

Asylum

a dark suspense saga by Kathryn Orzech

~ ONE ~

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MARGARET ROSA DELITO should have known the day would come to a grim end. She had a sense about things like that, important things, life and death things.

She lived a deliberate life centered on one purpose—to erase the memories of her dark days.

From the second floor of Delito, Inc.'s home office, Rosa descended the grand staircase with quiet grace, like she had nearly every day at 5:20 p.m. for more than sixty years. She paused at the atrium, sighing with a hypnotic stare through the lobby's wall of glass. Wispy clouds, blushed scarlet, drifted across a clear New England sky. The low sun warmed her face.

Her fingers tightened around the scrap of paper clenched in her disfigured hand. The newspaper masthead dated 1900 had been left on her desk during the night ... a cryptic message from someone connected to her past, someone employed at Delito. Secrets were bound to surface. Something wicked was sure to follow.

She'd sent her granddaughter to a meeting at their New York sales office and wondered how she fared. She had hoped to protect Laura, but if someone at Delito knew of its tarnished past, of the family's complicity and the source of her shame, she had to tell her everything. And she would. Tomorrow.

Rosa stashed the torn newspaper into her purse before buttoning her favorite cashmere coat. Outside, dried leaves clattered across the sidewalk in a gusty wind. The American flag fluttered like a beating heart, like her heart, pumping faster in a rhythm gone bad. Pressure in her chest forced the wind from her lungs like when she slammed to the ground that day long ago, that day when it all began.

As her heels tapped across the lobby's white marble tiles toward the exit, Rosa's recall skipped through memories of those times, in that place, that had tormented her life and haunted her dreams, like a phonograph needle scratching across damaged vinyl ... walk cold ... cold ... cold ...

My feet walk cold stone floors. I wear no shoes.

I feel my way along a wall. Fingers scrape its gritty surface and sand sprinkles on my feet. I sense a tunnel though I see nothing but darkness.

Dampness veils my skin and a foul taste, musty and bitter, settles in my throat.

I sneak toward a distant line of light where a door is cracked open. Voices inside. Moaning. Sobbing. Fear tightens its choking grip as I stand alone, knowing I must look into that room.

A chill crawls up the back of my neck. Cold. My hands tremble. My knees weaken as I creep toward the door to see ... Oh God ... Oh God ...

Be silent. Mustn't scream.

Gray ghosts ... Gray ghosts ...

Shhh ... They'll see you.

Pain burned through Rosa's left arm and her purse slipped from her fingers, landing with a thud. Her hand stretched out as if seeking support as she stumbled toward the sofa set against the wall.

I feel my way ...

Light dimmed as Rosa's skin grew clammy ...

Dampness veils my skin ... I hear voices ...

The receptionist bolted from her desk. "Ms. Delito, what's wrong?"

I stand alone ... My knees weaken ...

Clutching her chest, gasping for air, she collapsed to the floor in a dizzying yet elegant spiral. Her back braced against the sofa. Her legs sprawled before her like a rag doll propped against bed pillows.

Panic distorted the receptionist's features as she screamed, "Help! We need help out here!"

The girl advanced toward her, seeming to move in slow motion as if wading against wild water.

Is this how it ends? ...

Gray ghosts ... Gray ghosts ...

WITH THE NAME LAURA DELITO, my ego should have been bruised when the trades slammed Delito's new line of costume jewelry as "mediocre," but I was prepared for defeat. I'd lost my battle months ago when our COO Sam Bender, my stepfather, rejected my designs, which made me wonder why I'd been "invited" to a marketing meeting.

Our Manhattan sales office was the last place I wanted to be, but Gram had insisted. The office depressed me even on a good day. Nicks and scratches scarred the conference table. Chairs were lumpy and hard. A whitish rectangle framed by decades of grime marked the wall where a painting once hung. Something beautiful had been there, but now it was gone, like the short history of Delito, Inc. With an antiquated thermostat stuck at eighty degrees, coupled with last night's restless sleep, I could hardly keep my eyes open.

