

The only thing she remembered about that summer was that she missed her sister, and that something was wrong with all the watermelons. She remembered sitting at her kitchen table, the seat being too low, or maybe her just being too small. She folded her legs beneath her as she watched her mother carve into the green watermelons. She always bought two at a time, in case one of them was bad, but this time, they were both a sickly orange color on the inside. It reminded her of flesh, the warm sound that the knife made as it sliced through the center.

There was something sacred about her mother's cutting of the watermelons. She didn't understand what, but she and Kayla would always come watch whenever her mother began to lay the plastic bags on the table to stop the juice from spilling everywhere. Kayla would sit, bright-eyed, chattering and in eager anticipation of the sweet fruit. She'd talk and her sister and her mother would listen to the fluttering of her voice. Every word in her mouth always seemed brighter, better somehow, as if she polished them before release.

Now, though, it was just her and her mother at the table. And now, the few words Kayla ever spoke were always dead and empty.

"When's Kayla coming home?" she asked her mother, trying to lighten her voice, trying to sound like an unsuspecting child. She was a child, but unsuspecting? She hadn't been that since she found out what Jacob did to her sister.

Her mother cut a look at her as sharp as the knife. "We've gone through this."

She swallowed her frustration to the back of her throat. She sometimes wondered if her mother thought she was stupid. She was twelve that year, but treated as if she couldn't know of the things that had happened to her sister. How could she not know? She'd seen her sister's stomach swell with an unwanted child. She knew Jacob had given it to her. What she didn't know is whether her sister cried when the baby was born dead because she was relieved or

because she was grieving. What she didn't know was why her sister had to stay at her father's house, when neither of them had seen their father in two years.

"But you never told me when," she finally decides to say, realizing that she could never get all of these thoughts out her head without her mother shutting her up.

"When she comes, that's when," her mother snapped.

She pouted and dazed off as her mother continued to cut. She thought of the day when it happened to her sister. No one had bothered to tell her. She just knew that one night Kayla had come home sobbing. She and her mother talked in hushed, pained voices downstairs. She'd come out to see what was the matter, and her mother fiercely sent her back to her room. "Don't be in no business you don't belong in," she'd told her.

But, as far as she was concerned, Kayla was her business. Kayla was her world, her bright and shining world, the alternative to her mother. Kayla was vibrant and while her mother was dismal. Kayla was unwavering while her mother was faint. Kayla was the one who got their father to finally leave. Kayla was the one who eased the dullness of life out and into the light. And then suddenly Kayla was not Kayla. Kayla was quiet, invisible, and distant. When her little sister finally noticed the bulge of her stomach, the girl was livid...and hurt. Why was she not told of these things? Why was she always last to know?

"Is it Jacob's?" she'd asked. "Are you having a baby with Jacob?"

Kayla's eyes flashed with what remained of the fire of her soul. "I'm not having anything with Jacob."

It was not until later, after the stillbirth, that she would finally realize what exactly Jacob had done to Kayla.

Having filled a bowl with misshaped watermelon cubes, her mother now handed it to her daughter, breaking her out of her thoughts. The girl stared down into the bowl of cut fruit. It looked slimy, as if it could barely hold itself together without the rind. She picked up a piece with her hand. The fruit smelled revoltingly sweet.

Her mother watched her staring at it. “Will you stop playing with that and eat it?”

She slid the piece into her mouth. The taste overwhelmed her, oozing down her throat before she’d even swallowed it. It was warm and sat in her mouth like something still breathing. She swallowed it quickly.

“How is it?” her mother asked, even though she’d tried it herself already.

She leaned back in her chair, conflicted in how she felt about it. “Overripe,” she finally said.

Her mother just nodded, starting in on the second melon. “Must be a bad year for them. I don’t think we’ve had a good one yet.”

Her mother’s phone rang from the living room. She left the knife sticking in the fruit and went to rinse her hands in the sink. When she left the room, the girl got up to inspect the watermelon more closely. There was nothing wrong with it on the outside. It was a deep green, like they always were, with darker and lighter stripes. She always loved the contrast of the green outside with the rich red inside, but this time the inside was pale. It was soft. Instead of resisting the knife with a cool crunch, it yielded to the knife, as if it desired to be cut. She sank the knife deeper into the flesh of the fruit and barely heard any noise. It angered her, that it would take whatever abuse it was given with no objection. A watermelon was not supposed to give so easily, to let itself be cut so easily.

