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Sarah Addison Allen

First Frost

A Novel



# First Frost



*SARAH ADDISON ALLEN*

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*To the magical Andrea Cirillo  
For your faith in a strange little garden book*

# 1



**B**ay Waverley-Hopkins raced down Pendland Street, her backpack bouncing and her dark hair flying behind her like blackbirds. The neighborhood homeowners always knew when she ran by, because they suddenly felt the desire to organize their sock drawers and finally replace those burned-out lightbulbs they'd been meaning to. We need to set things in order, they all thought as Bay ran down the street every afternoon after school. But, as soon as she passed, their thoughts quickly drifted back to where they'd been before—what was for dinner, why was a husband so moody lately, could a load of laundry wait another day.

Bay sped up as she approached the Waverley house. It was a rambling old Queen Anne with a wraparound porch and, Bay's favorite thing about it, a single, lovely turret. It had

been the first house built in the neighborhood in the late 1800s, before even Orion College was founded, back when Bascom, North Carolina, had been nothing more than a muddy rest stop for people traveling through to the western mountains. The surrounding houses on the street had later tried to imitate the Waverley house in architecture, but nothing could ever compare. At least, not to Bay.

Instead of taking the steps from the sidewalk to the house, Bay ran up the steep lawn, sliding on the wet grass. Last night it had rained in sheets and strong winds had finally blown autumn into Bascom as if by the sharp sweep of a broom. There was a discernible chill in the air now, and wet leaves were everywhere—in yards, on the sidewalks, in the street, stuck on cars. It looked like the world was covered in a cobbler crust of brown sugar and cinnamon.

Bay hung her backpack on one of the bare branches of the tulip tree in the front yard, and it was still swinging as she took the front porch steps two at a time and opened the door.

The outside world might have finally turned into autumn, but inside the Waverley house it still smelled of summer. It was lemon verbena day, so the house was filled with a sweet-tart scent that conjured images of picnic blankets and white clouds shaped like true-love hearts.

Maybe it was Bay's imagination, but the house always seemed to preen a little when she entered, the dim windows shining a little brighter, the quilts straightening themselves on the backs of couches. Bay's mother said that Bay loved this place too much, that she was a lot like her great-

grandmother Mary that way. Bay had never met her great-grandmother Mary, but all the same, she knew that her mother wasn't giving her a compliment. Her mother had never truly felt at home growing up here.

Trying to catch her breath from her autumn dash, Bay walked through the foyer, past the sitting room decorated with the same old furniture from when her great-grandmother Mary ran a boardinghouse here, and into the large renovated commercial kitchen. Her sneakers, almost covered by the frayed hems of her baggy jeans, squeaked against the polished floor.

The air in the kitchen was heavy with sugary steam. Bay found her quiet aunt Claire at one of the stoves, her short, dark hair pulled back with mismatched clips belonging to Claire's nine-year-old daughter, Mariah. Claire's shoulders were tense from stirring and pouring the sugar and water and corn syrup, in the same position, in the same large, copper sugar pots, into the same molds, every day for months now.

Her aunt Claire used to run a successful catering business, Waverley's Catering. What Claire could do with the edible flowers that grew around the cranky apple tree in the backyard was the stuff of legend. Everyone knew that if you got Claire to cater your anniversary party, she would make aioli sauce with nasturtiums and tulip cups filled with orange salad, and everyone would leave the party feeling both jealous and aroused. And if you got her to cater your child's birthday party, she would serve tiny strawberry cupcakes and candied violets and the children would all be well

behaved and would take long afternoon naps. Claire had a true magic to her cooking when she used her flowers. Each Waverley had something *different* about her, but Claire was the most unusual in a family of unusu-als. And Bay loved that about her.

But everything changed when Claire started Waverley's Candies less than a year ago. Last winter, Claire had been desperately looking for something to soothe her daughter Mariah's sore throats, ones that made Mariah lose her voice and kept her home from school for days on end. Rooms became tight when Mariah was sick, like the house wringing its hands. One day, when Claire had been fretting over another bout of Mariah's laryngitis, she heard something fall in her kitchen office, and she walked in to see that one of her grandmother Mary's old kitchen journals had fallen to the floor. That's when Claire found the hard candy recipe, tucked between instructions on how to rid the garden of shiny green beetles, and ingredients for husband-catcher cake.

