

Chapter 1

I twirled the vibrant rose between my fingertips. It was the one I'd picked from a bush nearby as my stepfather, Warren, and I walked to the funeral site. Today we were burying David, Warren's best friend.

I felt Aunt Madeline's eyes on the back of my head as the minister started to say a blessing. I wished Lily, Aunt Madeline's daughter, had stayed for the funeral.

Warren, who hadn't wanted to attend the wake, much less the funeral, was becoming more agitated the longer the minister spoke. Just as one of David's sisters began to sing about streets of gold and mansions in the sky, Warren leaned into my ear and said, "Let's go, Sage."

Startled by his statement, I shook my head.

"No—after the funeral. We need to stay," I whispered.

"I'm going," he said gruffly and stood, staggering for a moment from the whiskey he had been imbibing since early that morning. Those sitting around us looked up.

I clasped the rose tightly to my chest, remembering how David had made me feel. I needed to say goodbye to him, to thank him for the comfort he had brought me, to tell him I was sorry for things ending up this way.

I followed Warren out from under the funeral tent and then dashed toward the casket, releasing the flower onto its lid. As the rose fell, I noticed it was now dark and withered as though it had been neglected for weeks instead of freshly plucked that morning. I began to cry.

"Damn it, Sage, don't make a scene," Warren slurred as he turned to me, his eyes dropping to the casket and noticing the dead rose. He slowly lifted his gaze to me, and his face burned red from the anger filling his pickled brain.

I think he had suspected something the evening he saw me rushing out of the guest room David stayed in, crying, dialing 911, and saying I was so sorry and hadn't meant for it to happen. What happened, I can't recall, but I most certainly didn't mean to cause it.

I looked into Warren's eyes. They glared at me with blame.

"I'm sorry!" I sobbed and ran by Warren toward the car.

He ran after me. “What did you do, Sage?!”

Warren caught my ponytail, yanking me toward him. My neck jerked back, and I looked wildly into the gray sky as the rain began to fall.

“What did you do, Sage?!” Warren cried out again. “Answer me!”

He whirled me around and grabbed my neck. As water ripped from the clouds, he forced my face up into the watery onslaught and pulled me into the nearby woods.

My screams tore through the group of mourners who looked on, shocked by the scene before them. Several of the men, including my best friend, Will, bolted toward us.

I could hear them calling to me, pleading with Warren to stop as he continued pulling me toward the tree line.

He shoved me onto the muddy earth and stepped back, bending over, and clutching his chest, gasping as he kept me in his line of sight.

As adrenaline pounded through my body, I rose to my feet, scurrying away until I stumbled and fell. Warren grabbed both of my ankles and pulled me across the wet carpet of mud and rocks. I reached my arms out and clawed at the dirt until I grabbed a large, embedded rock and clung to its edges.

When Warren jarred me loose, my back popped, and my hand sprung open.

“What did you do?!” Warren shouted again, rolling me onto my back, straddling me, and encircling his hands around my neck. I tried to keep my eyes closed. I didn’t want to see what was happening, but they bulged open the moment my lungs could no longer fill with air.

In my terror, I noticed what seemed to be confusion and sorrow in the set of Warren’s mouth and brow, but in his eyes, I saw a drunken rage. There was no doubt in them. He believed I was the reason David was dead.

Then, suddenly, my world went black.

Chapter 2

Fall was my favorite time of year. I was fascinated with how vivid and alive nature was while in the throes of death. It was a brilliantly colored, exhilarating season that existed amid cool, crisp silence.

I was in awe of this dichotomy, so much so that I typically spent all of fall capturing it with my camera. However, my world had become a much smaller place since losing my mother, Aunt Madeline's sister, to cancer in June; my stepfather's best friend, David, from a heart attack several weeks ago; and my stepfather to a nervous breakdown two days before. Life was now a place too constricting to fit my curiosity. My awareness was limited to noticing only those things that truly mattered—things sharp enough to jab me into the present moment—things like pain and fear.

