

CHAPTER ONE

2014

In all my eighteen—almost nineteen—years, I couldn't remember a colder day in August. Instead of drenched in sweat like usual, I'd woken to temperatures colder than a witch's tit. And in Annandale, Virginia, that was almost unheard of.

I shot off a few texts, responding to the handful of people who actually gave a damn that instead of taking advantage of my academic scholarship to my father's alma mater, the school I'd busted my ass for four years to get into, I was moving to bum-fuck Maine with my mom and my little brother. Then I unplugged my phone from the charger and crawled out of bed, twisting my honey-colored hair into a loose topknot before stalking off to the bathroom. The movers were due to show up at eight, and I still had to grab a shower and something to eat before diving into what would be the second-worst day of my life.

I only had myself to blame. It was my choice to go to a small local college—a branch campus of U-Maine—so I could stay close to Mom and Josh. After everything that had happened, I just couldn't leave them. But I would have done almost anything to take my mind off the move, even sit through one of Dad's exaggerated stories about his years as an Army brat, moving from one end of the globe to the other, all before he was my age. Then again, if he'd been there—if he hadn't *died*—we wouldn't have needed to move at all.

My cat-pee-yellow cap and gown and the brand-new red bikini I'd ordered the minute the new swimwear catalogues showed up in the mail back in February taunted me from my empty closet. I couldn't decide what to do with either of them. Pack or pitch?

Those were my choices. With one last lingering gaze, I wadded them together and shoved them into an open box along with the rest of my memories.

The air conditioning didn't kick in once while I stuffed my entire life—what was left of it, anyway—into two-foot-by-two-foot boxes, but I wouldn't have minded if the furnace had. Unfortunately, Mom'd had the gas disconnected a week ago, so I had to settle for one of my dad's old Georgetown hoodies and a pair of his thick wool socks. Somehow, I knew he'd sent the cool weather to take the sting out of packing or maybe to remind me of what was in store for me in New England: snow up to my eyeballs, from October through April.

So much for the red bikini.

One by one, I sealed each cardboard square with clear tape and stacked them by the door for the movers. Five boxes and one hot-pink duffel bag later, I stared at the vast emptiness of my room as if we were total strangers—every hint of Ava Elizabeth Flynn wiped clean. I shivered and pulled my hands into the sleeves of Dad's worn blue-and-gray Hoyas sweatshirt. The only clues that I'd ever lived there at all were the imprints in the carpet where the bed and dresser used to be and the clean spots on the wall where my classic rock posters had hung. I'd started collecting them when I was thirteen, and Dad introduced me to Zeppelin and the Stones. Soon, even those faint shadows of me would be gone like footprints after a fresh snow.

"Ava, you about ready?"

I flinched and spun around to find my mom leaning against the doorframe. Her haggard appearance made her seem much older than thirty-nine, especially without a stitch of makeup to cover the dark circles under her honey-brown eyes—eyes that were an exact match for mine—and with a new crop of gray peppering her dark hair. She'd

obviously skipped her last hair appointment, and instead of wearing it in shiny waves over her shoulders, she'd taken to haphazardly tangling it into a loose bun at the back of her head. I guessed losing a husband would do that to a woman. Not that I knew firsthand, but I did feel as if I'd aged a dozen years after losing my father.

She must have felt my eyes dissecting her appearance like a science project and pushed a loose curl behind her ear. "Honey, did you hear me?"

"Oh, um, yeah." I pointed to the stacked boxes by the door. "That's the last of them, I think. Hard to believe my whole life fit into five boxes, huh?"

"Tell me about it. Though it took me a few more than five. And I have several more to donate to the church. I don't think we need to cart your dad's old clothes with us to Port Michael." Sadness leached the warmth from her voice.

Sharp pain sliced through me, and I swallowed to keep from crying out. "No. I guess not. Except maybe his old sweatshirts. I mean"—I glanced at the faded bulldog on my chest—"I like wearing them. And I'm sure the peanut will want a few... *someday*. When they don't swallow him up completely, that is." Imagining my eleven-year-old brother wearing our father's clothes like dresses triggered an unexpected giggle.

Mom's face lit up for a moment, and she nodded. "You're right. You and Josh should have something of your dad's. I'll drag the boxes with us, and we'll dig through them later. We can always donate some to the local church when we get there, right?"