The candies soothed her daughter's throat, and then became the newest thing everyone in town had to try. If it came from a Waverley, after all, there had to be something curious about it. When mothers at school heard about the candy, they found themselves knocking on Claire's door at two in the morning, bleary-eyed and desperate for something to ease sore throats that were keeping their children (and therefore the mothers) up all night.

When winter passed, the candies—beautiful, jewel-colored confections the size of wren's eggs and covered with powdered sugar—began to be asked for as add-on orders for



birthday celebrations Claire catered, then as bulk orders for trendy candy bars at graduations and weddings. It was at Lux Lancaster's wedding at Harold Manor, where the gift bags all contained small jars of Claire's honey-filled lavender hard candies, that Lux's cousin's girlfriend, who worked for *Southern Living* magazine, first tasted them. She wrote an article about the magical light purple drops on her plane trip back to Alabama, the words pouring out like water. She barely remembered writing the piece, feeling euphoric and a little drunk. When the article appeared in the magazine, then was shared through social media, orders began to flood in. People outside of Bascom were now curious about this curious candy, curious about the curious Claire Waverley who made them.

With her catering business, Claire used to hire help for bigger parties, but did the rest by herself. Her catering business had been the only size it could have been, just big enough for her to handle. But her candy business was getting so much attention now that it was busting at the seams. Bay worked for her aunt Claire every day after school. And Claire had another employee, a culinary student from Orion College named Buster, who was putting in so many hours that he was almost full-time.

And yet it always felt like they were running behind.

Changing from catering to candy had changed Claire, too. She was always tired, always working, and sometimes she would get this look on her face that was almost home-sick. But she never asked for help, and no one could approach her about it. One of many peculiar things about Claire was

that if she didn't want to talk about something, she could spring shut as quickly as a mousetrap.

When Bay walked into the kitchen that afternoon after school, Buster was talking, as he usually was. He could go on for hours, filling the kitchen with constant chatter that bounced off the stainless steel walls.

"So I told him his bread was ugly, and he called me a dough diva. *A dough diva*. Of all the nerve! We're going out on Saturday." Buster was tall and full-lipped with cropped hair that was dyed blue at the tips. When he finally noticed Bay had arrived, he stopped sifting the fine powdered sugar over a large batch of hard candies, just popped from their molds. "Hello, beautiful. Took the late bus again? I was just telling Claire about a guy I met in bread class. I hate him, but he could be my soul mate."

"Dough diva?" Bay asked. "I like it."

"I'm *so tired* of bread. I can't wait for next semester, when we do things with meat. What does your T-shirt say today?" Buster asked Bay. Bay showed him and he read, "'I Have Not Yet Begun to Procrastinate.' Oh, please. You probably had all your homework done before the bus dropped you off. Do you have any big plans this weekend? I hear there's a Halloween dance at your school on Saturday. Are you going with anyone special?" He wagged his eyebrows, one of them pierced.

Bay felt her face get hot, so she turned away and crossed the kitchen. She washed her hands and put on an apron.

Claire watched her, but didn't say a word. Unlike with Bay's mother, Bay had a silent understanding with her aunt

Claire. Claire understood things about Bay without Bay having to say a word. Two months ago, when Bay had walked into this kitchen after her first day of tenth grade, her first year in high school after the purgatory that was junior high, Claire had known something had happened. Bay's mother had, too, but in a vague way. Claire had honed in on the problem right away and had asked, "Who is he?"

"No. No one special," Bay said to Buster, still turned away from him. "I'm just helping with the dance decorations."

"A face like that and the boys aren't falling over you." Buster tsked. "I don't understand it."

"If you were from here, you would," Bay said.

