

CHAPTER ONE



I was almost sixteen the first time my grandmother died.

It was mid-October. Warm still, like summer, but the trees were wearing their scarlets and golds. Back home, in Seattle, we had evergreens and faded browns. Those absurdly vivid colors along the banks of the Severn River were the first thing I fell in love with — autumn the way it was intended.

It's hard, now, to remember that first day, like looking at a photo underwater — the image shifting, in motion, never quite in focus. But there's a part of me that doesn't forget. And it's important to tap into that part, to will myself to remember. Sometimes, if I really concentrate, the memories come flooding back. All of them. Beginning to end. Then back again to the beginning. A full circle.



It started at the funeral. We were standing on the hill just west of the house, inside an iron fence filled with tombstones. Everyone in my grandmother's family had been buried in that graveyard, all the way back to the first immigrants. Gramma had picked out a plot for herself when she was still a little girl. Which gives you some idea about my grandmother's family and their morbid obsessions.

It was one of the few conversations I'd had with my grandmother that I actually remembered. I was nearly six at the time. She told me about her chosen resting place and then said,

cheerfully, “One day, you’ll be buried there too.” I’d burst into tears.

Ten years later, I found myself clustered with a few dozen strangers on the exact spot Gramma had described to me, beneath the living half of a skeletal tree blasted by catastrophe long ago. The new slab of marble that stood in its shade, waiting to be moved into place, read simply, *IDA WARREN MCGUINNESS ~ AT LONG LAST REUNITED*. We stood in ranks beside the open grave like starlings on an electric wire, listening to the priest remind us there was indeed a “time for everything under the sun.” One old woman dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, sniffing loudly. The rest of the group seemed frozen, including my mother. Dad tried to take her hand at one point, but she pretended not to see. Her eyes were focused on something in the distance.

Sammy, my five-year-old brother, was playing hide-and-seek among the headstones — humming the same six notes he always did — and I thought fleetingly of joining him. I guess that sounds like I didn’t have proper respect for the dead. But I’d hardly known my grandmother — I could count the number of times she’d visited us on one hand. And we’d never been to see her here. My mother had always treated Gramma more like a distant acquaintance than a family member. So it was a little hard for me to get caught up in the proceedings.

I felt bad that I didn’t feel bad.

Up the hill a bit, apart from the group, there appeared to be a father-son pair, both blond, bronzed, and sculpted, in matching black suits. I noticed a few of the other mourners covertly pointing them out to one another, and I wondered who they were.

Closer by, on the other side of the rectangular hole punched neatly in the ground, my grandmother’s nurse, Rose Valois, stood with her teenaged grandson, he a full head taller than she. They

were the only two dark faces in a crowd of pretty-much-uniform wrinkled, pasty white. When I glanced at them, the boy looked away, like he'd been caught staring.

My cheeks flushed. I tugged self-consciously at the suitcase-rumpled black sweater my best friend, Jecie, had lent me to wear over an old white blouse. Everything I had on was mismatched and ill fitting — humiliating enough in front of my grandmother's friends, but it sure would've been nice if my mother had warned me a couple of guys my age might be attending.

Mrs. Valois's grandson glanced back at me. His eyebrows lifted. Now I was the one who was staring.

I forced my attention elsewhere, beyond the fenced-in cemetery. To the fields baked golden. The trees lifting their heads above the bluff from their places along the banks of the river. The distant house crouched behind the thick border of gardens.

Waiting, I thought. And shivered involuntarily.

The morning air spoke to me. A breeze blew my hair into my face, whispering in my ear. The woods gossiped in hushed voices. Fallen leaves skittered across the ground like furtive animals. I heard an echo of voices, perhaps rising from some boaters on the river.

Sammy and I were the only ones who seemed to notice.



Following the service, the group massed together and headed to the house. All except the father-son pair — I saw them down on the driveway, climbing into a black SUV. I wished I'd gotten a better look at the younger one.

I slipped past the rest of the mourners, scooting out the gate and down the hill, putting some distance between me and the crowd. I wanted to be the first through the door of the family home I had heard about but never seen.

It was one of those places that actually had a name — Amber House. It'd been started in the 1600s as a stone-and-log cabin and had grown a little with every generation, almost like a living thing. Thrust out a wing of brick, heaved up a second story and a third, bellied forward with a new entry, sprouted dormers and gables and balconies. The house was mostly white clapboard trimmed in green, with lots of small-paned windows, and chimneys here and there. Which sounds messy, maybe, but wasn't. Everything came together into this beautiful whole. All of one piece.

At the entrance, I turned the brass knob, the metal flesh-warm in my hand. With a little push, the door swung smoothly open.

Shadows pooled inside, cool and deep. The air was dust-heavy and silent, empty. I saw a sweep of golden floor, thick Persian rugs, a staircase climbing and turning. Antique tables, chairs, lamps. Oil portraits hanging among folk art of all kinds. I knew without being told that generations of others had lived in this place, and had touched and used and looked upon these same things. It felt somber. Like a place where something was meant to happen. Like entering a church.

Then the crowd caught up with me, dammed into a pool on the front steps by the dumb girl rudely blocking the door, her mouth dropped into a small O.

“You're in the way, Sarah,” my mother observed.

I pressed my lips together and stepped to the side.

My mother glided in — a black swan leading that flock of black-coated women. She did not look suitcase-frumpy. Even though we'd basically come straight from the airport, not a single wrinkle betrayed the sleek lines of her charcoal suit. She turned and positioned herself to greet the mourners, with maybe the smallest hint of a gracious-but-sad smile shaping her lips. Her guests shuffled past, pressing her hand, seeming a little

baffled by her cold composure. They all stared around them at the house, commenting in low voices, sorting themselves into the rooms that opened off the entryway. Most went through the second door on the left, where the unmistakable clink of china and silverware announced the location of whatever food was being served.

For a moment, I regretted that I hadn't beaten the crowd to the lunch. My stomach was making those embarrassing empty noises. But I wasn't hungry enough to wait in a line with twenty white-haired ladies exuding a toxic cloud of Chanel No. 5. So when I saw Sammy scuttling past, I set off after him — my half-hearted attempt to delay the inevitable moment when he would turn up missing, and I would be sent to find him.

He must have sensed I was on his tail, because he doubled his pace. He led me into the living room and the library beyond that, and then through a door to a glassed-in gallery with two archways opening to other wings of the house, closed and unlit.

"Sam!" I hissed as unnoticeably as I could, speed walking behind him. "Sam. Wait up."

Without slowing, he veered left into the entry again. I next spotted him climbing the stairs. I followed him up, all the while trying to look at everything, trying to take in details. The eight-foot grandfather clock in the bend of the stairs, stopped at 10:37. The posts in the railing, each one different from the rest. The faces of every step, painted with a bible scene. A frame on the wall, covered in black cloth.

The stairs ended on a long landing, where a compass rose was inlaid in the varnished boards of the floor, as if a map was needed to navigate the house. I stood with my hand on the carved newel and looked in all directions. To the north was a wall of windows. South, the long railing overlooking the entry hall. To both the east and west, portals to halls that led off into gloom.