



For my Sophie and William.





CHAPTER

1

As we whipped past the trees I caught sight of the sign marking 5 miles to East Hampton and sank lower into my seat. My chest had started to tighten since we left New York; Mom, Dad and me squeezed into our old family wagon, which was crammed with all of our belongings that the removalist hadn't already taken the week before.

I had sat on the top step outside our house, watching sadly as two overweight strangers jammed the last sixteen years of my life into the back of the U-Haul, with absolutely no regard to the emotional value of the items. They were being damaged just by being removed from the place where they belonged. Sixteen years and it took only four and a half hours to remove all traces of us from the house.

I had spent the first sixteen years of my life happily ensconced in city life in New York. My parents couldn't understand my passionate pleading for us to stay; I went to

a run-of-the-mill public school where I had never made any particularly close friends, and we lived in a small but comfortable house in Brooklyn. Surely a sea change to an historic mansion would be a lot more exciting, they argued.

But it wasn't school, our house or my neighborhood that I would miss in particular. It was the city. I saw my future in the city. On the weekends I would walk for miles to find inspiration for my latest drawings and the city never failed to disappoint. Whether it was the homeless couple that walked hand in hand through the park every morning, the people pushing against each other at Louis' deli on the corner of our street to get their first caffeine fix on their way to work, or just the bridge over the East River leading in to our little borough, there were an endless supply of subjects for my pencils. It was also a city that embraced artists, which I loved, because I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I had never been particularly sporty or scholarly.

The passing of my great aunt this spring had set in motion a series of events that had brought me to this miserable predicament. Poppy Farrell was a small and stocky woman who, at ninety-eight years of age, sported more wrinkles than a Shar Pei. But she had kind eyes and she would sneak me butterscotch candies when my parents weren't looking, and I loved her. It was her house that we were now speeding towards to take up residence. When I was a child I adored Poppy's house in East Hampton. She would create the most elaborate treasure

hunts for me to follow around the gardens and through the secret passageways of the mansion, so I knew my way around there better than I knew my way around my school.

Her name was actually Gladys and no one could ever tell me why we all called her Poppy. To add to the confusion, she wasn't actually an aunt at all. My grandfather was a distant cousin and my dad grew up calling her auntie. She was the only daughter of a wealthy oil tycoon, had married young and in love, and her husband had gone to war and never come back. She never remarried so my father was the closest person she had to family but it had still been a surprise when she had left everything she had to him including her house.

When I was younger we would make the two-hour-long drive out to her imposing mansion that sat in the middle of millionaire row, backing onto the sound. Although there were thirty-four rooms in the main house she only lived in a handful of them and I would spend hours wandering through the abandoned rooms that lay heavy with dust. Back in the heyday the house had been full of staff, life and parties, but by the time we would go and visit the champagne had stopped flowing and the staff had been reduced to three: the grumpy housekeeper, Clara, a chef called Marcel who only knew how to cook a handful of tasteless dishes, and the gardener, Thomas, who never spoke to me. He didn't seem grumpy like Clara, just gruff and deep in thought.

We would pack up Dad's twenty-five-year-old Volvo station wagon on a Friday and brave the traffic to make

it there by dinner to eat one of the six meals that made up Marcel's repertoire. In fairness to Marcel I always suspected that Poppy only liked eating those six meals so he had no opportunity to exhibit any creative flair.

Mom and I called her crazy Aunt Poppy because she would tell the most peculiar stories about the rooms in the house coming to life with mysterious strangers. She would tell us of parties in the grand hall, high tea in the formal sitting room, which had ornately carved ceiling roses, and visiting soldiers sneaking in through the greenhouse for stolen kisses with the maids. When I would excitedly pop my head into the sitting room to witness the tea party for myself it would be as I saw it last – empty and coated in a layer of dust that had not been disturbed for decades. I stopped looking after a couple of years and would simply roll my eyes at Mom and yawn when Poppy began yet another tale of intrigue.

Then when I was fourteen the trips suddenly stopped and my parents would look at each other with strained expressions whenever I brought up a possible trip to see Poppy. They would instead quickly make arrangements for us to do something else that weekend; trips to the beautiful galleries in the city were a regular excuse, and to my parents' obvious relief my love of art blossomed so much that I stopped asking about going to see Poppy.

Six weeks ago that all changed when Poppy had a heart attack. Thomas, the gardener, found her in the hot house where she had been tending her favorite rose bush, and although he called the ambulance, she never regained



consciousness. The lawyers contacted Dad two days later with the news that the mansion and its staff were now his responsibility. They told him that she had been suffering from dementia, and her death was probably for the best.