"Oh, *please*. Everyone in this town always says that, like you have to be *born* here to understand things. I understand plenty. You're only as weird as you want to be. Okay," Buster said to Claire, taking off his apron, "now that reinforcements are here, I'm off to my shift at the market."

"How many jobs do you have now?" Bay asked him.

"Just three."

"And yet you still have time to date?"

He rolled his eyes. "Like it's that hard. Bye, girls!" he said as he walked out of the kitchen. Seconds later, they heard him yell, "The front door won't open again! I'm trapped! I'm going to die in this house, having never known true love! Oh, wait. Now it's open. Oil your hinges!"

After the door closed, Claire turned to Bay. "I've been thinking. I could make something for you. To give to the boy, the one you like," she said, careful not to mention his

name. “I could make mint cookies, and tea with honeysuckle syrup. Mint to clear his thoughts and honeysuckle to help him see. He’ll be sure to notice you then.”

Bay shook her head, though she’d considered it dozens of times, sometimes just because she wanted her aunt to cook something that wasn’t hard candy again. “I doubt he would eat anything I gave him. He would know it came from you.”

Claire nodded in understanding, though she seemed a little disappointed.

Bay suddenly put her hand to her chest, as if she just couldn’t take it anymore, as if there were a knot there, all sinewy and hard, pressing against her rib cage. Sometimes it was an actual, physical *ache*. “Is it always like this?”

“You should talk to your mother,” Claire said simply, her dark eyes calm and sympathetic. As different as they were in looks, in temperament, in *everything*, Claire and Bay’s mother talked every day. Sometimes, when Bay would walk into the living room at home, she’d find her mother, Sydney, leafing through hair magazines, the phone at her ear, saying nothing. No sound came from the phone either.

“Who are you talking to?” Bay would ask.

“Claire,” her mother would answer.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“We’re just spending some time together,” her mother would say, shrugging.

The Waverley sisters hadn’t been close as children, but they were as thick as thieves now, the way adult siblings often are, the moment they realize that family is actually a choice. Bay didn’t know many particulars about their child-

hood. But from listening to conversations through open windows and behind couches as a child—the only way she'd been able to learn any of the good stuff—Bay had gleaned that they were basically orphans. Their mother, a wild, lost soul, had brought them here to the Waverley house when Claire had been six and Sydney a newborn. They had been raised by their reclusive grandmother Mary. Claire had embraced everything Waverley as easily as breathing, but Sydney had rejected the notion that she was anything but normal until much later in life.

And, as magical as her mother was, Bay *still* wasn't sure she totally accepted it. It was one of many reasons Bay felt closer to her aunt.

Regardless, it was just a matter of time before Claire told Bay's mother about the boy.

"I don't think Mom would understand," Bay said.

"She would understand. Trust me."

"You know me better than she does."

Claire shook her head. "That's not true."

Bay turned to look out the window over the sink. The back garden was surrounded by a tall iron fence covered in honeysuckle vine two feet thick in places, and topped by pointy finials, like that of an old cemetery. She couldn't see the tree, but she knew it was there. That always gave her a small measure of comfort.

"It's finally getting cold. When will the apple tree bloom?" she asked. It was autumn, and the only time the strange apple tree in the Waverley's backyard, the one that had been there long before the house was built, was dormant. For no

reason anyone could explain, the tree bloomed all winter, then it produced small pink apples all spring and into the summer. Some of Bay's fondest memories were of lying under the apple tree in the summer while Claire gardened and the apple tree tossed apples at her like a dog trying to coax its owner into playing catch. But as fall approached, the tree would lose its leaves overnight, and then it could do nothing but shake its bare branches miserably until the first frost of the season startled it back awake. The entire family felt its frustration.

"The almanac is calling for first frost on Halloween this year," Claire said. "A week from Saturday."

"That's late. Later than I ever remember. Will you have a party?" Bay asked hopefully.

"Of course," Claire said, kissing the top of Bay's head as she passed. Copper pot in hand, she began to pour the tart, yellow, lemon verbena candy syrup into small round molds to harden. "We always celebrate first frost."