As much as the trades had tainted my company pride, I had to agree that "mediocre" pretty much summed it up. Competitors Napier, Monet, and Trifari had to be gleaming. The best news today—it wasn't my responsibility to sell the stuff.

I glanced at Michael Bryce who sat beside me. It wasn't his responsibility either. As Gram's right-hand man, he knew her daily routine better than I, though no relationship came close to the connection I shared with Gram. Michael had accompanied Sam and me from the home office in Barrows, Connecticut—and he was the only excitement in my mediocre life.

He leaned against me and whispered, "You look like you're somewhere else."

Even after a year of knowing him, his touch sparked fire. "Just wishing I were."

I had been content in Chicago, working at the museum with my career poised to soar. Then Gram phoned, demanding I return. We didn't even talk long, fifteen minutes at most.

Her ambush challenged that I'd wasted enough time "finding myself" and if she didn't find me back at the plant, she'd sell the business. Done deal. I returned within the week.

Another ten years away would have been fabulous, twenty even better, but I couldn't risk she might actually sell. Someday in the far future I wanted it, if only to prove myself to Mother and my stepfather. Gram seemed to be in a different time zone. A different zone. Period. Wanting everything done now. Her urgency escaped me because even after a year, my role remained unclear. Everyone had a title except me, and at twenty-eight, almost everyone thought of me as "the owner's kid." And far too many people were calling me Del, a name I reserved for those closest few, except Gram who was too proper to adapt to casual mores. The sixties damn near scared her to death.

Honking horns and traffic noise drifted from the street twenty stories below. Emergency vehicles sped by, sirens fading into the distance. The alarm switched my thoughts. Something was wrong and my muscles wrenched tighter than twisted sheets after a bad dream. I squirmed in my chair—a hard, lumpy chair—and accidentally bumped Michael's arm.

"Del, what's up with you?"

"I should be home." I clipped an urge to cry out—has anyone heard from Rosa? The hollow cold in my chest warned something bad was about to happen ... had happened. "Did you talk to Rosa, today?"

"After lunch." Michael adjusted his Bulova. "Around two. Why?"

"Just a feeling. Anxiety, I guess. I resented that she had insisted I be here, so I didn't call..." I glanced aside and downward as I confessed, "... To punish her."

His eyes rolled.

"Guilty, I know. Shame. On. Me."

"Anxious about what?"

None of the executives noticed that Michael and I spoke outside of their agenda. No surprise. They rarely noticed me at all. "I should be with her." My neck and shoulders tightened. My fists clenched.

"Del, chill out. Take a breath or something, jeez. I know you can't justify Sam's choices for the line, but we're almost done."

"I'm not doing this again. I don't care what she says. I feel trapped in a bad dream."

He swiveled in his seat to face me. "A bad dream? You had that nightmare again, didn't you?" Determination skewed his forehead as his eyes shot open. "Didn't you?" He checked his watch. Again. "I'm not letting you off easy. We will discuss this later."

Ugh, reluctant agreement. Story of my life. I focused on the pendulum of the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. Ten minutes after six. Its rhythm lulled my mind, breathing slowed, but last night's dream replayed in my head, the type of dream that Gram and I often shared. No doubt, if I dreamed, she also dreamed ...

... A dark dream ... Of a dark place ... A door cracks open ...

Voices from inside ... I must look into that room ... I creep toward the door ...

Be silent. Gray ghosts ... Shhh ... They'll see you.

The clock chimed half past the hour and snapped me back to the worst meeting of my life. Frustrating. Hot and stuffy. I needed space, somewhere high and breezy. Maybe it wasn't a Gram

dream after all. Maybe this boardroom was the room I feared to enter. Our senior executives, the gray ghosts. A forewarning of this unpleasantness? Or something worse?

“Del. Hey!” Michael rattled my shoulder. “Are you ready to go?”