Dad suggested to Mom that we could fix up the house and run it as a bed and breakfast. I could hear them discussing the idea in hushed voices at night when they thought I was asleep. Our house was small enough that I could hear parts of the conversation but not all and the grabs that I did hear made me realize my life was about to irreversibly change, and for some reason they were particularly anxious about my reaction.

I closed my eyes and began planning my future escape back to the city I loved.

I opened my eyes with the sun shining down on me and sat up in surprise. I was in a garden, enclosed on four sides by walls covered in jasmine. I closed my eyes again and breathed in the beautiful smells of the flowers, the freshly cut grass and salt and felt the sun warming my arms and legs. I felt very calm although I wasn't quite sure where I was and how I got here. I opened my eyes again and sat up taking in more of my surroundings. I was sitting in the middle of a patch of grass on a picnic blanket the size of my double bed.

The garden was in two grass sections with a stone path running through the middle and a beautiful fountain in the center that made soft tinkling noises as the water ran over the edge of each of the three tiers into

the bottom which was alive with fish. My eyes were drawn to movement at one end of the pathway where a boy was running towards the gated archway leading out of the garden. He turned when he reached the wooden gate and looked back with a cheeky smile. He couldn't have been more than ten years old.

I pushed myself up into a standing position to run after him and it wasn't until that moment that I realized I was the same size as the boy. I was wearing a dainty floral dress with a white lapel that I vaguely remembered my mother making for me. 'Hurry up silly, girls are so slow!' yelled the boy, and turning, ran through the archway.

I ran toward the gate and, pushing on the solid wood, went through the arch.

A decorative graphic featuring a large, stylized number '2' in the center, surrounded by intricate, light-colored floral and vine patterns that extend upwards and outwards.

CHAPTER

2

My eyes snapped open when I heard the sound of the tires crunching on rock. I realized that I had drifted off and had vague recollections of chasing a young boy down a long path and the sweet smell of jasmine. The images faded from my mind as I stared down the long driveway to the imposing house. It looked darker than I remembered it; the large pine trees on either side of the driveway blocking out the light made the white stones of the driveway look gray, and the house loomed large in the front windscreen. As the car circled around the sculpture that sat in front of the house I closed my eyes and realized that I was holding my breath. I exhaled loudly and opened my eyes to see if my parents had heard but they were too busy analyzing the house.

Dad stopped the car and glanced at Mom. ‘Here we go!’ she said, sounding as excited as he looked, and opened the car door.

‘Smell that fresh sea air!’ Dad exclaimed as he climbed out of the driver’s seat and stretched his arms above his head.

I climbed out of the car slowly in silent protest. ‘In New York City the air smelt of excitement and anticipation. The promise that whatever you thought you were going to

do was likely to change and become better!’ I shot back.

‘Sure kiddo, if excitement and anticipation smell like the body odor of the train commuters and the garbage truck that sat out the front of our house because the driver had a thing with the lady in number seven!’ Dad said, smiling broadly and then continued stretching. I shot him a withering glare but he had turned his attention to the imposing pile of bricks that stood before us.

My negativity didn’t seem to be rubbing off; they looked like they had just won the lottery. Which I guess they effectively had. My parents had both been teachers, my mother, a primary school teacher and my father a university lecturer. Mom had stopped teaching when I was born so they had been on one income for quite a while and this house had to be worth millions, despite the fact that it was completely dilapidated. Poppy had left some money in her estate and Dad had received a leave of absence and a grant from his university to prepare research papers while doing up the house.

I turned and glanced back at the long white stone driveway that we had just come down, the huge pine trees lining it, and the ginormous oak tree sitting next to the massive wrought iron gates that marked the entrance, and then slowly turned my head around to look at the house.

It looked the same as it had all of those years ago, the only difference being that now it appeared to be even more dilapidated. Three stories of imposing brick with a glassed-in conservatory off to the right-hand side. The stone pillars at the front of the house were still impressive in stature but

had turned a muted gray, the white frames of the windows had paint peeling off them, the shutters were hanging off some of the windows, and the once beautiful green vines were dead in some parts, the leaves brittle and flaky.

I sensed movement in the small dormer windows above and glanced up, squinting against the sun's glare. The windows were framed by heavy drapes and I could just make out a shadow in the window at the end.

'Welcome back Master Edward,' came a stern voice from the front entrance. I looked over and saw Clara's steely gaze looking anything but welcoming. Her eyes looked haunted, she was very thin, and her hair had gone from pitch black to a charcoal gray. I had thought she was scary when I was younger but it was possible she was even more intimidating than I remembered. Her dark clothing did nothing to soften her harsh appearance. She glanced to the top of the building where I had been looking and then appraised me with an icy glare.

'Hello Clara! I told you on the phone to please call me Ted,' said my dad with a big teddy bear smile, as he started pulling luggage out of the trunk of the car. Fortunately he wasn't looking at her as his smile was not returned.

