

A  
MILLSTONE  
FALLS  
NOVEL

THE  
PEOPLE  
YOU  
TRUST

K.T. GEORGE



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First Paperback Edition

*For those who have trusted the wrong person. For those rebuilding from the rubble, including the self-made kind. For those exhausted by a story they didn't write. For those struggling with the complicated grief of loving someone they shouldn't. You are not the worst thing you survived.*



She understands transformation better than most—what it takes,  
and what it costs. ~ K.T. George, on Rose Sullivan.



## CONTENT WARNING:

*This novel is a psychological thriller with dark romance elements. It sits with hard things. Some scenes may be difficult. Please take care while you read, especially if you are sensitive to pregnancy loss, suicidal ideation, or themes generally found in either genre. A longer note from me appears at the end of the book. ~ KTG*



# THE PEOPLE YOU TRUST

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## CHEF SULLY



**D**arkness swallowed the stage at Pigment's amphitheater. A single beam landed on the Ruby Relish guitarist, straddling a stool. The notorious alt-rock band was kicking off their reunion tour in Millstone Falls of all places. What was the draw of her new upstate New York hometown? Rose didn't care, didn't even really want to be there. Even though the music had mattered once.

His gnarled fingers stroked those six strings, the iconic acoustic chords hitting just right. She froze, the crowd roared, phones shot in the air. The world funneled down to vibrating nylon and memory. Her, in 2019, all swagger and celebrity. She was Chef Sully, face like a billboard, with a Michelin star and an attitude to match. Her show *Global Cuts* dominated reality TV, and restaurants across the Five Boroughs either begged for her camera crew or barred the doors.

She hit her weed pen, vape settling behind her eyes. Onstage, another strum sent a thousand voices bouncing off the Hudson. Like a switch flipped, she was back in her Jimmy Choos, present day, 2024. Face of a killer, all consequences and emotional scars. Just Rose Montgomery, accused murderer, Upstate transplant, and self-imposed shut-in. She hit the pen again, the Sour Diesel flavor sitting on her tongue.

Everyone knew the words, shouted them, because they were an anthem. To their youth, to a universal feeling of the time. That was the problem. Her universal feeling then? Falling in love with a monster. Dr. Finnegan Montgomery.

He'd been her neurosurgeon first. An on-call knight in blue

scrubs putting her back together after Central Park. A random attack that left her with a TBI and a permanent tremor. It was her shit luck the assailant left behind a full wallet and the latest smartphone, but chose to take something irreplaceable. The one thing that made her whole: being a chef.

She did gain a husband, though. A devil in Dior who forgot *Do No Harm* applied to everyone. Oath or not. The joke was on him. Because now he was a dead man, leaving behind nothing but blood, cuffs, and PTSD.

“There you are.” A voice tinged with the local accent came from behind, lips way too close, hot breath ghosting her ear.

She jumped. Situational awareness restored. Either she’d been mistaken for this guy’s date or he’d used the world’s worst pickup line. Then his arms locked her in place, mouth brushing the curve of her neck. That made the lines blur slightly, or perhaps that was the weed. Either way, she went with it.

His drugstore aftershave was familiar. The musky edges like something a dad would wear to church on Sunday. Unlike Mark, her forever crush. His scent was singular, mouthwatering. Coveted. They’d danced this way once when she was eighteen. Bodies synced, skin alive with electricity. Safe. Always safe.

Perceptive bastard, whoever he was, must’ve sensed her relaxing because he began singing along with the crowd. Tenderly. Talk about buzz kill. Finn used to make the words sound true too. But everything about him was pretense, conditional. Disobey and his interest vanished. That wasn’t affection. It was control, gift-wrapped in charm. What about this guy?

Mercifully, the song ended. She twisted, thinking their little dance was over. A pinch of harmless fun. An amuse bouche.

Then the drums started, the tempo shifted. Pummeling toms in a tribal rhythm. Each strike landed like a heartbeat. Once in the chest, once right in the feels. Pounding any resistance that had been building right into submission. Just like Finn taught her.

A thick thigh wedged between hers. The sea of spectators surged,

the whole scene rolling, not a soul watching. Guess they were doing this.

She looped her arm around his neck and pulled him in, body writhing with the music. Her lids slid shut. A fleeting fantasy where he could be Mark and it would cost nothing. The guilt-free version of something she'd never get to taste.