I nodded as Sam rose from his seat. Meeting adjourned. Hallelujah. The men gathered in the reception area leaving Michael and me alone.

He hoisted his briefcase and mine. “You should have told me you were having those nightmares again. I thought they stopped. Didn’t you tell me Chicago cured you?”

With a force that nearly popped a button, I fastened my suit jacket and grabbed my purse. “They did stop, but they’ve been creeping back since I returned to the business.”

“And to your family?”

“A failed attempt at discretion. About four months ago they got bad.”

“You’ve had them all this time?”

Silence. Nothing more to say, and he let it drop.

“We got a lot done today.”

I shrugged, not as convinced. “I’m drained. Let’s have a quiet dinner, in my room or yours, and not talk about work. You booked a separate room, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” A provocative smile curled his lips. “I can be discreet for as long as you want.” His hand slipped under my hair and rubbed the back of my neck.

“Mmm, yes. Right there.” The turn of my head guided his hand.

“Sam and I are meeting with the ad agency for breakfast at eight. Did you want to sit in?”

“I don’t. You can fill me in on the ride home.” I scanned the vacant boardroom and tucked the chairs under the table. An evening breeze carried the scent of light rain on concrete. I closed the window that had been propped open with a Lucite ad campaign award from 1968, then turned off the lights.

The room looked better in the dark.

The others were gone, and we were nearly out to the elevator lobby when the telephone rang at the reception desk.

“Let it go, Del.”

My hand froze in midair as I reconsidered for two more rings. I snatched the receiver and pushed the button for line one. “Laura Delito.”

Vinny Ferro, Sam’s second-shift executive assistant rattled words without a breath. “I’m sorry Miss Delito, but I have bad news. She’s okay, don’t worry, but your grandmother was rushed to the hospital, and they called here when they didn’t find you at your apartment. They said she’s been asking for you. You should go directly to the hospital.”

I set the receiver in its cradle on the third try and steadied myself against the desk. Surprise evolved to fear, then panic before changing to emotions that were all too familiar—new guilt for not being with Gram added to the shame I felt all day for not calling her.

Michael leaned against the door frame and snapped, “Now what?”

“It’s Gram.”

He stepped forward. Brow furrowed. Timbre softened. “Rosa? What happened?”

Did Vinny say she'd fainted? Was it her head or her heart? The message blurred, but my gaping mouth said it all.

"Never mind." His hand rested on my shoulder. "We'll leave now. I'll pack and—"

I grabbed his wrist and checked his watch. "I've got forty minutes to get to Grand Central. There's a train at seven forty. I'll get home quicker if I'm on it."

"That's crazy. I'll go with you. We'll take the car."

"It's so late and there's nothing you can do anyway. Go to your meeting. You and Sam take the limo. You'll be back at the plant by noon. Pack my things." I shuffled through my purse. "Here's my room key. I'll catch a nap on the train. This could be a long night."

Did Vinny say her room was 314 or 340? The other day Gram assured me she felt "splendid," and she had agreed to a full physical before Christmas. She had ordered me here. "Get involved, know the staff," she'd said. I caught the train just in time, but soon regretted I hadn't taken the company car. One hundred miles seemed so far and the ride too long for somber thoughts, and I regretted Michael wasn't beside me.

I should have thought through my plan.

I panicked.

MY FOOTSTEPS ECHOED in the third floor corridor of St. Mary's Community Hospital in downtown Barrows. My leather pumps danced along the gray and white checkered floor though I didn't feel like my feet were in them. Even though Gram could afford the best private care, she had always insisted on St. Mary's, as if she expected the Saint to relieve what ailed her. A faint sick odor escaped the disinfectant as I hurried to her room. Soft night lighting surrendered to the glare of the nurses' station at the far end of the hall.

Cold chills my skin. A tunnel ...

An eerie familiarity from my nightmare rolled shivers down my arms, then someone in a pantry whistled a cheerful melody, breaking the psychic connection.