'I have made arrangements for you to sleep in the south wing. I hope that is to your liking. Please follow me.' She turned on her heel without checking to see if we were in fact, following her.

I turned my head back to the window on the third floor but the shadow had disappeared. Throwing a couple of my bags over my shoulder, I stumbled over the pebbles

as I followed my family, wondering what we were about to walk into.

We followed Clara's black figure into the house and up the huge staircase. It was even worse inside than out. The wallpaper was coming off in strips exposing spidery cracks all over the walls and the floorboards groaned in protest with any movement. The patterned carpet was faded and coming up in parts and there were struts missing in the banister. Despite the solid brick exterior the inside felt like the whole building could collapse at any moment.

What a dump, I thought to myself. I turned around to look at my parents, expecting them to be looking equally dubious, but they were both looking at each other with the excitement of small children who has just been handed a puppy.

'We can start on the banisters,' said Mom, running her hands along the solid wood as the white paint flaked off.

'And I'll work on replastering the walls and give it a fresh coat of paint – it will look as good as new!' replied Dad, with a huge grin on his face.

I sighed and shook my head as I continued following cranky Clara up the stairs. At the landing on the second floor we turned right and passed a couple of rooms with closed doors. At the next door along the hall Clara paused.

'This will be your room Master Edward,' Clara said to my parents, who had momentarily left their critique of the banisters and were halfway up the staircase. She then

continued down past a few more doors to the very end of the hall. ‘And this is your room Miss Sophie.’

I paused at the door that Clara had indicated was my parents’ room and peered into the space. It was as if I was looking into the past. The large four-poster bed had a floral printed bed cover and the matching floral curtains cascaded in large waves to the floor. Looking out of the window at the expanse of water was a small dark wooden desk and matching chair and at the end of the bed sat a gigantic soft green couch covered in cushions. Although the decor left a lot to be desired it wasn’t nearly as old and moldy as I had expected and the view out the windows over the water was incredible.

‘Well this looks very welcoming,’ Dad muttered, giving me an encouraging pat on the shoulder as he walked past me into the room.

‘Oh yes, how lovely,’ Mom agreed, ‘just like a Laura Ashley catalogue!’

I stepped back out of the doorway and glanced with trepidation along the passage in the direction Clara had indicated my room was. Clara’s dark figure had disappeared. Probably off to stick some pins in voodoo dolls of our family I thought with a frown and started moping off towards my room. God knows what else she did in the house given she would have to be in her early eighties. I wondered unkindly whether she just had nowhere else to go and Poppy had kept her on for company even though she didn’t seem to be doing a great job of keeping house, or whatever her role was supposed to be.

I stopped at the door to my room, took a deep breath and pushed it open. Light flooded in through two large windows onto the big bed, which had soft blue bedding and white pillows. Running along the windows were big window seats, which had cushions, propped at either end. I dropped my bags at the end of the bed, walked tentatively over to the window seat and nestled into the soft cushions as I looked around the room. The carpet had definitely seen better days but the room was sunny and clean and the scent of flowers and salt air drifted in through the open window. Not nearly as bad as I had been expecting. In fact, it was much more a haven than a jail, I thought, and breathed a sigh of relief as I hugged one of the pillows to my chest.

Leaning back on my window seat I closed my eyes and felt the warm sun on my body. After relaxing there for a few minutes I opened my eyes and glance outside toward the house next door. If our house was the ugly duckling of the street the house next door was a shining star – light gray shingles offset against white shuttered windows. I sat up on my window seat and craned my neck to see a glistening blue swimming pool sitting in front of the house, a pool house matching the main house sitting next to it and a tennis court sitting beyond the house. Glancing down to the water again I could see they had a matching shed at their private dock, where two expensive-looking boats sat bobbing up and down with the currents.

I looked over to our dock, which sat alongside theirs. Every fourth board was missing and the pylons

looked like they could fall over with the next strong wave.

Looking back at the house next door I could see the interior resembled a home decor magazine. As I squinted to see what looked like a gray-colored cashmere blanket draped casually over a pristine white couch I noticed some movement in one of the windows looking straight into mine. A boy was standing in the window watching me. His face was unbelievably handsome and he looked around the same age as me. Completely mortified, I ducked behind my curtain. Idiot! He had clearly been standing there watching me inspect their house like a half-witted burglar. I took a breath and slowly peered around the curtain trying my best to stay hidden. I needn't have bothered; the window where he had been standing was empty. I scanned all of the windows on the second story in case I had looked back at the wrong one, but no one was there. Strange, I thought his expression was so odd, like he had seen a ghost.

