drive home out over three days when she definitely could have done it in two. She had lingered on the front lawn, gawking up at the house, dreading what was inside.

Vera hadn't known it would be this bad. She couldn't have known. That whole time, her mother had been wasting away.

Daphne cleared her throat, cracking through the silence like the back of a spoon tapping the top of a *crème brûlée*. "You should take your things to your bedroom and get settled," she said, her voice more even now that she'd had some water. She still sounded strange, but Vera supposed dying would do that to a person. "You must be exhausted from the drive."

"Yeah, um. It was a long way up here from Cape Coral. And I slept in the car." Vera stood at the side of the bed where her mother was dying, unsure of where to put her hands. Sitting on the mattress felt unspeakably overfamiliar but standing there felt like looming. And she didn't want to go to her bedroom. Not yet. "I probably smell awful, I should take a shower."

"Oh, I can't smell anything anymore," her mother said, her lips cracking as they pulled back from her teeth in a clenched smile. "But I'm sure a shower will make you feel better, at least. You can use the one in the upstairs bedroom. I suppose that's obvious, it's not like there's another shower you could

use. Unless you want to go knock on the door to the cottage, and ask James if you can borrow his." She cleared her throat again, a thicker, wetter sound than the first time. "Go on and get settled. I'm fine here."

Vera's stomach clenched at the thought of the cottage, which used to be called a 'shed' back before her mother decided to invite people to live in it. Ignoring it—the twist in her belly and the memories she had of that shed—she poured more water into the waxed paper cup and set it down on the rolling table beside her mother's bed.

The dining room was all dark paneling and butter-yellow paint. The flat-pack look of that too-modern rolling table was completely out of place. The bed was similarly wrong: made of smooth white particleboard, nothing like the dark bedknobs of the bed her mother and father had once shared. That bed—the old bed—was probably still upstairs, too heavy for Daphne to have moved on her own.

The realization washed over Vera like nausea: that bed, the matching nightstands, the matching vanity, the half-empty closet. It would be up to her to decide what to do with all of it, and soon.

Sooner than she'd planned for, if Daphne was as sick as she looked.

Vera stood there, dull-eyed, contemplating the rolling table, until her mother spoke again.

"I know. It's hideous. But it was cheap, and it's not like"—she interrupted herself to clear her throat again, her eyes flashing—"it's not like I'll be using it for long."

"It's nice," Vera said automatically. "It seems nice, I mean." She couldn't tell if this was a real conversation or if her mother was just making noise to drive her out of the room.