In a few days, Gram will be home and all will be as it should. The idea tasted like a lie. Something was wrong and I knew exactly what it was, but if I allowed the thought to form for even a moment, my worst fear would be realized. Don't think it. *Too late. Gram will die tonight.*

A five-foot statue of St. Mary posed on a pedestal was the only figure at the nurses' station. Painted eyes and outstretched arms did nothing to soothe me. My pace quickened through the hospital's east wing while I noted room numbers as I passed ... 304, 306, 308 I brushed against the hallway handrail as I raced toward something grim.

I feel my way along a wall.

... 310, 312. The night nurse stepped out of room 314.

We collided.

She scowled as she peeked at her watch. "May I help you?"

"Laura Delito. To see my grandmother." My tone was polite but firm. Fully aware visiting hours had passed, I didn't need to be patronized by some snooty nurse. I'd had my fill of pompous attitude in New York.

Her stance eased. “She’s been asking for you. Your office said you were away on business. We didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“I want a doctor to explain her condition.”

The nurse wore a gold band on her finger. Black raised letters printed on a white plastic badge read *Ida Sturm R.N. Always get their name right, and you’ll gain their respect.* Gram had taught me. “Mrs. Sturm, you said she’s been asking for me?” If she’s talking, she’s alive.

“I looked in on her a moment ago. She’s awake.”

I see a line of light where the door cracks open. I stand alone, knowing I must look into that room.

I fluffed my hair and tugged my suit sleeves to my wrists to smooth the wrinkles.

My hands tremble. My knees weaken as I creep ...

I eased open the door. A heavy floral scent stuck in my throat like the flowers that had surrounded my father’s casket, their smell so thick I’d nearly gagged.

Some foul taste settles inside me.

“Get rid of these. Clearly the office staff overreacted. She hasn’t been here four hours.” I pointed to two small bouquets on the granite sill. “Leave those and give away the rest. The room smells like a damned funeral parlor.”

“I’ll see to it myself.” She pulled the door closed, leaving Gram and me alone.

A fluorescent light mounted above the headboard bathed Gram’s white hair and the white bed sheets in an eerie glow, heavenly bright. I thought I heard angels singing. *Maybe Gram was right about St. Mary.* Mismatched paint covered the walls with hues of olive green. Water stained plaster buckled in a ceiling corner where a pipe once leaked. I sat on the edge of the bed. “Gram, I’m here.”

She smiled and attempted to push herself upright. “I’m so tired.”

“Shall I let you sleep?” I pointed across the room to a brown leather chair, a tuft of stuffing bursting from its split arm. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll sit there while you rest.”

“No, stay.” Gram smoothed her hospital blanket like she did when I was a kid and she’d fan my skirt, arranging a seat for my guardian angel. With the sweeping motion, her intravenous tube tugged at the pole beside her bed where a fluid-filled bag hung. Bruised flesh ringed the needle piercing her arm. She winced as she picked at the tape that secured it. “*This is what tires me.* I seem to be withering faster than those cut flowers.”

With a gentle hold of her wrists, I braced her arms still across her chest. Her skin felt like cold silk loosely hung on a wire hanger. Where was her vitality? When did this happen? “Stop it Gram. You’ll tear out the needle and you’ll bleed.”

“No!” She shot me a clipped, frightened look. “No blood.”

She panicked at the sight of it, which was uncharacteristic of one who so fearlessly tackled life. She’d once explained it reminded her of “a wicked time,” but I couldn’t imagine Gram in such a state. And she wouldn’t elaborate. When she calmed, I released her wrists.

“Always remember who you are. Make me proud.”

She wouldn’t be proud that I’d almost thrown a tantrum at the sales meeting, or that my solution was to tune out, so I lied. “I’m trying.”

“Sweetheart, there’s something I haven’t told you ...” Her words stalled in a timid smile. “You know how neither of us likes surprises?”