CHAPTER
3

With my cheeks blazing red I half-heartedly pulled some clothes out of my bags and tossed them into the wardrobe, put my fluffy teddy bear on my pillow, and pulled my sketchbooks out of their squashed position in my backpack. In between pulling items out of my bag I glanced out the window at the house next door, but the boy did not appear again. After a while I gave up and walked back down the hallway to try to find my parents. They were not in their room so I decided to have a look around before starting the process of unpacking.

The house was unquestionably in desperate need of some TLC but I had to concede it did have a lot of character. As I wandered through each of the rooms I struggled to recall memories from the last time we had visited. We hadn't been here in more than two years and although I had known my way around the house so well when I was younger, I was struggling now to remember all of the nooks and crannies.

Also frustrating me was the fact that some of the closed doors I tried to push open appeared to be glued shut and no amount of pushing and pulling the handles succeeded in moving them. Absentmindedly I wondered why you would

want to seal the contents of a room shut in such a permanent way. To mark it as a room not necessary to take care of? That didn't make sense given the state of disrepair of the unsealed sections of the house. Possibly to dissuade burglars I thought to myself, but then reconsidered; if anything, it made me more determined to get into the rooms for a look.

I vaguely recalled secret passageways leading from a number of the rooms but as I walked around the house and through the doorways that were not stuck shut, I couldn't remember the way to unlock them and which of the rooms actually had them.

One of the rooms, I noticed, was slightly less dusty than the others and had a well-worn leather armchair sitting in front of a beautiful fireplace that looked as though it had been used recently. I could see crystal glasses and a decanter on an old-fashioned copper-colored drinks trolley. This must have been where Poppy retired with her evening brandy. I sank down into the luxurious leather seat, understanding why it was so well worn, and looked at the two large bookshelves that towered on either side of the fireplace. There were books that looked to be hundreds of years old and I stood up to get a closer look at the spines for a clue on the contents. There were books on animals of the South Pacific and centuries old sea guides advising of the turning of the tides and storing of meats for extended sea travel. There was a beautiful encyclopedia and an atlas that looked as though it was half my height and fifty times my age.

'Wow,' I breathed out loud, taking in the impressive collection, and thought about the kind-hearted but

completely batty librarian from my school in Brooklyn who was so passionate about books. What she would do to have access to this room! I wondered how long it had been sitting in this house unfound and unappreciated.

As I backed towards the door to leave I noticed several of the books on the lower shelf that did not look as aged as the others. I walked back to the shelf and, noticing that there was no title on the spine, I pulled out the one closest to me and opened it. It was a photo album, and even though I could tell from the smell of the books that they were old, the photos were in fantastic condition. The black-and-white images still looked as fresh as the day that they were taken.

I carefully turned the pages on the first album, not recognizing any of the faces. One after the other I looked through the treasure trove of memories, wondering who all of the people were in the photos and whether any of their ancestors would appreciate seeing some of these moments in time captured in these beautiful albums.

Finally I found an album where I recognized someone – Poppy. One of the albums was entirely dedicated to her wedding. I had only known Poppy when she had been old and wrinkled but she was a particularly beautiful woman when she was younger. Her hair had been tied loosely at the back and a wreath of flowers hung over her hair. Her dress was all elegance and lace with a chaste high neckline. I wondered how she had stayed single all those years after her husband passed away when there surely would have been a number of suitors lined up around the block.

As I pulled out the next album a photo dropped out of the pages and onto the hardwood floor. I picked it up carefully and looked at the image. It looked like a photo taken of the whole household, all of the servants in their finest black suits and crisp white shirts and ladies' maids in their black dresses, white bonnets and starched white smocks. I was amazed at the number of people in the photo. There would have to have been more than two-dozen servants. At the front of the group sitting down on a collection of chairs were what looked like a very young Poppy and her husband. The house sat as an impressive backdrop to the photo and every one of the faces in the image looked very stern, as was the fashion of photos from that day. Everyone except, I noted, one housemaid. The maid who stood over Poppy's left shoulder did not look sternly at the camera but smiled broadly. I gasped and looked closer at the photo. Her face was certainly a great deal younger but she was undoubtedly a maid who still worked for the household now. It was Clara!

What had happened to this woman that she had gone from being such a happy looking person to a dark and menacing figure who seemed to do nothing but skulk around the house. I searched through the rest of the albums but couldn't find any more photos of Clara. Putting the last of the albums carefully back onto the shelf I checked that the room appeared as it was when I had arrived and quietly walked out, closing the door gently behind me.

I wandered in and out of several of the other rooms that I could gain access to, noting the ones that I decided I

would need to return to for a closer inspection. Some of the rooms really did seem to be stuck in the nineteenth century and it was amazing that even though the rooms and their contents were so dusty, everything, apart from the wallpaper and some of the plastering, had been preserved so well.