A wail rose from her mother. Startled at first that she'd been caught playing with the watermelon, she leapt away from the table, the knife clattering to the floor, barely missing her foot. She looked around frantically, but her mother was not in the kitchen. "Ma?" she called.

She ran into the living room to find her mother on the floor, her body cradled around the phone, her face pressed against the carpet. She stared in shock; she had never seen her mother down like this. "Ma!" She kneeled on the floor next to her mother, shaking her shoulder. "Ma, what's wrong? What is it?"

Her mother just moaned softly, and as she leaned closer she realized she was saying something: "Not my baby. No, not my baby. Not my baby girl."

Confused and unsure what to do, the girl picked up the phone, the only thing that could have put her mother in a state like this. The call was still on. A man was speaking. "*Hello? Deborah, are you there?*"

"Hello?" the girl said into the phone.

There was a moment of silence. "*Is this Kiara?*"

She finally recognized the voice as her father's. The girl nodded, then remembered that he couldn't see her. "Yes. Where's Kayla?"

He was silent again. "*Put your mother back on the phone.*"

An anger rose up in her that she'd never felt before. "Where's Kayla?" she demanded again.

"*Kiara, I'm not—*"

Her mother rose. Her mother rose to her feet, with a swiftness she'd never seen her move with before. She rose and she screamed as if someone was carving the guts out of her body. She

screamed and she grabbed the lamp off their table and hurled it at the wall. The girl felt the collision in her chest, as if she'd absorbed the shock from it. "Ma—"

"*My baby!*" her mother wailed. "*That boy took my baby!*"

The girl could only stare, flinching at each thing her mother threw at the wall of their living room. The dents and holes piled like bruises, each one deeper, darker. Her father was yelling something at her through the phone, but she couldn't even hear him anymore. The spell slowly passed through her mother, and she collapsed on the couch, panting, her face in her hands.

"*Kiara? Are you still there? I'm going to come over. Tell your mother I'm coming over.*"

She could hear the rattling of his keys.

She stared at the wall, then her mother, then back at the wall. Tears started to flood her eyes.

"*Kiara? Can you hear me? Tell your mother I'm—*"

"Bring my sister home," she said, with a cold softness, with the sickly sweet voice of an unsuspecting child.

She heard her father take in a slow breath. "*Kiara, I can't do that. She—*"

"Bring my sister home, bastard."

She hung up. She hung up, because whatever he was about to say, she'd rather not hear it. She'd rather not understand what had broken her mother, what'd sliced through their family like the blade of a knife. She'd rather be blissfully unaware, for the short amount of time she had between now and when her father arrived, her sister nowhere to be seen.

She'd only ever asked Kayla once: *did it hurt?* She did not know why she asked; she just knew that she wanted her sister to speak to her again. And she could never forget the look on her

sister's face, how quickly her muscles froze, her face turned to stone, her eyes looking not at her but through her. It was the first time she'd ever seen a person cave in on themselves. Her sister was hollow as she answered, "Did what hurt?" as if she simply could not comprehend. *Did what hurt? Did what hurt? The rape or the baby?*

Her mother, now, had become the same. She stared at the woman and didn't recognize her, the shell perched on the edge of the couch. She put the phone down beside her mother, went into the kitchen. She picked the knife up from the floor, rinsed it in the sink. Hands shaking, she cut mismatched shapes out of the watermelon, piling them into the bowl. The fruit looked like flesh. The fruit looked like flesh. She felt as if she was carving into something alive, something small, like Kayla's dead baby. She wanted to throw up, but she cut it. She cut it and it yielded as if this was all it ever wanted, to be cut. She piled the pieces into a bowl, watermelon juice dripping down her hands and arms. When she was done, she stared into the bowl. Her tears dripped and mixed with the watermelon juice. "Ma," she cried. "Ma, it's overripe. They're all overripe."

When she thinks about that summer, she thinks about the watermelons, the sick orange flesh, and the knife her sister stabbed through her own neck.