I grinned, and shaking our forefingers at each other like we’d done ten thousand times, we said in unison, “No surprises,” though her finger barely moved.

She struggled to point toward the bedside cabinet, the hint of a smile was gone. “There’s something you should know ... *must* know ...”

“I only need to know you’ll recover.”

“... Something about my past ... something a person might use against you ...”

Don’t tell me. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. I had to be as strong as she expected me to be.

“A secret I’ve kept ... about the family ...”

If you confess now, you’ll die.

Gram moaned. “Give me a minute.” She pushed up on her elbows to sit higher on the bed and again pivoted toward the nightstand.

I spotted a plastic pitcher and filled a cup with water. “Is this what you want?”

She looked long at me before closing her eyes. She didn’t open them again. When her last breath escaped, she shook as if chilled and slipped into death so peacefully, it was difficult to realize it had happened. But I knew.

I ran to the hallway and called for help. Shock locked my steps. My arms slumped at my sides. Scenes from Gram’s life—of her and me and the business—flashed in my head. Colored beads, shiny chains, and delicate filigree stampings.

Everything was about to change. I knew days ago when she ordered me to New York and hours ago when I fled. I probably knew a year ago when I ditched Chicago. And she knew it, too.

Ida Sturm R.N. rushed into the room, felt for Gram’s pulse and shook her head.

“Do something. We can save her.”

“Your grandmother was quite lucid when she requested we not revive her. Why don’t you wait in the hallway? I’ll call again for the doctor.” She left the room.

Was there something proper to do? I needed roadside guardrails and painted lanes. I colored inside the lines. Boundaries and rules maintained my illusion of order, so where were the rules for this?

“Wake up, Gram. You didn’t finish telling me.” I shook her harder than I intended. “Damn it. Don’t you die on me!”

I looked toward the ceiling in a lame attempt to divert tears. I couldn’t leave. “You can hear me. I feel you near. We shared dreams and nightmares and knew each other’s thoughts.” I stroked her hair. She always looked her best and she’d want that now. From the bedside cabinet, I set her purse on my lap and twisted the clasp.

A crumpled newspaper masthead sat on top. I flattened it on the edge of the bed. The year was dated 1900, the month and publication title torn away. *What the hell? Why was she saving this?* I stuffed it into my suit pocket.

Her gold-plated hairbrush weighed heavy in my hand as I fluffed her thin hair. It once fell to her shoulders, thick and shiny with a slight curl, auburn like mine. It’s why they named her Rosa.

I brushed it for the last time, like I did when I was small and playing at her dressing table with sparkling crystal bottles filled with scented lotions and exotic perfumes from the Far East. “I wanted to be like you and still do. You knew that, didn’t you?”

A middle-aged man in a lab coat entered and nodded indifferently. He pressed his stethoscope to Gram’s chest. “I’m sorry for your loss.” He never looked me in the eye, just checked his watch and wrote on the chart hanging at the foot of her bed. I didn’t even get his name.

It was official. Gram wasn’t coming back.

Uncapping the moisturizer in the hospital’s patient kit, I fought not to full-out cry while I massaged each swollen knuckle and finger, including the stub of her left pinkie. Gram had not been self-conscious about it, nor had she explained its loss. She was always there for my falls, my hurts. How did she lose her finger? When did it happen? What were the things in her life that made her hurt? *Was I one of them?*

My hand laid on her chest where her heart used to beat. “What was your secret?” When Gram pointed to the nightstand, I assumed she wanted water. Maybe she wanted her purse. An idea came to me as if Gram herself had replied—*The newspaper will lead to answers.*

“Rest in peace, Gram. I love you.” I removed from the wall a framed print of St. Mary and propped it on the nightstand to guide the soul of Margaret Rosa Delito, Beloved Grandmother. Beloved mentor. Beloved friend.

Now, I could leave. The worst had happened and I could leave.