The cymbals mirrored the shimmering slide of the stranger's strong hands. Over her waist, under her shirt. Lower. She arched into the friction, denim against skin. A little rough, but it'd do the job.

"I knew you'd have a good time tonight, baby." His nose dragged down her ear, teeth grazing the lobe.

It'd been two long years since hands mapped her like this. Too bad the drought was ending with a placeholder. Did it really matter? This was one night. Grind, let go, goodbye.

The snare's rat-a-tat-tat mirrored his sharp touch. Her breath shallow, every pulse point thrumming beat for beat. The final crash hit, coil snapped. She unraveled.

"Aww, fuck." She wiped her brow. So much for guilt-free.

"Was never into drums." He clutched her hips. "Until now. Our song."

Another impossible Finn echo with a not-so-subtle message from the Universe: You are damaged goods, forever cursed to attract unstable creeps.

Time to dip, see if the mystery matched the mistake. She broke away and turned.

"Hello." A grin stretched wide, revealing straight white teeth and cappuccino-brown eyes reflecting the stage's glow. He ran a hand through tawny hair, biceps flexing, pecs jumping beneath a fitted black tee.

She pressed her lips tight and sought out an easy exit. The smart move would've been stopping him at the first whisper. But the music, the atmosphere . . . the soul ache that took root every time she thought of Mark all the way in Chicago. Together, they tipped the scales. She needed this release. A recalibration.

"Speechless, huh? You'll get used to it."

“The fuck?”

He reclosed the distance she'd just claimed. “Cain Hawkings.” He gave a slight nod.

“Great. Now I know what name to scream in therapy.” He was pretty. So was Finn. On the outside. Elderberries in full bloom, beautiful until ingested. Hello cyanide.

His brow lifted. “Seriously, Rose?”

Her name rolled off his tongue, as if tasting each syllable. She rocked back. Wouldn't be the first murder fanboy to slide into her life. She'd gotten letters. Even a proposal.

“Fan of the food, or the court case?”

Curling his fingers around her wrist, he tugged. Their shoe tips kissed. The stilettos she shouldn't have worn brought them eye to eye. In the culinary world, men measured her with looks of challenge, judgment, admiration. This one did it with proximity. Would she fight, flee, or fawn? His expression said it all. He was betting on surrender.

She chose fight. Turning toward his thumb, she yanked. He didn't let go.

It was no casual hold, just shy of bruising. He had her by that delicate spot where nerves flared fast. She clocked unfamiliar faces. Nobody so much as blinked.

“That's how you wanna play, *Chef Sully*?” His gaze raked over her. “Sure. Definitely a fan.” Whatever heat the summer air held evaporated.

His grip loosened, the illusion of choice settling between them. “Been a *pleasure*, Rose Sullivan. Or is it still Montgomery since . . .”

If playing the monster kept him from pursuit, she'd bare her teeth.

“ . . . I got away with murdering my husband?” She smirked. “Not for long.”

## CELEBRITY SCANDAL



Rose shoved through the throng of concertgoers. Her heart jackhammered louder than the band, stealing her breath. August's humidity absorbed the oxygen from the air. What little remained got sucked up by the over-capacity crowd. And Cain Hawkings' ghost.

His scent clung to her palate, cloying as rotting durian. His palms had traced the curve of her breasts, slick as spoiled raw chicken. The backless halter top that seemed a bold choice pre-concert now crawled over her skin like a second trap. Same as her own name on his lips.

She hit the weed pen again, driving those thoughts away. Bouncing off sweat-slicked bodies, she pushed inside. The converted pigment factory resembled a labyrinth: restaurant, multi-use spaces, private rooms. Slots, too. And a Minotaur named Cain lurking nearby. What it had that Crete's famous puzzle didn't? Three bars. One straight ahead.

Elbowing her way to a spot at the reclaimed wood counter, she waved to the bartender. "Macallan neat. Double. No, not that one. The 18-year."

Her upswept chignon left her neck as bare as her back, baiting glances from every direction. Some curious, others calculating. All of them, predatory. Including the pock-faced creeper who poured until she nodded *enough*.