The sun was setting slowly over the water. I glanced at my watch and realized I had been walking aimlessly around the house for more than two hours. I quickly closed the lid of the beautiful antique music box I had been examining and headed off to check in with my parents, lest they think that I had headed for the nearest bus station, which I had threatened them with more than once.

As I wandered in the general direction of the kitchen I realized I was not paying attention to where I was going when I stumbled through open glass double-doors into the greenhouse. Every hair on my body prickled, and despite the summer sun and the warmth of the greenhouse I felt a chill run up my body. Turning on my heel I ran back into the house and followed the sound of voices to the kitchen.

Like my bedroom, I was pleasantly surprised by the kitchen. It was extremely comfortable and functional. I noted the irony that it was now fashionable to build a new kitchen resembling this one that was so old. The large marble table and white iron sinks were complemented by the newer stainless steel of the fridge and dishwasher. A large country-style wooden table big enough to sit twelve sat next to the double French doors leading down to the garden, and beyond that to the water. All around the kitchen were windows which gave it an airy, light feel.

My parents were deeply ensconced in what looked like the plans of the house. Marcel looked up from what he was doing and smiled at me. 'I am making omelets Miss Sophie. Would you like one?'

Good for you Marcel, I thought. That wasn't in the six-meal list that Poppy demanded – he must have branched out!

'No thanks Marcel, I'm beat. I'm going to head to bed.'

Both parents looked up, concerned.

'You need to eat honey, are you okay?' asked Mom.

'Yes, I just want to finish unpacking and go to sleep.'

'Alright then.' They both exchanged a nervous glance. Honestly, they had never been so overprotective and concerned about me having an early night before! I looked like a walking zombie; surely they didn't consider me a flight risk after only a few hours. Still, I thought, I had better set their mind at ease. 'Really I'm fine. I'm just exhausted. I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight.'

Walking back into my bedroom I glanced at the half-unpacked suitcase and felt heavy with fatigue. I'll finish it tomorrow I thought, moving sluggishly towards the bed. Too tired to even pull the covers over me, I flopped into the fluffy cloud and as soon as my head hit the pillows I was asleep.



My eyes still felt heavy but I opened them to see the boy from the garden at the end of my bed. He looked older than in my dream.

I sat bolt upright.

'Who are you and what are you doing in my bedroom?'

The boy continued to stare at me as though I had said nothing.

'Who are you? What do you want?' I demanded again, pulling the covers up tighter around my chest.

He tilted his face to the side and appraised me.

'You really don't remember?' He sounded sad.

I closed my eyes trying to push down the headache that was starting to develop.



CHAPTER

5

When I opened my eyes there was daylight coming through the curtains. The large pool of drool on my pillow made me realize that I had been heavily asleep, but the memory of the boy standing at the end of my bed was still there. It felt as though his sadness vibrated through the room. I looked up quickly but there was no one there.

I rolled myself out of bed and quickly threw on jeans and a sweater, wanting to push the memory of the boy out of my mind. I had slept in, so my parents were already in town picking up supplies to begin the restoration. There was an amazing smell drifting up from the direction of the kitchen and my stomach rumbled. I realized that because I hadn't eaten the night before I was now famished. I wandered down into the kitchen where the obviously new and improved Marcel was making waffles.

'That smells incredible Marcel!'

'Yes, I have been taking some cooking courses since Madame Poppy passed away. I think maybe I wasn't so good the last time that you came, eh?' He smiled at me, handing me a full plate of waffles smothered in strawberries.

'Not at all,' I laughed nervously, focusing my attention on pouring the maple syrup onto the fluffy goodness that

was sitting in front of me, knowing that he could probably see right through my lie.

'Actually, my mother wanted me to be a nurse like her,' he smiled, pulling down a framed photo from the shelf and passing it to me. In the photo a younger looking Marcel was hugging a round woman wearing hospital whites, a nurse's cap and badge, with a big smile on her face.

'You look like her,' I said passing the picture back.

After gulping down my plate of waffles made by the new-and-improved Marcel I spent the rest of the morning finishing unpacking my things. I carefully cleared a space on the bookshelves that were already laden with what looked like first editions of Enid Blyton books and fairytales from Hans Christian Andersen and put some of the antique-looking objects into a bag to move into one of the other rooms. China dolls were not really my thing. Every so often I would glance out the side window that looked into the neighbor's house, but the boy's blind had been pulled down so I couldn't even see into his room now. Once I had finished unpacking the majority of my stuff I went to the window again, but this time I looked out the front of the house. The sun was glinting off the water, which was as still as a lake, and there were people out and about walking their dogs and playing with their children in the soft sand near our little jetty. I decided to take advantage of the beautiful weather and spend the afternoon exploring the outside of the property to see whether my memories of playing outside would come back. I also took my sketchbook and

a couple of pencils with me in case I found any inspiration during my explorations.