"Sure. I'll bet they'd like that." Not that I had a clue what the churches in Port Michael, Maine, would or wouldn't like. I'd supposedly spent summers there when I was a toddler, but other than a few fleeting images of chipped croquet mallets and bloodred roses climbing a white trellis, I didn't remember a thing, not even the little shop on the square

where Mom swore I had my first banana split—and where Jackie Kennedy supposedly bought ice cream cones for her kids when they were little. I remembered the story well enough—Mom had told it at least three times since she'd decided to pick up and move—but if I'd ever been there, that memory was as lost as Miley's innocence.

“Okay, good. The movers should be finished packing up the truck within the hour, and then I need to drop the keys off at the real estate office.” Mom stared past me out the window and pushed another loose lock of hair out of her face. “After that, we'll hit the road. We have a long drive ahead of us, and I'd like to get there before dark.” She studied me for a long moment, as if trying to see my future or something. She still worried that I'd regret my decision to give up my dreams and follow them to Maine. She never asked the question, but I saw it in her eyes every day.

I meant to ask her if I could help with anything, like scrubbing the bathrooms or vacuuming the cobwebs from the corners of the kitchen. The words were right there on the tip of my tongue. At the very least, I should have asked if my brother had packed up his crap or if he needed a hand. Instead, I watched as she turned and disappeared down the hallway then sat in my barren room, picking at the twisted strands of purple shag carpeting as if they were blades of grass in a field. I let my mind wander, running through eighteen years of milestones as I tried to commit every single detail—every whiff of nail polish, every bedtime story, every creaking floorboard—to memory.

As promised, the movers came to take my boxes sometime in the next hour. I didn't speak a word, just grabbed my pink duffel and left, scooping my phone and charger from the floor on the way out.

“I call shotgun.” Josh bolted through the house and out the front door after my

mother, a bright-blue backpack slung over his shoulders. "Can we stop at McDonald's?" He threw his bag into the back of Mom's new cherry-red Durango then ran around and climbed into the front passenger seat.

Mom loaded the last of her bags, glancing at him then at me before huffing out a breath and closing the hatch. "No."

With the front seat taken, I climbed in behind Josh and shoved my stuff to the floorboards beside my feet. Having the backseat to myself was hardly a sacrifice on a road trip.

"Burger King?" My brother bounced, making the entire car rock from side to side. With each jump, the brim of his baseball hat crested the top of the headrest.

With an exasperated sigh, Mom climbed behind the wheel. "No." She turned the key, cranking the SUV to life.

"Wendy's?" With another bounce, his hat taunted me from the front seat, and I reached out, timing my movements to his bopping head.

Mom blew out a breath as I swiped for the cap, missing it entirely. "I told you, no fast food."

"But *why*?" My brother flopped back into his seat, putting my goal completely out of reach. "You won't let us eat anything good anymore." He continued to whine as Mom backed out of the driveway.

"Because I'd like to see you reach adulthood." Mom's voice wavered, and she shot me a pained glance in the rear view mirror. Moments like that were why I'd made the sacrifice. Even if she'd never say so, I knew she needed me.

Josh tossed his ball cap up and caught it, repeating the action a second time. "It's

because of that stupid documentary, *Super Size Me*, isn't it?"

When the hat hit the air for a third time, I leaned forward, reaching out my hand to snatch it as it came down again.

"Hey! Give that back." My brother whirled around, grasping wildly for his hat, his fast-food fixation forgotten for now.

Mom mouthed, "Thank you," in the mirror, and I gave her a quick nod as I surrendered the Orioles cap to Josh. Ever since Dad had died of a heart attack at forty-two, Mom had become obsessed with healthy living. No more fried or processed foods and no sugary drinks. I hated it as much as Josh, but I got where she was coming from. She and my dad had been soul mates, and now he was gone. And because of that, we were leaving the only home I'd ever known. Without Dad, it was just a place, an empty shell, stripped bare of even the memories at this point.

I twisted around as far as I could without unbuckling and watched out the back window until we turned off Gallows Road, and the house disappeared from view. My eyes burned with tears, but I refused to let them fall. I'd cried every day since the funeral, but I didn't think I had anything left.

"Hey..." My brother stopped bouncing and turned a serious face toward Mom. "You are going to feed us, though, right?"

She reached across the console to ruffle his floppy dark hair. "Of course I'm going to feed you, Joshy."

"Okay." He turned around to smirk at me like some miniature supervillain. "But *I* get to pick the place."

