

*Can Sophie uncover the secrets of her
family's past before it's too late?*

STORYBOOK HOUSE



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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 of a vine with leaves and small flowers, framing the chapter title.

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