

{Prologue}

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I tip the champagne glass up, light forming a prism as the last of the warm sourness slides into my mouth. My head is warm and thick, like a woolly blanket. The anger and tightness in my chest are gone. Disappeared two glasses before, to be honest.

The key scrapes in the lock, the heavy door swinging open and then the normal sounds in succession that Cole makes every time he arrives home. First, the clink of the keys hitting the silver dish by the door. Four steps and then the soft swoosh of the coat closet as he hangs his jacket and puts down his leather driving gloves. Fourteen steps across the great room where he flicks on the television, then a pause while he watches the stocks roll across the screen.

I set my glass in the marble sink of the cavernous kitchen and go back to arranging a bouquet of wildflowers for a still life. Commissioned six months ago to paint the piece, I've been struggling to find time between my studio and shop. I study the arrangement, remove an aster stalk and cut it shorter than wedge it between a lily and cornflower.

I'm about to replace the lily with a fiery orange Gerber daisy when my husband of five years slides his arms around my waist. I'd lost track of his progression into the kitchen. He nuzzles his cheek into my neck. I stand as cold and rigid as a knife blade.

"What's the matter, darling?" He sighs, shoving away from the counter and moving to look into my face.

"Nothing," I mutter knowing fully how stupid that sounds. I might as well answer his question with "peanut butter," or "sky."

"I'm sorry . . . I'm late?" The statement that was a question. Typical Cole. "Is that it?"

"Bloody hell, Cole, what time is it?" My hands jerk away from the flowers and toward the huge face on the silver antique clock. "Eight o'clock. You were supposed to be here at six. Did you forget what day it is? You couldn't get in touch with me on one of your fifty-five electronic devices? How about a payphone? A gas station somewhere in Philadelphia must still have a payphone."

Cole steps back, raising his hands. "Woah. I get that you're irritated, but there's no need. I've got dinner covered. I didn't forget it's our anniversary, and I'm taking you out on the town." He smiles his winning client grin.

"I don't want to go out on the town," I reply, surprised the words are able to slither out through my clenched teeth. "I made Beef Wellington. And peas and new potatoes. And lemon torte. But that was at six o'clock when I thought you'd be home, and now everything is cold, and I have a painting to finish."

I sweep up the vase of flowers, clearing stems and flower bits into the trash on my way out of the room.

"Happy Anniversary," I say and let the kitchen door swing silently closed behind me.

I sit in my art studio for more than an hour but inspiration has run away with its tail between its legs. The tight ball in my chest has morphed, frustration making my legs jittery and my hands clench. Finally I sigh, put down the brush and dab at it with water, cleaning chartreuse paint from the bristles. The sink in the corner of my studio is splattered with the remains of previous projects. I turn, leaving the brush drying on the sideboard and look at the space.

My home studio has high ceilings, tall windows, pale yellow walls and bright pops of turquoise and orange which have become my signature. Geometric patterns on the curtains, black accents, and along nearly every wall, floor to ceiling shelving. Boxes are neatly labeled, but they

don't need to be. I could find everything I need in this room with my eyes closed. When I opened my first brick and mortar store last year, I intended to work in a back room. But I spend so much time there already that this room has become my sacred space.

Guilt nibbles at my chest as I think about all the work Cole put into my store, into making it a success. My childhood dream became his in the years since we first met in England. He's not the first husband to have screwed up anniversary plans, I suppose. Some of the tenseness leaves my body, slinking off like a shadow. I smile, shut off the lights in the studio and close the door.

My hand trails along the chair rail down the hallway and into our bedroom. Cole is lying still in his work clothes, on top of the coverlet. His hair is mussed, chin dropped forward onto his chest. For a minute I imagine him as a little boy, exhausted after a long afternoon playing in the sandbox and chasing frogs.

The television anchorman is blathering on about the recent dip in the financial market. I click it off but Cole doesn't move. The tight ache in my chest loosens even more and I smooth back a piece of hair, kiss his forehead.