Making sure that I avoided the greenhouse, I walked out the front door and around to the left side of the house, where Poppy had designed a garden amphitheater. The tiered grass steps that you could sit on flowed down to a sunken stage that was surrounded on all sides by hedging. According to Clara, many years ago the mansion had played host to local productions of Shakespeare where all of the neighbors would come to watch with picnic baskets. I could imagine that the hedging that surrounded the theater would have been great acoustically.

Back in the day, when there had been a full-time gardening staff, I am sure it would have been beautiful, but with only Thomas left and the Shakespeare plays no longer a common occurrence the trees had grown out of control. The big trees blocked out any sunlight so the rock steps that curved around in a semicircle were covered in moss and the atmosphere was dark and damp.

I walked down the steps and onto the stage. Placing my sketchpad and pencils down I pretended to dance gracefully around the stage and finish with a bow. Even though it was a warm day I shivered. I could feel the goosebumps rising on my neck and down my arms. Strange that even though the theater was enclosed on every side by the ginormous hedge I felt like I was being watched.

I quickly left the mossy green stage, grabbing my pencils and sketchpad, and walked out through the entrance to the side of the stage. I walked further down

the side of the property where there was a large oak tree and found a beautiful ornate chair to sit on, overlooking the water. On the chair was a small plaque dedicated to Poppy's deceased husband.

And if I am not there for you to see

Do not be sad – where you are is where I will be.

I sat down and gazed up at the beautiful big tree. Closing my eyes I breathed in the clean fresh air and pictured the couple sitting there, side by side. All around me I could hear sounds but it was so peaceful: the birds, the water lapping onto the shore and the wind softly tugging at my hair. The air was warm and even though the seat was shaded by the big tree I could feel the warmth of the sun on my arms and face.

The memory of the sad boy in my dreams came to my mind and I opened my eyes again expecting him to be standing in front of me. Of course he wasn't, but his face had been so clear and after a minute of feeling foolish I opened my sketchbook on my lap and started drawing him.

I stayed there for over an hour trying to get his face just right but the dream was fading quickly from my mind and by the time I gave up I was questioning whether that was what he had looked like at all. I closed my book, giving up and jumped up to continue my tour of the grounds. I did a large loop back around the house and up to the right was a small wooden gate surrounded with jasmine flowers. Funny, while we didn't have any of these flowers in Brooklyn the smell was so familiar.

I walked around the hedging to the heavy wooden gate and pushed against it but like some of the rooms in the house it wouldn't budge. Running my hand over the beautiful markings on the wood I followed the grain down to the middle. There looked to be a slot for a big old metal key, but the key was missing.

I looked around for an obvious place for someone to hide a key. I felt along the top of the posts that sat on each side of the gate but there was nothing. I followed the hedge around in a circle but it looked like the wooden gate was the only point of entry. I did another lap around to see whether the hedge had any gaps that I could squeeze through but it was far too dense.

'Sophie!' I heard Mom calling from the back of the house.

Looking back at the wooden gate my curiosity was peaked. 'Coming!' I yelled back and decided to concede defeat for today; I would have a look around the house and see if I could find the key later. Not tomorrow though. Tomorrow I had an entirely different challenge to conquer.

As I walked back up towards the house I saw movement in one of the rooms. Glancing up I spotted Clara standing in the window of the room next door to mine. I raised my hand to wave and she turned and walked away from the window. Shaking my head I continued walking back to the house. I couldn't know for sure but it felt like she had been watching me. I involuntarily shuddered as I wondered how long she had been standing there.

After dinner I again dragged myself up to my room,

my body heavy with fatigue. But unlike the previous night, as soon as I walked into my room I felt my mood shift. Something was strange. It was not immediately obvious what, but I was certain that some of my things had been moved around. The pillows on the window seat were fluffed up and some things on my desk weren't where I thought I'd left them. I wondered whether Clara had been cleaning in my room, but she hadn't said anything. They were only the sort of small things that someone who had been searching through my room might not have noticed. Someone who was looking for something quickly and hadn't put everything back quite the way it had been before. I felt a chill go down my spine and pulled my warm cardigan tighter around my body. Suddenly my little haven didn't seem quite as safe as it had minutes before. I realized with a sinking feeling in my stomach that maybe it wasn't my room that I was worried about but the fact that the following day was Monday.

New school. Generally the change that is most feared by teenagers moving around the country. Not me; I was going to get through the next two years and get out. I didn't need to make any friends because after I had completed my two-year sentence I was quite certain I would never lay eyes on any of those kids again.