During the trip to Kennard, Vermont, with Aunt Madeline, I had avoided looking at her, not wanting to invite questions like “How are you feeling?” “Do you want to talk about what happened?” “So, are you excited to see the inn?” Any interaction would be an attempt to pull me from my indifference. Not caring was comfortable.

As my eyelids became heavy during the first part of the trip, I remembered the gravesite scene, my stepfather's attack. I had passed out. Aunt Madeline told me it had taken several men to pull Warren off me as he accused me of killing David.

She said someone had dialed 911 when Warren disappeared into the woods with me. It wasn't long before two police cars and an ambulance shattered the cemetery's sacred stillness with their sirens.

Warren was taken to the police station and then to a secured psychiatric facility.

The ambulance took me to Martin Stow Memorial Hospital, where I was observed several days for a possible concussion.

By the third day, my doctor, astonished that I reported no pain and noticing that my cuts had healed entirely, released me from the hospital. Aunt Madeline and I agreed I would stay with her.

I vividly remembered Aunt Madeline's face in the ambulance and hospital room, but the details of my hospital stay were blurry. I had called out for Mom once during the night, but then the memory of Mom's death burned through my medicated fog, and I cried.

On our way to Aunt Madeline's home, we stopped by my house. She used the spare key Warren had given her when she came in for David's funeral and entered the house to gather some of my things. I didn't want to go in. I didn't care about my clothes, music, books, or my camera anymore. I once thought those things were an expression of who I was, but now, without Mom and Warren, I didn't need them. I was nothing.

At the end of the two-hour drive to her home, Aunt Madeline took a left onto a small, paved road. The trees on either side of the road loomed over us. They peered in as though fretting over whether arriving guests would feel welcome.

Another left took us onto a dirt road that wound up a hill. As we neared the top, a white building peeked out from the autumn trees that encircled it like a cape. This was the Englewood Inn: a renovated Victorian-style two-story home. Sitting on ten acres, the inn was twenty minutes from a downtown lined with pottery shops, art galleries, and tearooms. Not only was this Aunt Madeline's home, but it was also her business—at least the first floor.

"Home sweet home," Aunt Madeline announced, pulling into the driveway. "I'd love to give you a tour. I think it was about a decade ago that you and Caroline last visited."

I nodded, vaguely recollecting the last time Mom and I were at the inn.

Taking my suitcase from the trunk, Aunt Madeline carried it through the large front doors.

“Be careful on the second step,” she cautioned. “This is an old house, and one of the bricks broke off. Nicole is going to have Marty fix it soon.”

I stepped over the missing brick.

“We’ve made a few renovations since you were here last,” she said, leading me into the grand room, where guests checked in.

I felt a vague familiarity as I looked into the room.

“So,” Aunt Madeline began, setting my suitcase just inside the front door entrance, “Lily and I live upstairs. There’s a sitting and dining room and three bedrooms. One for Lily, one for me, and . . .” she pressed her lips into a smile, “one for you. There’s a fourth room, but that’s used for storage.”

“Where’s Lily?” I asked, aggravated with myself for caring about my cousin’s whereabouts despite her not staying for David’s funeral. Lily and I weren’t especially close, but with both of us being eighteen years old, we had a few things in common. I had hoped those commonalities would spur a closer bond between us, but it hadn’t worked out that way.

“She’s not back from her business trip,” Aunt Madeline replied. “She asked me to tell you how sorry she was that she couldn’t stay for the funeral.”

“I get it. Can’t keep the boss waiting.”

“Yes, I suppose.” She cleared her throat and placed her hand on her necklace.

We stood in awkward silence for several moments.

“The guests stay downstairs,” she finally said as she led me through the grand room and down the hall to the right, showing me the four guest rooms.

“All the rooms have flat screens, Wi-Fi, and excellent cell phone reception.”