On the day the tree bloomed in the fall, when its white apple blossoms fell and covered the ground like snow, it was tradition for the Waverleys to gather in the garden like survivors of some great catastrophe, hugging one another, laughing as they touched faces and arms, making sure they were all okay, grateful to have gotten through it. It was a relief, putting their world back in order. They always got restless before first frost, giving their hearts away too easily, wanting things they couldn't have, getting distracted and clumsy and too easily influenced by the opinions of others. First frost meant letting go, so it was always reason to celebrate.

Everything was okay after that.

To Bay, the day couldn't get here soon enough.

Because the way things had been building up lately, there was a lot that could go wrong between now and then.

After working a few hours for her aunt, Bay left at dusk and cut through neighborhoods and backyards, heading toward downtown Bascom.

As she approached the green in the center of town, she immediately noticed an old man standing in the park alone, a beat-up, hard leather suitcase on the ground next to him.

There was something magnetic about him. He had a self-contained, silent confidence, as if a simple glance or a smile from him would feel like a secret he knew that would change your life, would change everything. Maybe he was a preacher or a politician or a salesman.

Bay considered it for a moment. Yes, definitely a salesman.

From across the street, Bay stopped to stare, a tendency she tried to curb because she knew it bothered people. Once, when she had stared too long at a woman in the grocery store, the woman had become angry and said to Bay, "I belong with him. He's going to leave his wife. Don't try to tell me otherwise." This had startled Bay because, number one, she'd had no idea Ione Engle was having an affair and, number two, she'd simply been staring at the tiny twigs caught in Ione's hair as, just an hour before, Ione had been rolling around the riverbank with another woman's husband. But

people were always suspicious, because that was Bay's gift. Or curse, as her mother would say. Bay knew where things belonged. Just as her aunt Claire's gift was with the food she made from the edible flowers from the Waverley garden. And her mother's gift was her uncanny way with hair, how a cut from her could inexplicably turn your day around. Bay could put away silverware in a house she'd never been to before, in exactly the correct drawer. She could watch strangers in parking lots, and know exactly which cars they were walking to.

Bay watched the old man, his hands in his pockets, as he took in everything around him with a steady gaze—downtown Bascom's touristy stores, the fountain on the green where college kids would sometimes hang out. His eyes lingered curiously on the outdoor sculpture by the fountain, which had been made by the winning art student from Orion. The sculpture changed every year. This year it was an eight-foot-high, ten-foot-wide cement bust of the founder of Orion College, Horace J. Orion. The huge gray cement head was half buried in the grass, so that only the top of the head—from the nose up—was visible. Horace J. Orion looked like he was returning from the dead, peering out from under the ground, taking stock, before deciding if it was really worth the effort. It was actually pretty funny, this giant head in the middle of downtown. Local fervor had died down in the months since its installation, but it was still a source of conversation when gossip became thin.

The wind had died down, but the stranger's silver hair



and trouser cuffs were moving slightly, as if he had attracted what little breeze left to him, the way birds flock to seed.

His light, silvery eyes finally landed on Bay. There was a road between them but, strangely, all the cars seemed to have disappeared. He smiled, and it was just as Bay had suspected. It was as if he could tell her everything she wanted to hear.

“I was wondering,” the man called to her in a pearly voice, “if you could tell me where Pendland Street is?”

Bay paused at the coincidence. She had just come from the Waverley house on Pendland Street. Pendland Street was long and winding and contained the oldest homes in Bascom, rambling, shabby-chic houses that tourists like to see. He could belong at any number of them. She looked at his old suitcase. Maybe at the inn on the street.

She pointed back the way she had come.

“Thank you,” the man said.

Cars suddenly appeared again, racing down the busy downtown street, obscuring her view. She jogged to the nearby newspaper box and climbed on top of it, steadying herself with the lamppost beside the box.

But the green was empty now. The man had disappeared.