Grasping the glass, the tremor in her right hand kicked in. The one that once wielded a chef's knife couldn't hold a drink steady. Five

years ago, Finn promised it was temporary. A side effect of getting clubbed in the head on her morning jog through Central Park. Another broken vow from the man who cut her open to heal her, then tore her apart without lifting a blade.

The whisky burned going down, but did nothing to mollify the edge. Her legs stayed tense, screaming *run*. She slipped a twenty under the empty Glencairn and turned, scanning the room. Ruby Relish's breakout hit blared from the speakers. Fans rushed toward the stage, clearing a path to the left. She took it.

The air was cooler in the dark hallway. Lingered paint fumes and stale beer hung heavy. The clamor behind her faded as the corridor's dimness closed in.

Swallowing hard, she drew her phone from her back pocket.

"Where the fuck did you go, Billie?"

Instead of Eamon's droopy jowls as the background, the screen flickered, then went blank. No Face ID or passcode prompt. Dead.

A reset didn't work. Didn't even display a low-battery warning. She swung it toward the wall, but stopped. "A thousand-dollar life-line, and it's fucking useless!" So was Billie.

In her little sister's book, reinvention equaled social engagement. "You need to get out, Rose. Burn those nasty yoga pants. Ruby Relish is playing! God, their one song at Mark and Sydney's reception—remember the awful brother/sister dance they forced us into? Poor Mark. What was that D.J. thinking?" She'd flashed her persuasive cognac-colored eyes. Weaponized by age two. In a house of four girls, manipulation-as-survival came before full-on sentences.

But Billie knew Rose's young adulthood could've been the band's complete anthology. Back when Chef Sully existed only on a vision board and Mark Mulrone was still an enigma. Between the nostalgia and Billie's nagging about her large group of friends making it easy to hide in plain sight, Rose caved. Yet the second they got there, little sister bailed. "Useless!"

At least Billie had gotten the hiding part right. Rose, alone in a packed venue. Phones in every hand. Ready to capture the face that went from Michelin to meme faster than flaming cherries jubilee.

Magazine covers, gossip sites, endless gif reactions. The masses loved a good celebrity crash and burn. That's why pre-dawn jogs listening to death metal and door deliveries were necessary.

Clenching her jaw, she choked on the scream rising in her throat, bare back pressed into cold bricks older than Nana Sully.

She used to love being seen. Her reality show, the perfect stage. Until the TBI. She might've pivoted to restaurants or her own *Top Chef* knockoff. But the pandemic cleared the board before she even had a chance to try.

Then came Finn's murder, the indictment, and the trial.

The acquittal meant nothing. Neither in the criminal case, nor the civil suit brought by his big, blended family, all hoping to cash in. Outside the courtroom, *not guilty* didn't equal innocent. It read as rich people immunity. Surely she must've skated thanks to Mark. Legal powerhouse, one-quarter owner of the firm responsible for her defense. Connected in the best ways. If that were true, she would've never been charged.

Whenever someone spat the word *murderer*, it scraped her insides like a cleaver grating down bone. No one wanted to see Dr. Finnegan Montgomery as an abuser. Especially not Clive Montgomery, *The Celtic Hammer*. The famed boxer, the infamous father, who had his own reputation skirting the headlines. A different mother for nearly every sibling, rumors of emotional and physical abuse. The façade made better clickbait. Finn as the perfect victim. Rose as the jealous pregnant wife. Exactly the narrative the masses thirsted for. One that kept the algorithm happy.

Tears swelled. When did Schadenfreude replace joy? She blinked them away. The floor became sand between her toes, the air, a balmy ocean breeze. A trick of the mind picked up on Instagram.

Exhaling, she tried the phone again. This time, it powered on. Unlocking it, she tapped Billie's contact.

Straight to voicemail.

"Damn it, Billie!" Socializing experiment over. Rose belonged behind closed doors. A heavy oak one. Where Eamon was probably stretched out waiting. In the battered Craftsman bungalow, half-

restored. Her house. Cozy pjs, an infinite loop of cooking shows, and twelve-year-old whisky. The nightly ritual. A lot of torture. A little oblivion.

Scuffling footsteps broke the silence. Could be Cain. That'd suck. No witnesses, no one to intervene. Could be someone else, someone worse. Neither option was ideal.