When I walked through the front gates I got a few curious glances but it wasn't until I walked into homeroom that I drew any real interest. A couple of the girls who looked like their clothes were worth more than my family's car looked me over then went back to their conversation, and some intelligent-looking kids at the front glanced up at the door as I entered and then back at me like I had stepped off a spaceship.

After everyone rediscovered their manners and averted their eyes I slunk over to a free seat by the window and pulled out my timetable and a map of the school buildings that the surly looking woman at the front desk had shoved at me.

'Let me know if you need any help with that,' said a boy to my right. I looked over to where he was sitting. He was scruffy looking but with a really kind face covered in freckles.

'Thanks,' I muttered.

'I'm Percy.'

'Seriously? As in the steam train from *Thomas the Tank Engine* and the guy from *Dawson's Creek*?'

'Yes, my parents are that cruel. Actually, I think I'm named after a great-grandfather or something,' Percy said laughing. He put on an official-sounding gruff voice and with a serious look on his face said, 'One of the founding fathers of our community. Our family has been living here for generations.' He smiled and winked.

His smile was infectious and I found myself smiling back. 'I'm Sophie.'

'Great to meet you Sophie. I hear that your family have just moved into the haunted mansion,' he said.

I snorted, 'I guess you could call it that. I'm not sure it's haunted by anything scarier than bad wallpaper and bathroom mold though.'

'Well, regardless, I feel it is my civic duty to advise you that you are likely to get a request from the social committee to hold the Halloween ball there later this year.' Looking around, he motioned toward the back of the room where a group of beautiful people sat, all looking the same. 'They've been itching to get their hands on a decent venue for years and I overheard them talking about the Storybook House before you arrived. I dare say they might even give you an honorary membership of the attractive people table if you loan them the house, and you could sit there and do nothing,' Percy added with a laugh.

'Thanks for the heads up. I'm not much of a social

committee kind of person,' I said rolling my eyes.

Just then the teacher walked into the room and everyone went silent. Well, I thought to myself, I know I said I wouldn't go out of my way to make friends, but Percy seems like a very easygoing kind of person ...

For the next couple of classes there was at least one person who made a special effort to be nice and make me feel welcome and for that I was grateful. After each class I was led to the next one before my savior left me with a wave and a promise to find me at lunch.

When I reached the cafeteria I discovered that all of them were sitting on the same table. That figures, I thought to myself. Percy waved me over and I carefully made my way past the inquiring eyes and over to their table.

Percy introduced me to the group, which included Alex (who had cheerfully volunteered to be my lab partner in Chemistry), James, Emma, Megan and Alice, who I had spoken to in Art class.

'How are you finding our little school of overachievers Sophie?' Alex asked smiling.

'Everyone seems really nice,' I said politely.

'Everyone on this table anyway,' said Alice, a tall blonde girl with big dimples. 'You might not say the same thing about all the tables in the cafeteria.'

She started to point out the different groups around the room but based on the appearance of the groups I think I could have worked them out myself. 'The tables at the front are full of the math and science groups. They usually eat quickly and disappear back to their important

work. The jocks and socialites sit towards the back because the girls don't eat the food and the meatheads need lots of space to throw balls at each other. And then you have all the mixed groups like us in between.'

As she pointed out the group at the back I spotted him. My neighbor who had caught me gawking at his house. He was looking directly at me with the same look on his face. His eyes were narrowed and he looked surprised. I quickly looked away, feeling my face burn with embarrassment. After picking at my food and staring at my plate for a couple of minutes I quietly murmured to Alice, 'I think one of the boys over there lives next door to me.'

'Really? Which one?' she asked, looking in the direction of his table.

I looked back up at the table he had been sitting on and he was gone. 'Oh, my mistake,' I said, unsure, searching the rest of the cafeteria in vain.

The bell rang for the next period and everyone picked up their trays and started heading off. 'What class have you got next Sophie?' asked Alex, in an overly keen kind of way.

'Umm, history in building B,' I said, glancing at my timetable.

'Oh,' he said, looking disappointed. 'I have gym class but it's right near building B if you would like me to take you?'

'Sure,' I said with a polite smile. 'That would be good, thanks.' Might have to keep my distance from this one, I thought. He was a little overeager and I wasn't looking for

any kind of romantic relationship.

As soon as I walked into the classroom I saw him. He was sitting up the back pulling out his pens and textbooks. I had a minute to check him out before he looked up and saw me staring at him. He looked straight back down at his book and pretended not to see me but the muscles in his hand and arm were tense. The class had filled up and the only seat left was directly in front of him. I took a deep breath and nervously made my way over to the desk and sat down.