As Bay stood there on the box, a blue Fiat drove by. Inside were the upper-crust girls from Bay’s high school—Trinity Kale, Dakota Olsen, Riva Alexander and Louise Hammish-Holdem. Louise leaned out the window and yelled to Bay in a singsongy voice, “We’re going to Josh’s house! Do you want us to give him another *note* from you?”

Bay, used to this, just sighed as she watched the car drive

on. Then she jumped down from the newspaper box and walked to her mother's hair salon across from the green.

When she entered the salon, she saw her mother deep in conversation with her last appointment. Sydney was thirty-eight, but looked younger. She was a confident dresser, her preferences leaning toward shorts paired with striped tights and midcentury vintage dresses. Her skin was smooth and her hair was a delicious caramel blond—usually. Today, Bay could swear there were new, electric shadows of red in it, ones that hadn't been there that morning.

Bay dropped her backpack behind the reception desk where Violet, her mother's new (totally ineffective) receptionist was fast asleep in her chair. She was even snoring slightly. Bay took a tattered paperback out of her backpack and held it up for her mother to see, then she hitched her thumb at the door, telling her mother that she'd be outside reading.

Sydney nodded and gave Bay a look that had *driver's ed* written all over it. She'd been nagging Bay about signing up for driving lessons for months now. But Bay didn't want to learn to drive. If she did, there was no telling what sort of embarrassment she'd cause herself before first frost. No, she was fine walking and taking the bus to her aunt Claire's house and waiting for her mother to get off work in the evenings.

Too much freedom was a dangerous thing for a girl in love.

"Take your phone. I'll call you if I get through early," Sydney said, and Bay grudgingly went back to her backpack and took out her phone and put it in her pocket.

Her mother said she was, quite possibly, the only teenager in the world who didn't like talking on the phone. That wasn't necessarily true. It was just that no one but her mother called her.

Bay walked across the green, wondering for a moment where that strange elderly man had gone, and considering going back to her aunt Claire's house to see if that's where he'd ended up. But doing that would mean she couldn't walk over to Josh Matteson's house and back in time to leave after her mother's last appointment.

So she trekked through more backyards, then through the woods by the cold rush of the river, where the best homes in Bascom were. The new chancellor of Orion College lived there, as did a few doctors. And the Mattesons, who owned the largest manufactured housing plant in the state. Live in a double-wide? It was probably made here in Bascom, by the people who lived in this seven-bedroom Tudor. In the shadow of the half-bare trees, Bay climbed the hill that overlooked the Matteson's back lawn. She could see straight past where their pool had been covered for the season, to the hot tub and the open patio doors.

There were a lot of kids there already, some in the hot tub, some watching television in the sitting room off the patio. They were taking advantage of the fact that Josh Matteson's parents were away for the month. They were all trying a little too hard to look relaxed, like something they'd seen in a movie, but the truth was, none of them really belonged there.

The girls from the Fiat, for instance. Trinity Kale, whose

parents were divorcing, belonged in Florida with her grandparents. And Dakota Olsen wanted to be working on her college essay, because she clearly belonged at Princeton. Riva Alexander, just this shy of plump, always on the bottom of the cheerleader pyramid and always on a diet, wanted to be home, cooking. And Louise Hammish-Holdem, well, Bay couldn't tell exactly where Louise belonged, she just knew it wasn't here. That was high school in a nutshell. No one was where they belonged. They were all on their way to someplace else. It drove Bay crazy, and also made her something of an outcast, because Bay knew exactly where she belonged. She belonged here in Bascom.

With Josh Matteson.

She'd known about belonging in this town the moment her mother moved back here from Seattle when Bay was five years old. It was the fulfillment of a dream Bay had had a long time ago, a dream of lying under the apple tree in the Waverley garden, everyone happy, everyone in the right place. It took a while longer to realize that Josh was who she was supposed to be with. Bay and Josh had never had a chance to socialize, not until this year, when Bay finally entered high school, where Josh was now a senior.

Josh was sitting at a patio table, engaged in some animated conversation with another member of the soccer team. He was blond and beautiful and funny and good-hearted, but so clearly miserable that Bay was surprised no one else could see it. It radiated around him like smoke, like he was smoldering, slowly burning away.