She bolted, heels ticking like a metronome across the wide-planked pine floors. Clanging steel ricocheted from all directions. She skidded to a stop, eyes clamping shut.

"Not now." Her throat tightened, sweat beaded. Rikers. Those metal bars sliding open and shut hundreds of times a day.

Shrill laughter bled through the brick. Was that here and now? Or then? She inhaled for five, paused, and exhaled. The layout of this place made less sense than a haunted maze, dead ends and all.

Two left turns and through a metal gate, she spotted an *Exit* sign. Flinging the door open, she stumbled into the parking lot just as packed as inside. Tailgaters and ticketless looky-loos clustered around the unending rows of cars. Was Billie among them?

She tapped *Call* a final time. Voicemail.

"Fine. Rideshare it is."

Jeers of '*Chef Sully*' echoed from a group huddled under a streetlight when the car arrived. She slid into the back seat. Cameras flashed. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she squeezed her lids tight, keeping the tears in check. "And this is why I don't leave the house."

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**BABY STEPS**

“Jesus, Rose!” Billie’s voice crackled through the speaker. “I’ve been losing my mind, picturing you zip-tied in some psycho’s mountain cabin. A name like ‘Petal’ carved into your collarbone. Next time? Text before you Copperfield during a ballad!”

Cain Hawkings gave off that serial killer vibe.

“I’m not the one who dipped. Leaving me alone. Drowning in denim, despair, and deeply questionable choices.”

“Sorry. I *was* there. Watching you make out with your trauma. Then, Em and Sam dragged me to the slot machines, where I got emotionally invested in a digital leprechaun. Intense.”

“Well, I hope it put out, because I really needed you.”

Billie sighed. “Are you home?”

“Yep. No thanks to you.” Rose sipped a whisky. “Took an Uber.” Tongue clicking, she patted the spot on the couch beside her. “Eamon’s ecstatic. It’s good to be missed.”

He didn’t budge; just grumbled and flopped by his empty dish.

She slapped the cushion louder. “I’m his whole world. Ready to defend me at will.”

“Ha! The only thing that dog’s ready for is the next bowl of kibble.”

“Pfft. As if I’d feed my angel processed food.”

“Okay, Sarah McLachlan. Can you feel my eye roll? Anyway, back to you. What happened? Were you caught in the brawl?”

Rose set down her glass, fingers petting the armrest instead. “Brawl? No. I bailed after the third . . . maybe fourth song.”

She wasn’t willing to unpack Cain. Or hear Billie’s take on it.

“Something *did* happen. Who needs to die tonight?”

“Mark says never to say shit like that. Even jokingly. Especially over the phone.” Rose pulled at her eyelashes, as if plucking the memories free. The old ones and the new. “Thank you, though. For always having my back. Without question.” She drained the rest of the drink. Silence. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah, waiting on Em and Sam. The women’s bathroom line is ten times longer than the men’s. Maddening! Once they’re done, we’re heading to Mullen’s Pub. Low stakes, offensively attractive bartenders, high probability of regret. Come?”

“Why? The bar was jamming when I left.”

“Because of the brawl! Geez, Rose, keep up! The owner, Cain Hawkings, is kicking everyone out. Called in the cavalry for the assist. Bet it’ll be front-page news by morning.”

Rose barked a quick laugh. “I’ll be damned! Prayers *do* get answered. Some other poor bastard bags the headline.” A fight definitely trumped a photo of Cain’s hand in her crotch. “Regardless, I appreciate tonight—pushing me. But it was too much, too soon. Being a has-been is messy. I’m pouring another whisky, then falling asleep to *The Great American Cookoff*.”

Billie tsked. “A has-been? Please. You’re freaking *Chef Sully*! Has-beens don’t earn Michelin stars or TV shows. Stop selling yourself short. Take a page from Ivy’s journal—she turned her crash landing from med school to moon water. Farmers’ market witchery wasn’t on anyone’s bingo card, but she made it work.”

Rose tucked a leg beneath her, twisting a loose pajama thread. Ivy. A year shy of her DO and blam. A mystery illness nearly claimed her. Now, she was thirty-eight, still living with Mom and Dad, pitching new-age tonics to a devoted following across Chicagoland. And surprisingly killing it.

“If the money runs out, I might boomerang to Evanston. Join Ivy.