For the next fifty minutes I sat there wondering what he was thinking about behind me. I wasn't sure why but he seemed to be somewhat frightened or angry when he looked at me. It couldn't just be because I was spying on their house from my bedroom. I felt like there was an electrical current running straight into my back. I summoned all of my courage and when the bell rang I was prepared to turn around and confront him, but he was one step ahead of me and was already at the door before I opened my mouth.

I found Percy waiting for me at the door. 'Ready for some softball?' he said, pretending to hit a home run with an imaginary bat. He looked totally ridiculous and I laughed, despite my rising concern that I had created an enemy of someone I had never even spoken to.

My lack of sporting prowess had not changed with the move and despite one mildly impressive shot, which was an accident more than anything, I spent most of the class trying to avoid having to take the bat.

By the end of the day I was exhausted. I walked over

to the bike racks next to the car park and looked around the parking lot. There were expensive European cars in all different shapes and sizes. My jaw dropped when I saw the boy-next-door walk over to one of the shiny new cars and drive off in the direction of our houses. Of course he has a beautiful car, I thought to myself. He is a beautiful guy driving his beautiful car to his beautiful house, probably with his beautiful girlfriend. I, on the other hand, was riding my second-hand bike back to my falling-down house that everyone seemed to think was haunted. Pulling my bike off the rack I rode past the shiny cars and out to the road. This was going to be a long year, I thought, sighing.

When I got home there was no sign of the shiny black car next door. I walked in through the front door and Mom was finishing up on the staircase banister. The lacquer had been stripped back and the color underneath was a beautiful warm brown oak. 'Looking good Mom,' I said giving her a quick hug.

'How was your first day honey?' she asked anxiously, stopping her work and studying my face.

'It was OK,' I told her honestly. It really hadn't been as bad as I'd feared it might be. I picked up a piece of sandpaper and began running it gently along the grain of the wood on the staircase. 'There was a group of really friendly kids that welcomed me onto their table. They all seem really nice.'

'That's great Sophie!' I could hear the relief and encouragement in my mom's voice.

'And I have been told the social committee want to

use our house for the annual Halloween ball,' I added, chuckling.

'Well that would be lots of fun. Let us know when it is and we'll start planning.'

'You're kidding, right?' I said, incredulous. 'This house could fall down on top of them!'

'Don't be silly, the house is made of brick. We'll make sure the ballroom is in good condition and we could decorate the room with black crepe and we could go to Hank's and buy the pumpkins ...' I started walking up the stairs already tuning her out.

'Sure Mom. I'm going to get started on some homework. Let me know if you want me to help with dinner.'

I ran my hand over the smooth wood, tracing the lines all the way up to the top of the landing, and walked down the hall to my room. Glancing out the front window that looked out over the water I caught myself thinking about the boy next door. There was something so familiar about him. Maybe I should just go over and introduce myself, I thought, but the look on his face each time that I had seen him stopped me in my tracks. I couldn't shake the feeling that he didn't really want to talk to me or that he was angry with me for some reason.

Dad had made me a makeshift desk and I sat down to start working through my homework. Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of something propped up on my desk lamp. It was a thick, cream-colored envelope with my name written in beautiful cursive text. My hand froze as I

reached for it. The treasure hunts that Poppy would create for me all started with the same cream-colored envelope, which would hold the first clue. But the card had not been here this morning.



CHAPTER

7

With shaking hands I picked up the card and turned it over. It even smelt like her perfume. I opened it slowly and pulled out the card that was inside. It was definitely made of the same paper and there was no question about it – the writing inside was Poppy’s.

*The treasure hunts were always fun
It’s time to do another one.
It is in the place where we used to play
How I loved it when you came to stay
I would place the flowers in your hair
And all of our secrets we would share
Can you hear the water falling down?
And smell the grass? It’s all around
Oscar and Lucinda are no longer there
Find some new friends that come in a pair
But please do not let anyone see
It must be you that finds the key.*

I read the card over several times before putting it down on the desk. She had obviously hidden something, but what? A key? And where was it hidden? I was completely confused and I had no idea where to start

looking. I had played all over the house and there were so many rooms. And who had put the card there? Obviously not Poppy or I would have seen it when I came in on the first day we got here.

Just then I heard the creaking of someone coming up the stairs. Remembering her comment not to trust anyone, I hid the card under the cushions on my window seat and sat back down quickly at my desk.

There was a knock on the door and Clara’s voice on the other side. ‘Miss Sophie, dinner is ready.’

‘OK thanks, I’ll come down now.’

I opened the door, looking back into the room to make sure that the card was not visible, and once I was confident it was not I turned around to leave the room. I let out a cross between a squeal and a squeak and shrank back when I saw that Clara was still standing in the door waiting for me. She peered over my shoulder into my bedroom as if looking for someone or something and then, realizing that she was lurking, she pursed her lips, turned on her heel and marched back down the hallway.

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