She belonged with him. That alone was hard enough to

bear. But the fact that she knew he also belonged with her, that he was on a path he wasn't meant for, was excruciating. Getting him to believe that was the hardest thing she'd ever tried to do. She'd made a fool of herself two months ago, writing that note to him, giving herself a reputation she didn't really need, on top of being a Waverley. So she kept her distance now.

She finally understood that, no matter how hard you try, you can't make someone love you. You can't stop them from making the wrong decision.

There was no magic for that.

Late that evening, Claire Waverley woke up and shivered. The bedroom window in the second-floor turret was open, letting in cold air. The chill hovered above the bed, twinkling in tiny white stars she could almost reach up and touch.

She got up quietly and went to the window to remove the board her husband, Tyler, had used to prop it open. Last night's big rain had finally blown colder weather into town, following a particularly scorching Indian summer. Outside, the neighborhood streetlights glowed in a blue haze, the way a warm glass will haze over when put in the refrigerator.

Claire looked over her shoulder at Tyler, blankets kicked off of him, his bare chest emanating heat in waves. He never got cold. The man even wore his Birkenstocks, without socks, all year round.

"I'm going to finish up some work," she said softly. The

words barely took form, because she didn't want to wake him up. If he woke up, he would draw her back into bed with him, telling her that it could wait until morning.

She turned, just missing Tyler opening his eyes as soon as she left.

But he didn't stop her.

They had been married for almost ten years now, and Claire would still wonder, when she was tired and particularly short of temper, why he was still here, why he still loved her so much. He wasn't from here—he'd moved to take a job here at Orion College a decade ago, a time in Claire's life she always referred to as the Year Everything Changed—so he'd never fully invested in all of Bascom's superstitions and eccentricities. He'd never put much stock in the fact that everyone in town believed there were things about the Waverleys that couldn't be explained. In fact, deep down, she knew he didn't believe in any of it. He loved what *wasn't* special about her. Her hair, her laugh, even the way she walked. And it was confounding. Who she was without her gift was someone she couldn't even imagine. Being a Waverley, she used to think, back in the old days, back when she was alone, was her one redeeming quality.

She loved him with a force that could bring tears to her eyes, and the thought of losing him felt like standing on the edge of an endless black pit, about to fall in.

She shook her head as she walked down the hall. She was catastrophizing again. Tyler wasn't going anywhere. She knew her husband was as patient and happy as a leaf in the wind, blowing in whatever direction Claire went. But Claire had

long ago realized, even after those constant dreams of her mother leaving faded away, that when you are abandoned as a child, you are never able to forget that people are *capable* of leaving, even if they never do.

Claire stopped at the end of the hall. She opened their daughter Mariah's bedroom door and saw that Mariah's window was open, too. Mariah was sleeping in a position similar to Tyler's, arms and legs outstretched, like she was dreaming of floating in warm water. She was so much like her father, and so little like Claire, that sometimes Claire thought it felt like loving another piece of him, wholly unattached from herself.

She picked up Mariah's ballet clothes and backpack as she crossed the room, looking around and feeling her child's normalcy like a crossword puzzle clue that made no sense to her. Mariah had wanted a pink room, perfect pink, the shade of watermelon cake frosting. She had wanted white furniture and a tufted princess comforter. She hadn't wanted old wallpaper or antiques or handmade quilts. Her daughter took ballet and gymnastics and was always invited to sleepovers and birthday parties. She even made friends easily. Just this week, she'd said she made a new best friend named Em, and Em was now all she talked about. That kind of normalcy never came so easily to a Waverley. And yet, here Mariah was, as normal as her father, as happy as he was, as oblivious to the eccentricities of Claire and this house as he was.

She reached the open window in Mariah's room and pulled it down. She thought of all she needed to do

downstairs. She would make sure all her Friday candy orders were boxed and labeled. Then she would answer business emails in her office and save them in a draft folder to send during business hours so no one would know she was awake at 2:00 A.M., worrying about things that didn't need to be worried about.