I nodded politely.

“I don’t know if you recall, but I’m an avid reader of Jane Austen’s works, so I named each of the guest rooms after my favorite Austen characters—the Darcy, the Elliot, the Crawford, and the Knightley.”

She pointed to the first room on the left, with its hearty wood flooring, dark-blue walls, and rich, ornate ivory accents. “This is the Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

I glanced in.

“That one—” Aunt Madeline continued, pointing to the room across from the Darcy, featuring a queen bed and dark-green-striped wallpaper “—is the Elliot.”

She then pointed to the room next to the Elliot. “I named this after the character of Mary Crawford,” she said. “I thought the room’s dark reds, blacks, and tans had a bit of sex appeal.”

Aunt Madeline then gestured to the room across from the Crawford. It had a quaint fireplace and intricately scrolled wallpaper of gold, reds, and creams. “This was my favorite room. I named this room the George Knightley.”

I nodded again to show her I was still listening.

“The character of George Knightley is the perfect man of high moral character and maturity,” she stated. “Someone who can hold a woman to her own standards of what is right and wrong, and someone who can just hold her and let her be imperfect, as she is.”

She looked at me for an uncomfortable amount of time until I felt obligated to ask, “Did you know someone like that?”

“I did,” she said, seemingly relieved that I’d posed the question. “Years ago, I thought such a man would save me from my nightmare of a world. He made all of the promises I wanted to hear.”

“And he broke them?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “Unfortunately, he kept every single one.”

I made no reply to her cryptic response and followed her back into the grand room. She then motioned toward a room left of the main entrance. “That’s the Brick Room Bar. The locals and guests start coming in around five p.m.”

I scanned the bar’s brick walls that butted against the warm beige wainscoting.

“You like to read, don’t you, Sage?” she asked, directing me to the right, toward the back of the grand room.

“Yes,” I answered and followed her into the room.

“This is the library,” Aunt Madeline stated, taking a step back so I could get a better look at the dark, cherry-wood flooring, tall built-in shelves, and large picture window framing Wilkins Lake. “You’re welcome to any of the books.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“And now for your room,” she announced, her eyes lighting up as she picked up my suitcase and led me upstairs.

“I only have the bare essentials for you,” she explained, setting my suitcase inside the bedroom door. “A comforter, pillow, and reading lamp. We can go shopping once you feel up to it.”

I sat on the bed, forcing myself to study the room with interest and appreciation.

“I called Allen before we got here and asked if he would get some bathroom items for you.”

“Thanks,” I replied, picking at a cuticle.

“Allen Fines is the head chef here and a good friend.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Allen’s gruff voice boomed behind Aunt Madeline. Surprised by Allen’s sudden appearance, she nearly stumbled into the nightstand.

I looked up at her as she regained her balance and then at Allen.

“Unfortunately, none of the female staff were available, so I volunteered,” he informed me, stepping into the room. “Wow, kid, I gotta tell you, there are way too many choices out there for women these days.” He shook his head. “I didn’t know what you’d like—lavender-scented soap, sandalwood, mango. I didn’t know if you wanted to smell like a flower, a hippie, or fruit medley.”

“Thanks. Whatever you got is fine,” I said.

“And the shampoos. Don’t get me started on those!” He smacked his forehead. “And the . . . uh, well, more delicate items. I didn’t know about that. I got you both—the pads . . .”

I cringed, and Aunt Madeline’s face flushed.

“Allen, I think Sage needs some time to rest,” she said and placed her hand gently on his shoulder.

“Uh . . . sure.” He backed out into the hallway. “I hope you’re okay with a shampoo and conditioner combo. One bottle—that’s simpler to me.”

“Thanks, Allen.” I laid on my side. “Thanks, Aunt Madeline. I think I’ll sleep for a while.”

Aunt Madeline closed the door. That was the last time I’d be out of my room for a week.