We hadn't driven more than five blocks before the skies opened up, pelting rain

down on us like tears, as if Annandale knew we would never be coming back, and it missed us already.

Other than a quick stop for food and fuel and a few more for bathroom breaks for the bladder challenged, we drove straight through. Even with lighter-than-usual traffic, close to nine hours of Twenty Questions and I Spy nearly pushed me over the edge. By the time the sun had melted into the horizon with a sizzle, leaving an orange glow across the sky, we'd reached Port Michael.

I didn't want to like it. In fact, I wanted to hate the quaint little harbor town. It had no business being so idyllic when Dad was gone. Life was utterly and completely unfair, yet I caught myself smiling as Mom wove the SUV through the narrow streets past rows of Colonial houses and cobbled walkways.

We pulled up to a battered gray three-story shingle house. I could almost taste the salt water that had been eating away at the siding for over a century. Overgrown rose bushes crawled across the front porch, and green and brown vines climbed up the side, devouring entire sections of the house. In the glow of evening, one of the two upper windows appeared to wink at us like a giant jack-o'-lantern.

"This is it?" I leaned out the window to stare at the ancient monstrosity from the safety of my seat. A curtain of vines hung in front of the porch. "It looks deserted."

Mom shut off the engine and climbed out of the Durango. "Nobody's lived here since... before your grandmother died."

"Well, that's a glowing endorsement of the place," I muttered under my breath, unbuckling my seatbelt but staying put, taking it all in.

"Can we go inside?" Josh hopped out and ran up the walk to the front porch.

“Hey, be careful.” Mom fumbled with the keys as she hurried to catch up to Hurricane Josh. “Wait for me!”

The glint of sunlight reflecting off the third-story windows drew my attention again. Mom said no one had lived there for over a decade, and yet, it felt as if the house was watching me.

“Are you coming?” Mom called from the front porch. “You’d better stake your claim on a room before your brother does. He’s still fascinated with the pocket doors between the living and dining rooms, but we both know it won’t be long before he realizes the third-floor bedroom has its own bathroom.”

I climbed out of the car and stood in a patch of weeds alongside the driveway. “Really? It does?”

“Yep. Even has a claw-foot tub. That’s where your dad and I stayed when you kids were little.”

“Oh.” My shoulders deflated a little. It would have been nice to have my own bathroom, but of course, Mom would want that room.

She tilted her head and watched me from the front steps with a glint in her eye. “It’s yours if you want it.”

“What?” Shock held me in place as she made her way back to where I stood. “You don’t want it?”

“Too many memories.” Grief rolled off her in waves, soaking me with her pain. “Oh, don’t look so sad. They’re all good memories, but I think, maybe that makes it worse, somehow. Besides”—she flung an arm over my shoulder—“you’re starting college in a few weeks. You should at least *feel* as if you have a place of your own.”

“Thank you.” I gave her a quick hug, fighting back tears. I understood all too well how good memories could be worse than the bad ones. Those were the ones worth grieving for. My attention drifted back to the third-story window as I imagined all the memories trapped within the walls.

I peeled back the draping vines and stared at an old porch swing. White paint flaked off old boards. *Would it hold me?* I didn’t weigh *that* much. Deciding against it, I gave the wooden seat a shove with my foot and listened to the rhythmic creaking as I followed Mom inside.

I did a quick scan of the cracked plaster walls and the wavy window glass. Thick black skid marks stained the red brick fireplace surround and the chipped mantle. My footsteps kicked up miniature dust clouds, and I almost hacked up a lung breathing them in. The place reeked of mildew and old people and reminded me of an old black-and-white horror movie. “You call this renovated?”

“It *was* renovated.” Mom flipped a switch, lighting a grungy crystal chandelier and bathing the shadows in a warm glow.

I spun around to take in my surroundings. I knew it was my grandmother’s summer house, so I wasn’t surprised the place came completely furnished. But white sheets draped the furniture like the ghosts of summers past, and several layers of dust coated every surface. I wondered if we could figure out how long the house had been vacant by counting the layers—like carbon-dating dinosaurs or something. “When? In the last century. Or the one before that? How old is this place, anyway?”

“Over a hundred years old. Maybe two.” Mom eased back a sheet to reveal a gray linen sofa with rolled arms and plump cushions. “I remember work being done years ago,

but that was probably before you were born. And when Grandma got sick back in 2002...” That devastated look washed over Mom’s face again. “Well, I can’t say if anyone bothered to air out the house after that. Your grandmother was the glue that held the family together.”