Everyone was excited about Waverley's Candies, how much it was growing, how it was bringing so much attention to Bascom. Tyler, his brows raised when he'd found out what the profit margin had been over the summer, happily remarked that the new business was definitely good for Mariah's college fund. And even Claire had to admit that it was thrilling—seeing the Waverley name on the candy labels for the first time; the unfamiliar, but not unpleasant, jangle of nerves the moment she truly realized there were untold numbers of people out there, buying something she'd made. Claire. A Waverley. It was so different from catering, no longer personal, opening her talent up to a wider pool. It felt like the precipice of something big, and she wasn't immune to the idea of success. In fact, she was overcome with it, putting all her effort into the candy, thinking how proud her grandmother would have been. Grandmother Mary had been an intensely withdrawn woman who had sold her wares—her mint jellies and secret-love custard pies and rose geranium wine—only to people who would come to her back door, like it was a secret to be kept by all.

But as first frost approached, bringing with it that noticeable uncertainty, Claire could no longer deny that something about Waverley's Candies was distinctly off.



When orders from gourmet grocery chains and specialty stores around the South flooded in after the *Southern Living* article, Claire couldn't keep up with making the flower essences that flavored the candy herself. The demand became too great for what she could harvest from her garden, so she'd had to quickly make the decision to buy the essences, instead of making them.

*And no one noticed.*

As the labels on the backs of the jars attested, the lemon verbena candies still quieted children and eased sore throats. The lavender candies still gave people a sense of happiness. And everyone still swore the rose candies made them think of their first loves.

But the candies now contained nothing from the Waverley garden, that mystical source of everything Claire held true.

In weaker moments, she found herself thinking, What if it wasn't real? What if Tyler was right and Waverleys were odd just because everyone had been told that for generations, because they just happened to live next to an apple tree that bloomed in the wrong time of year? What if the little girl Claire used to be, the one left here as a child, clinging to her grandmother Mary's apron, had latched on to the myth of this family simply because she'd so desperately wanted roots? What if the flowers weren't special? What if *she* wasn't? Instead of keeping the Waverley name local and mysterious like her grandmother, she'd opened it up to wider speculation. She'd wanted the attention, she'd wanted more people to know her gift, as if the more people who knew,

the more real it would be. But she'd begun to wonder if she had betrayed a secret her grandmother had entrusted her with.

It didn't help that, at this time of year, Claire felt the loss of her grandmother Mary the strongest. Claire had been twenty-four when she'd lost her. That had been twenty years ago, but Claire could still smell Mary's fig and pepper bread sometimes, and there were times she was sure Mary was still here, in the way a carton of soured milk would tip over into the sink, or the mixing bowls on the shelf would seem to coordinate themselves by color overnight. She missed how natural everything felt with her grandmother around, how substantial.

She stepped away from Mariah's window to go to the kitchen. She paused, then turned back. Across the street, on the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Kranowski's house, she thought she saw a shadow. She squinted, her nose almost pressed to the glass, and the shadow began to take form.

There was someone standing in the darkness between the streetlights. He was tall and wearing something light, like a gray suit. His hair was silver. Everything else was obscured, as if his skin were invisible.

But he was definitely staring in this direction.

She made sure Mariah's window was locked, then she quickly went downstairs and pulled a flashlight out of the drawer of the table by the door.

She unlocked the door and opened it, stepping onto the porch. The chilled floorboards made her toes curl.

There was no one across the street now.

“Hello?” she called.

She flicked on the flashlight and aimed the light on the front yard. A breeze flew through, picking up some leaves and swirling them around, the sound like fluttering pages in a quiet library. Mrs. Kranowski’s dog barked a few times. Then everything was quiet.

There was a scent of something familiar in the air, though, something she couldn’t quite place, a combination of cigarettes and stout beer and sweat and, strangely enough, cheap cherry lip gloss.

Everything meant something, in Claire’s experience. And this vision of a man made the hair on her arms stand on end.

First frost was always an unpredictable time, but this year it felt more . . . desperate than others.

Something was about to happen.