Following the wide staircase down to the first floor I find shoes, then keys. A quick drive will refresh me. I picture the rest of my frustration blowing out the open windows, cool air replacing what's left of the heat inside.

Windows down, I turn the volume up, and Ella Fitzgerald's voice works her magic, draining away the remaining tension. I drive aimlessly. Away from the lights of the city toward the flat roads that lead out of Philadelphia. Our little cul-de-sac becomes a distant point of light as I meander from one road to another. The air smells clean and warm, still tinged with the dampness of the rain from earlier today. I swerve to miss a leaping frog caught in the light beams of my Audi.

The blue lights catch me by surprise, so much that I nearly stop dead in the road.

Shit.

Gathering my wits, I steer off to the side, slowing and then letting the car purr to a full stop.

I reach into my handbag on the seat beside me, pull out a piece of peppermint gum and pop it into my mouth. Seconds pass, then I extract the registration and insurance paperwork from the glove box. The cop is sure to ask for it.

He emerges a moment later from the squad car. He's short, muscular, broad shouldered and walks with a swagger. I roll my eyes before he gets to my window. Typical power-hungry rookie, I think.

But his face is older than I imagined as he leans down close to me.

"Evening, ma'am."

"Good evening, officer," I reply. My voice sounds steady despite the fast thumping under my ribs.

He looks me over and I shiver. I recognize that look. Not one of keen observation but something dark. I glance behind us. The road stretches, black and empty behind. My heart beats faster.

"Is there a problem?" I ask. This time my voice sounds a bit breathless.

"Depends," the officer says. Correction: sergeant. *Sergeant Melvin Brooks* it says on a gold bar over his breast pocket. "You been drinking?"

"Drinking?" My voice has raised an octave. I take a deep breath then another. *Steady, Sarah. Slow down.*

"Just a bit," I say. "A glass of champagne. For my anniversary."

“Really? Just one glass.” Sergeant Brooks sounds like I’ve just told him the world is flat or that the road we’re on is actually constructed from cheese. He chuckles. The sound is rusty.

“Get out of the car, please, ma’am.”

Is this standard procedure? Doesn’t he just need to run my information? Questions form, but my brain refuses to process them. Instead I’m faced with little empty holes where answers should be.

He opens the door without waiting for my reply. I fumble with my seatbelt, and he chuckles again. Then I scoot out, pulling my skirt down and smoothing it as I do. The road behind us remains dark, deserted. I look at the cop again, and panic fills my throat.

“Beautiful night, isn’t it?” He says unexpectedly, glancing above us at the trees that frame this stretch of road.

For an instant I think I’m wrong. That my instincts are off, dulled by the champagne and my imagination, which has been playing tricks on me again. I glance up, too and see that he’s right. The trees are backlit by a sliver of moon. Frogs peep in a swampy area nearby, and I hear a shrill call of an insect that I can’t remember the name of.

But then his hands are iron tight around my arms, and I’m pinned against the car. His breath is hot on my neck and face and smells of onions and stale cigarettes. And I think I’m going to be sick, but his mouth is so close to mine that I feel dizzy. Ella’s finished her song and Billie Holliday is crooning a tune I can’t quite remember the name of.

{Chapter One}

St. Albans, Vermont

Her name is Charlotte and she speaks quickly, hands moving like thin birds in front of her. She pauses only for a moment to take a miniscule sip of her coffee and then starts right back in, barely pausing for breath.

Charlotte is the first neighbor in the community to introduce herself. In fact, in the three months that Cole and I have lived at Hawthorne Estates, she’s one of the only people I’ve seen. Her property sits kitty corner to ours, separated by the tall, voluptuous hedges common in gated communities. When I’d mentioned to Cole how odd it was we hadn’t seen anyone out in their yards, he’d shrugged it off.