Chapter 3

Groaning, I pulled the covers over my eyes as the morning sunlight slipped into the bedroom. Nighttime was so much more forgiving than the day. The day was too alive, too active. The night was quiet, still. There was no expectation to take part in life when it was dark outside. But when the sun rose, expectations changed.

I rolled on my side and listened to the birds chattering at the window. I could also hear Aunt Madeline and Allen whispering to each other outside my door.

“It’s not healthy. Not one bit,” Allen advised Aunt Madeline.

“I agree with you,” she replied, “but I’m not sure what to do.”

“She needs fresh air and work.”

“Maybe she needs more time to acclimate.”

“She can acclimate while stocking the pantry,” Allen replied curtly.

“Allen,” Aunt Madeline huffed, “are you that callous?”

“Tough love, Maddie.”

“Maybe she could meet with Dr. Kessler?” Aunt Madeline suggested.

“You don’t need to get some shrink involved already. She’ll pull out of her funk, eventually.”

“Dr. Kessler is a wonderful therapist,” she replied sharply.

“He didn’t do much for Lily.”

“Well, that was a different circumstance,” Aunt Madeline said.

“Lily *is* a different circumstance.”

“Allen Fines, that’s my daughter you’re talking about,” she scolded.

“Okay, okay.”

“Maybe Sage will come down for brunch this morning,” Aunt Madeline said with a lilt in her voice.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

“Allen Fines! Don’t start!”

“I’ll be in the kitchen getting the crepes ready for the guests,” Allen said and stomped down the stairs.

“Allen is making strawberry crepes this morning,” Aunt Madeline said to me after a quick knock on the door. “Why don’t you come down and join us?” She stepped inside, although I hadn’t asked her to come in.

I kept my eyes closed to feign sleep and felt the mattress shift as she sat beside me.

“He uses strawberries fresh from the local farmer’s market. You may want to go down to the kitchen before the guests inhale them,” she said, lightly touching my hand.

I pulled my hand away and burrowed deeper into my quilted cocoon.

“I can’t imagine how difficult this is for you, but I want to help,” she sighed. “Maybe talking to someone would be good for you—a professional.”

I didn’t reply.

“Okay. I’ll have your brunch brought up to you, but this is the last time. I need for you to start making an effort.”

I said nothing.

“Don’t make me send Allen up here,” she said with a tired laugh.

I wished she would just leave me be.

She extracted herself from the uncomfortable silence with another sigh, leaving the bedroom door slightly open and walked back downstairs.

Minutes later, familiar footsteps trudged up the staircase to my bedroom door.

“Maddie wants me to bring you breakfast . . . again,” Allen growled. “I *suppose* my crepes aren’t good enough for you to come downstairs to eat them?”

I rolled my eyes.

He poked his head into the room and glared at me. “God bless! I work my arse off making these things for the inn’s guests, and now I’ve got to come here and force them down your throat?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re not getting breakfast in bed this time. I’m done with it. My crepes are worth coming downstairs for. You eat in the kitchen. You got me, kid?”

I closed my eyes, noticing the soft pixels of light inside my lids.

“I asked you a question.”

“I got you, Mr. A.,” I said, sitting up in the bed but avoiding eye contact with him.

“Sage, look at me when I’m talking to you.” Allen continued to clamor on in the background like an angry, unattended teakettle.

“You’re ridiculous! Stop nagging me!” I shouted.

Allen’s deep-set, gray eyes tightened as his thick fingers scraped along his salt and pepper stubble.

“Ridiculous is you cowering in your bed for the past week,” he said with a glower. “Breakfast is in the kitchen.” He turned and stomped back downstairs.

I fell back onto my pillow. Allen had had enough of my self-pity. For him, I was a nuisance, just like every other guest. This place would never be my home. It was just another visit like the ones Mom and I had made before.

I now remembered the first time Mom and I visited the inn. I must have been nine or ten, running down the hallway with Lily and sliding along the hardwoods in socks, before padding into the kitchen for brunch.