I understood glue. Dad had been our glue, and his loss had the three of us clinging to each other to keep from breaking apart.

The sound of thundering feet from above shook the house just before Josh came barreling down the stairs. He charged through the glittering dust motes hanging in the waning rays of daylight, scattering them to the air. “I call the third floor!”

I had no idea how he’d made it up there without us seeing him. “Too late, peanut. Mom already said I could have it.”

“No fair! I got there first. I already wrote my name in the dust!”

I bit back a laugh.

“Sorry, Josh. I guess you’ll have to share the second floor with me.” Mom caught Josh at the bottom of the stairs and wrapped her arms around his middle. She pretended to eat the side of his face as she towed him toward the car to get his bags, leaving me to explore on my own.

I ran my finger through the thick layer of dust on the mahogany handrail as I made my way up the stairs. Some long-lost memory must have come dislodged because my feet knew exactly where to take me, and before I realized it, I stood in a doorway, staring at my new bedroom. Or maybe suite would be a better description.

I didn’t blame Josh for wanting dibs on this room. For an attic space, it was pretty amazing. Polished wood floors. An antique iron bed with what looked like handmade quilts and feather pillows. A glossy dark wood dresser and mirror. And the cherry on my

bedroom sundae—a carved marble fireplace. *I could get used to this.*

Josh must have already uncovered the furniture because a pile of white sheets lay in the corner, and I couldn't find even a sprinkling of dust anywhere but the floor, where Josh had scrawled his name in giant block letters—*JOSHUA DAVID FLYNN, MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE.*

The little idiot.

After swiping my sneaker through the message, I wandered through the space to find the bathroom. White marble subway tile covered the room from floor to ceiling. The glossy claw-foot tub took up one side of the room, and the dainty pedestal sink and toilet shared the other. There was even an ornate silver mirror over the vanity. It couldn't have been more perfect.

With one last lingering gaze at the tub, I left the bathroom and continued my exploration.

Behind the bedroom door was another, smaller door that led to a tiny yet hugely creepy unfinished attic space running the length of the dormer. It was more like a long, narrow closet with a low, slanted ceiling, filled from end to end with dusty furniture and a few old trunks. I squeezed into the little room and peeked into the closest trunk.

Clothes. I ran my fingers over the cool, slippery skirt of a vintage floral dress. It looked like something straight out of *Downton Abbey*. Mom had forced me to sit through the first two seasons on Netflix, but I'd refused to admit I actually liked it. I closed the trunk and backed out of the closet, wondering how much I could get for the old clothes on eBay. Hopefully, enough for a down payment on a car.

As the exhaustion from the day finally caught up to me, I sank into the downy

mattress as if falling into a cloud.

Oh, yes. I could definitely get used to this.

Loud honking wrenched me from my own personal utopia, and I shuffled to the dirty window to peek out. The sun had slipped below the horizon, and the streetlights were coming on, but the two men and their truck had pulled into the driveway and were already unloading our stuff. “Impressive.”

I used the sleeve of my sweatshirt to wipe away some of the thick grime coating the window. That’s when I noticed the guy leaning against the lamppost across the street. He couldn’t have been much older than me—dressed all in black, from his leather jacket to his Doc Martens, with artfully disheveled dark, wavy hair and a sexy crooked smile.

A warm prickle started at the base of my skull and worked its way down my spine. I cupped my hands against the glass to peer down at him. It had to have been too dark in my room for him to see me, but I could have sworn his eyes locked with mine. I almost wanted to wait for the sun to come up to see if he'd catch fire... or sparkle. The guy was *that* hot.

“What are you doing in my room?”

I squealed and spun around to face the wrath of my brother. His blue eyes narrowed—the same sapphire-blue eyes as Dad’s—and his stick arms crossed angrily over his loose-fitting Orioles jersey, the signed Cal Ripken jersey Dad gave him, if I wasn’t mistaken. The thing hung on him like a tarp, but he rarely took it off these days. If he hadn’t scared the life out of me, I would have found his fury hilarious. “Sorry, peanut. Mom said I could have it.”

“Josh... stop bothering your sister, and come get your boxes.” Mom’s voice carried up the three flights of stairs.

"I *will* get my revenge." With one last death glare in my direction, he spun on his heels, grumbling to himself as he stomped out of my room and down the stairs.

As soon as I was sure he wasn't coming back, I whirled to the window and the mysterious guy below.

But he was gone.