“It’s winter, Sarah. In Vermont, mid-March is the time to huddle up and wait out the rest of the cold weather. What did you expect, cross country skiers on the main drive?” He’d smiled when he’d said it, teasing me.

“. . . and that’s when we moved here,” Charlotte says, pausing again for a doll-sized sip of coffee. I wonder if I put in too much cream and sugar. She looks as though she hasn’t had either in years.

I smile, take a sip from my own cup, and lean forward in my chair.

“I’m so glad you took the initiative, Charlotte, to come for a visit,” I say. “I’ve been thinking of baking bread for all the neighbors just as an excuse to introduce myself.”

“Oh.” She looks alarmed. I wonder if it’s the thought of eating bread or my showing up on the doorstep unannounced that’s cause for concern.

“I hope you won’t let our unfriendliness bother you. We’re not really so bad, just busy with work and social engagements. You know how that goes.” Charlotte smiles brightly.

I nod and smile, but I can't actually remember how it felt. My days now are long and slow. And tedious. For an instant I remember the long, black days that spooled out like ribbon—the ones after the hospital—but I block the memory out and take another sip of coffee.

"Can I get you something else? A slice of blueberry bread? Lemon cake?"

Charlotte waves off both, another worried look marring her unlined face. *It was the bread, then.*

"Thanks, but no. I'm on a strict no-carb diet. Marc has his business bash in the Caribbean in a few weeks, and I need to be able to fit into my bikini and impress the partners' wives." She laughs, joking. I smile back but think that if she loses any more weight she might not find a swimsuit tiny enough to fit. At least not in the adult section of the store.

"Forgive me, Sarah. I've been completely monopolizing the conversation. Tell me more about you and your husband. Is it Cole?"

"It is, yes." I freeze for a moment, unable to think of how to work around the hospitalization, unable to remember momentarily what it was that I used to do in my other life the one where I was competent and confident. The life where I was actually me.

"I'm an artist," I blurt out. This at least is true, though I haven't taken up a brush in months. "Originally from London. I met Cole seven years ago while he was working there; two years later we married. We just moved here from Philadelphia, where we lived for a while."

"Oh, London," Charlotte says, her eyes looking dreamily out the window. "I loved it there. I had such a lovely time exploring Europe when Marc was opening some large accounts in Paris."

Marc, I'd learned, was in financial securities, though what he actually did with money I wasn't exactly sure.

"London is lovely," I agree. "Of course, I'm biased."

"Do you miss it?"

I pause but just for a moment.

"Yes."

"What do you miss the most?" Charlotte sets her coffee cup down carefully and rests her tiny hands on the top knee of her long slender legs that are crossed in front of her.

I close my eyes, just for a moment, then look past her out the massive wall of windows that makes up one-half of our kitchen.

"I miss my kitchen. It was small and outdated and butter yellow, and I completely loved it. It was horrible, really. A mess of dangerous wiring and shorts that would make an electrician roll in his grave."

Charlotte laughs.

"I miss afternoon tea. Not the tea itself. You can get that anywhere. But the ritual of it. It was so comforting. And silly things you take for granted like the mechanical voice on the tube saying, "Mind the gap," a thousand times a day. I miss chocolate shops: real chocolate shops where they hand dip their sweets, and the smell slips out the shop windows and doors and into the street. And I miss Christmas when carolers dress up like characters in a Charles Dickens story and wander around the streets singing. It was so magical."

I stop and force a chuckle.

"I'm sorry. I'm going on and on like some smarmy advertisement. Vermont is beautiful. Lovely. It really is. I'm sure that in time I'm going to love it here. It's so . . ." I search for the right word. "Tranquil. And natural."

"And tediously boring," Charlotte says and laughs.

"No, really, it's breathtaking and lovely in its own way."

Charlotte rolls her eyes.