Margie, the chef at the time, would fry herb-crusteds pieces of veal, leaving them on a large wooden chopping block to rest. Lily and I danced along her periphery, slipping the juicy tidbits into our mouths once the meat had cooled. We were anything but stealthy as we burst through the swinging kitchen doors. Each time Margie laughed and shooed us out. Aunt Madeline had told me that Margie passed away a year ago from a heart attack. Allen, the sous chef at that time, had taken her place.

I shut my eyes again, wishing I was tired enough to fall back to sleep. My stomach growled, and I thought about the crepes. It was easier to roll back under the covers and not

move. It hurt to move. Not physically. Physically, I had quickly healed from the cuts and bruises. There was, however, an emotional pain associated with the thought of attempting something as mundane as brushing my teeth or stepping out into the hallway. The pain rose at the very idea of living, of hoping.

Allen had left the bedroom door open, and I could make out a female voice from downstairs, asking about the nearest art gallery. More voices joined. It sounded as though a group outing was forming. Then, a deep male chortle ascended the stairs and entered my room uninvited. The laugh had a familiar rough sweetness, reminding me of David's laughter. His image came to mind, and I jumped out of bed and ran into the hallway. I looked over the stair rail and down into the small crowd of people.

My eyes searched frantically and then fell. Of course, it wasn't him. David was dead.

Aunt Madeline closed the front door as the last of the guests left for their excursion. She glanced up to see me looking down at her. My body was shaking.

"Sage, are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost!" she said, starting up the stairs.

"No, I'm fine," I said, shaking my head. "I thought I heard a loud noise. It just startled me."

"Well, since you're up, would you—"

"I'm not hungry," I lied and turned back toward the bedroom.

"Sage Frankle!" Allen's voice boomed from below.

Tired of his drill-sergeant attitude, I looked down and scowled at him. He stood beside Aunt Madeline, his arms crossed, and brow furrowed. She looked at him nervously.

"Allen, it's okay," she said.

His mouth twisted as though he was considering putting his remarks aside. Instead, he stepped forward to get a better look at me. Aunt Madeline's hands flew to her face in frustration.

"Listen, kid, we know your mom passed away—and I'm sorry. Your dad is in a mental hospital—sorry about that, too. But Maddie is trying to help you. Sure, her priorities can be screwed up from time to time . . ."

Aunt Madeline shot him a look.

"But right now, she wants what's best for you. Take advantage of the opportunity while it lasts."

Aunt Madeline groaned, pressing both of her palms on either side of her temples.

“I save my sugarcoating for the pecan glaze.” He winked at me. “I don’t like shrinks, personally, but maybe give Dr. K. a chance.” He held his palm up to me as though swearing an oath: “If you let Maddie help you, I promise to quit being such a nagging arse.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Aunt Madeline replied.

Although it didn’t seem that her comment was meant as a joke, I started laughing. The odd noise didn’t sound like it belonged to me, but it came from my mouth, nonetheless. I hadn’t heard myself laugh in months. I looked at Aunt Madeline and Allen—the sweet and the sour, the silk and the burlap. Both were trying to help me in their own way.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll go if it’ll hush Allen up.”

“We could all do with that,” Aunt Madeline nodded. “I’ll set up the appointment.”

A sliver of humor had pierced my depressed wall. I was grateful for the small ray of hope, but I also felt weak for not having a stronger defense. I didn’t deserve happiness. Those joys shouldn’t exist without my family’s and friend’s presence. I should have to endure more suffering for what I had done. I no longer pressed my memory to find out what I was guilty of. It was a blur, a blip in my mind, but it was there. I felt it, and I needed to suffer for it. I’d make Allen and Aunt Madeline happy for now and go to a few counseling sessions. Once they were convinced that I was dealing with my trauma in a healthy way, they would finally leave me alone.