Sully's Pro Series Kitchen Essentials are still a hot buy. We can be spinster sisters."

Imagine—her, a Michelin-starred chef, under a canopy tent, peddling cookware? That stung worse than any insult. She hadn't clawed her way to culinary fame to become a footnote in someone's cart.

"Who am I kidding? It's exactly where I'm headed."

"Listen, hiding isn't healing." Billie's tone sobered. "You used to be brave as fuck. Resurrection time. Baby steps, but like actual steps. Not pajama steps."

She had a point. Rose had been fearless. Trying to meet standards Sydney set for all of them. Earn that elusive self-worth. A decade abroad, chasing a dream, perfecting the craft. Mastering sauces as complex as chemistry experiments. Creating bold new ones good enough to mark her a prodigy. Ivy called it destiny. Constellation woo. Leos were natural attention seekers, craving the spotlight, the applause. It made sense. Losing everything shattered Rose. Without her career, her identity, what was left?

"Hey, the girls are here. Gotta run. Glad you're not chained in Mountain Marty's kill shack. Deadbolt the doors. Sleep."

"Mountain Marty? You have *got* to stop watching True Crime."

"Not until you stop living it, sister!" Billie's shameless snort came through loud and clear. "We'll try again tomorrow. Zephyr Wilson's gallery show, remember? Mixed media, creepy art? You'll fit right in. We'll glow up. Like the princesses we were born to be." She murmured to someone in the background. "Hey, jokes aside, I'm proud of you. You went tonight. Hurt a little, but you did it. A micro win. Tomorrow, another."

"I don't know, Billie—"

"You'll love it. Or hate it. Either way, you're leaving the house. Deal?"

"Ugh. No promises. Go. Make good choices. Thanks for checkin' in. Love you."

Ending the call, she rubbed her watery eyes. Poured a dram, its smoky scent teasing her tastebuds. Billie's advice echoing . . . *Baby*

*steps*. Sounded simple. Yet here she sat, stuck on a couch. Alone. Did she have to be?

Cain Hawkings said her name as if it mattered. As if *she* mattered. Dangerous enough to be attractive. Attractive enough to be dangerous. Powerful, too. Billie mentioned he *owned* the old factory. Renovating the massive complex took money. Millions. For a small town, struggling to stay relevant, that kind of investment in Millstone bought influence. And becoming involved with someone influential had consequences.

As a pressure test, she leaned into the scene from the concert. Cain's hands roaming, caressing. But it didn't hold. The build. The way he moved. His cheap ass cologne—all wrong. None of it Mark's. Who it should've been. Who it was. *In her head*. Star of every fantasy since age eighteen.

She missed him. Missed their connection. Her best friend. Ride or die.

Sydney's mistake was trusting Rose not to fall for her husband. He made it impossible. Saving her. Dropping everything in Chicago. Bringing Mickey Gallagher, his partner. The finest damn defense attorney in the country. Writing legal fees off as pro bono. Because Mickey, the firm, couldn't buy the exposure her case gave them. Mark's reasoning.

And he stayed. Through every unraveling day. Five hundred and fourteen of them. From arrest to the civil verdict. Long after any obligation.

Moments when she begged to disappear, he kept her grounded. When blind rage replaced reason, he answered with resolve. Bound together in forced proximity. Twenty-four-seven. Safe. Regulated. Made imagining a world where they were more, too easy.

Now, she was just a table set for one.

An emptiness stirred deep inside. It wasn't only touch she craved. But being seen. Like a Niçoise salad, layered and vibrant, each ingredient recognized. Valued. Being chosen, even on the worst days. Like handmade pasta, imperfect and tender, shaped by effort. Being

wanted. Like dark chocolate ganache, rich and unapologetic, impossible to resist.

Her stomach growled. Spell broken. “A chef’s mind—making a menu out of anything.” Eamon let out a pitiful groan from the floor. “Oh, gods. You need to eat, too, huh? What’s it gonna be, boy? Scrambled eggs? Leftover chicken?”

She plodded into the kitchen, stepping around tools littering the great room. After her career crumbled, two years of financial limbo bleeding her dry, Millstone made sense. Billie had already put down roots. Moving close to family, finding a house that required as much work as her psyche, seemed perfect. In theory.