“I’ve lived here for many years, and I still can’t get used to the weather. I suppose as a flatlander—that’s the term the natives use for any of us who haven’t tilled the soil for the past two hundred years—I will someday come to appreciate it. At least that’s what Marc tells me. I’m not so sure.”

Charlotte stands, her chair gliding soundlessly away from the table. We’re seated in the dining room, the least-used room in the house. When Charlotte stands a shadow passes the sun and the room is momentarily dimmed, gray walls turning dark and dingy, white porcelain dishes in the high china cabinet looking brittle. I shiver, rubbing my hands over my arms.

“That’s another reason to take a mid-winter break,” Charlotte says, pointing at my arms. “It’s a chance to remember that there is indeed a sun still up there in the sky somewhere.”

I walk her through the long hall toward the front door. Her heels click on the tile, making tapping sounds. I pad behind her, stocking feet soundless. The sun peers out again as I open the thick glass-paned door. The handle is iron and twisted, it feels heavy and awkward in my hand. Cumbersome, smothering. Like this house and neighborhood. I push the thought away, clear my throat.

“Thanks again for stopping,” I tell Charlotte. *Should I give her a hug? An air kiss? A handshake, maybe?* She resolves the dilemma for me by tapping quickly down the stairs, donning her jacket as she moves, pushing arms into a fluff of baby blue fur.

“Seal,” she says, smoothing it over her and zipping the coat to her chin. “Baby seal,” she whispers with her finger pressed coquettishly to her lips. “But don’t tell. You never know when there might be an animal rights activist in our midst.” She laughs, and the sound is as tight and tinkling as she is, sharp and pointed in the cold air.

I force a polite smile, pushing the thought of sweet, fuzzy, white seals out of my mind and close the door halfway behind me. Charlotte waves thin fingers in my direction.

“Great to meet you, Sarah,” she says and then slips behind the wheel of the extra-large SUV (“Seating for seven!” she’d remarked earlier) and backs quickly from the curved driveway. With another wave, she passes onto the main drive, leading to the town highway beyond.

Charlotte is desperately in need of more warm weather clothes, she said, and it is miles and miles to the nearest women’s specialty shop. The marble steps are icy beneath my feet, but I stand for another few minutes, sucking in the fresh, cold air and dull sunshine like a drowning woman. Then I turn and walk back into the house, heavy door closing behind me like a coffin.

{Chapter Two}

Leaves encrusted under a thin layer of ice crackle beneath my boots as I walk. The forest behind our home is magnificent, dense and wild. Animal sightings are frequent: deer, rabbits, foxes, and the ever tweeting songbirds. This morning it’s louder than ever, nearly deafening as though I am walking in a rain forest instead of through New England hardwood and pines.

I make a mental note to look for a birding book next time I’m at the library. I’ve been spending hours in the woods and it would be nice to learn at least some of the calls from my feathered friends. Thinking of the birds makes me think of Charlotte. I picture her at this moment, wandering through a ritzy women’s store, waving her hands at the sales women to bring alligator sandals and calf-hair bags, and while they are at it, baby kitten-fur lined coats into the dressing room.

To each her own, though the thought of baby animals being killed to make a fashion statement turns my stomach. A particularly loud bird caws overhead. A crow. That one I

recognize. The air is fresh, and the cold aches my lungs. It's a welcome discomfort, and I expand my chest, drawing the scent of pine needles, loamy soil and sweet, decayed leaves deeper inside.

When I come to the woods, I make a pledge with myself not to dwell on negative things. I think instead about color and patterns, shape and contrast. Mother Nature is the ultimate creative.

The gravel path is hard. The bits that must be loose in summer are stuck firmly together with frost and ice, packed into a cement-like material. I adjust my hat, pulling it slightly off my ears to feel the sun. There's a quarrel going on in the treetops above me. Seconds later an agitated squirrel skitters down the trunk of a huge pine tree and leaps across the path, then into the forest on the other side. The party left behind makes another screeching sound but stays hidden in the tree. Apparently even animals aren't immune to daily drama and office politics.

The path ahead curves, following a brook to my right. Snow covers most of the area, which is indented. I continue left, realizing after a few moments that I've never been this deep into the woods. The path comes to a "V." The right side is covered in gravel, but the left, I realize, is more of a dirt path. A niggling voice tells me that it would be safer to stay on the main walking path. Ignoring it, I give in to my curiosity and go left.

The woods become thicker, the animal sounds, quieter. Everything here is quieter, hushed and muffled by ancient pine boughs and layer upon layer of dead leaves that have composted into thick, soft down lining the forest floor.

I'm lost in thought when I see something that stops my boots mid-stride. Sunlight, tarnished yellow, trickles through the thick branches overhead illuminating a figure in the woods. Or is it a tree? I squint, too far away to see clearly. I walk more slowly, trying to quiet my feet and the breath in my lungs which suddenly sounds deafening.

More steps, quiet, slow. The path before me twists, and I'm left, abruptly in a large, open clearing. I look again to the spot where I think I saw the figure. The hair along my neck rises, and my breath stops in my throat. The loud song of the birds is drowned out by the louder throb of my heartbeat. I blink my eyes once, twice. An illusion, maybe?

But it's not.

Silhouetted against a backdrop of thick, rough trees is a woman.

A gray woman.

A ghost.

Immobile and standing arrow straight between two maple trees. One hand rests against a tree trunk, as gnarled and rough looking as the bark. Gray hair, pulled back. A few pieces across her cheeks. Hard looking face. She wears a pale dress which reminds me of the buttery leather saddle bags I had when I took horseback riding lessons as a kid. She is slight but not skinny. Her face is turned, looking out across the clearing, her gaze intense. Then suddenly her head turns and she's staring at me. Face angry, eyes, narrowing. Without thinking I suck in my breath. A tree branch groans nearby, and I glance away, then back.

She's gone.

Goose bumps skitter up and down my arms and back then down my legs to my feet. I look again, checking the spot, then tracing my eyes left and right, but she's vanished.

A breath trapped and forgotten in my chest falls out, and I draw in another, then another, fast, quick. I stand for several more minutes, watching, but see nothing other than the trees, hear nothing but the incessant call of birds.

I don't remember retracing my steps through the woods or crossing from the forest to the maintained web of trails in the community, following one back to the house. I don't remember taking off my boots or putting on the tea kettle, but I hear it scream now and jump, hip bumping

hard into the granite counter. I pour a steaming stream into a mug filled with a double shot of bourbon with shaking hands.

It isn't until I've drained the first cup of tea and am working on the second, that I come to my senses. I walk quickly into my studio, flipping the light switch and flooding the area with bright, natural light. I've lost my tea somewhere, but it doesn't matter. I can't do what I need to now without free hands.

Moving fast, I find a large sketch pad and a packet of charcoal pencils. With quick, uneven strokes I fill the page with images of the woman. My hands are still trembling slightly as I work, quickly finishing the first page and starting a second. My wrist and fingers begin to ache halfway through the third sketch. It's been months since I've used drawing implements, and my body is out of practice. Ignoring the discomfort, I hunch further forward and concentrate on the lines and details before I forget, capturing an image on paper that will come to matter more to me than I could ever imagine.

Three hours later I sip my first glass of wine, admiring the clarity of the pale yellow liquid in the glass backlit by a crackling fire. I sigh contentedly, moving closer to Cole on the wide couch.

"Good day?" he asks, muting the TV and looking at me. He's so handsome. The sharp planes of his face are made smoother by the shadows and firelight dancing off of them.

"Sure," I say, burrowing my head into the crook of his neck. He smells of cedar and aftershave, a sharp but pleasant smell. I nuzzle his neck, and he lifts a hand and smooths back my dark curls.

We sit quietly for a few moments before I sigh again.

"You sure it was a good day?" He tips my face toward him. I hesitate, and he notices.

"What is it?" he asks.

I draw back for a moment, drain the rest of my glass and balance the leggy stem on the coffee table.

"I saw something, or someone I should say, in the woods."

Silence.

Then, "Like a vagrant?"

"No." I pause, look out the wide bay of windows across the great room. The dark presses in so hard I can't see a speck of light outside.

"A woman. A..." I'm about to say "ghost" but then think better of it. "An elderly woman."

"In the woods. Alone?" Cole asks.

I nod.

"Did she look, you know, stable? Do you think she'd wandered away from home?"

I see her clearly in my mind: straight, gray, angry.

"No, I don't think so. She was old, but her eyes..." I shiver, look away from the window and back toward the fire. "Her eyes were sharp, clear. I don't think she was misplaced."

"Hmmm," Cole said, un-muting the television set. "You didn't recognize her though?"

"I didn't. Not that I know anyone around here yet. I mean, out in the greater community," I hurriedly add that last part, knowing that Cole is sensitive to our new neighborhood and more sensitive to the slights I've made regarding its unfriendly occupants.

We watch the screen in silence for another half hour before I give Cole a kiss and turn in. I take one more look at the sketches in my studio before getting into bed. They were quickly done, but the detail is good.

I bring one of the sheets closer, the one in which I drew her clothing. It was an instant glance in the woods, but later, when I was drawing, I didn't have to stop and think back about it. I knew. My hand and brain were working together so quickly that my mind didn't have a chance to get in the way. That's when my art is best, when my mind is left completely out of it.

What I see now on the paper starts a slow tremble in my hands. Fear or excitement? I'm not sure. I look at the sheet, look away. I scan my art room, wondering if there was something in it that I saw seconds before drawing, if that thing could have influenced this work. I take in the same cream-colored walls, the dark walnut wood trim, the wall of open shelves, antique locker baskets holding supplies and the long, scarred and paint-covered work table. But there's nothing. I never display artwork in my studio: mine or anyone else's. Too easy for it to influence future pieces. I look at the sketches again, then the room around me, eyes searching for any type of fabric, beads or odds and ends that would have made it into this piece. But again, nothing.

Looking at the sketch again, I hardly believe what I see. The woman's clothing is simple, but old. Ancient, maybe. The dress, buttery soft, pale yellow, is made from a soft, flexible material, most likely leather. There are bands of beads around the hem and neck, fringe hangs from the body of the dress itself, and though no patterns in the beadwork show in my sketch, I know they're there. This ghost has an identity. She's Native American.

Hurriedly, I take out the first sketch again, the one in which I captured her face and stance. Sharp, clear eyes stare out from a lined face. What color were the eyes? From the distance I was standing it was impossible to tell. The face itself has the beautiful high cheekbones of a native. I can see it now, and it's so obvious that I feel stupid for having missed it earlier. Her hair, which I just remembered was long, was behind her, but a few gray wisps moved around her face. Could it have been braided? I look the drawing over again and again, but no other details stick out at me.

What is an old, Native American ghost doing in our woods? I look out the bank of windows in my studio but am met once again with complete blackness. I move toward the door of the studio, turn out the light, then press my face against the glass like I did as a little girl.

It takes several minutes for my eyes to adjust, and once they do I can still see little. Dark rims of the patio and outbuildings appear just slightly darker than the night, which is lit only by a thin rind of moon and a handful of dim stars. I look toward the forest and see movement. The trees sway slightly in a breeze I can neither feel nor hear. For a moment I feel trapped inside a box of stone and glass. As though instead of keeping the night and cold and unknown out, I'm the one being held away in this beautiful, icy chest. I shiver again and hurry to my bedroom, crawling quickly between the sheets and blankets. I try to blot out the image of the woman and the icy branches and the feeling that somehow, somehow this house is trying to imprison me.