Maybe it was Gram’s death I saw in my nightmare, her face pale like it was now—her life drained. *A gray ghost.*

Gray ghosts ... Gray ghosts ...

Finally my nightmares would end. I was sure of it.

*Falling from a high place. Dark clouds. A sinking sun slashes red across the horizon.
Field grass sways like ocean swells.
Thunder cracks and hard rain stings.
Falling. Falling.*

MY BODY SLAMMED TO THE BED as if it had fallen from a roof or a tree, or that place from where dreams come. For a moment, I wondered where I had landed. My bedroom seemed to roll like a ship in rough seas. Salty sea air had drifted twenty miles inland from Long Island Sound to permeate the room. Gulls squawked as they soared over dumpsters in the parking lot. Cold to the bone and shivering, I rose from bed and closed the windows.

Seven miles across town from Gram’s High Hill estate, my two-room apartment felt more like a hotel suite than my home. No favorite paintings adorned the walls. No family photos posed on my dresser. A set of twenty-dollar dinnerware didn’t fill one shelf in the kitchen cabinet. I’d lived here a year and unopened boxes from Chicago remained stored at Gram’s. Half my clothes hung in her closets. Neat classic clothes. Average. Straight skirts across the knee, not minis. Stovepipe slacks, not hip-huggers or bell-bottoms. Herringbone and tweed jackets, not satin or velvet, and definitely

not polyester. Wardrobe colors topped out at black, white, gray, navy, camel, and hunter green. Not trendy, but safe, always safe. Not the edge of average, but the smack dab middle of it.

Last night, I'd made a dozen or so calls from the hospital until my best friend, Marcia, drove me home. I'd talked to Michael in New York, then I crashed. Clothes on. Windows open. At least, I fell onto my bed.

I awoke feeling alone, not the live-by-yourself-alone that I cherished more times than not, but the singular loneliness you feel when you've lost your grandmother, your father—or yourself. *I wish Michael were here.* He should have insisted on staying with me.

My suit jacket hung over the back of a chair where I'd tossed it last night. While coffee brewed in the galley kitchen, I pulled the newspaper from Gram's purse and laid it on the counter. The title was missing, torn away and impossible to trace. Not even the library's microfilm archive could help. On the reverse side, a curious diagram had been drawn with a felt tip marker, a similar stroke weight to markers in Delito's design department and in Gram's office. The crude drawing indicated a large rectangle near the center. Straight lines like wheel spokes connected six scattered smaller boxes back to the middle box. A wavy line scrawled along one edge of the paper, and a bold circle highlighted an X that marked intersecting lines inside the large rectangle. *Great. What do I do with this?* It must have been important to Gram. Pointing to it cost her dying breath. I folded the paper and slid it into my Buxton billfold for safekeeping.

Today's reality was worse than my nightmares could ever be. Yanked from my Chicago adventure into Gram's grand Delito vision, but without her propping me up, who the hell was I?

Vague dream images lingered in my head like faces of forgotten friends. I tried not to presume the meaning of the falling ocean dream. I tried not to decipher what Gram had drawn on the old newspaper. I needed to be at High Hill, so I hurried to shower and dress and be with people as soon as I could—even if they *were* my family.

HIGH HILL WAS LOCATED at the maximum elevation on the outskirts of the blue-collar town of Barrows and offered the finest view of central Connecticut's countryside, though today I didn't notice.

Why great-grandfather Antonio Delito withdrew from the jewelry capital of Providence to settle in these quiet hills was a family tale learned long ago. He preferred a closer proximity to New York's business opportunities. And High Hill's stunning views had bewitched his young bride. She'd said it would be a grand place to live and a peaceful place to die, though no one could have predicted she would die so young.

I loved this house where I was raised, and even now, had spent more time here with Gram than anyone, more than in my own apartment. A Tudor structure had been added to the original stone and timber home, tripling its size to twelve spacious rooms, plenty big enough for Gram, Dad, Mother and me without stepping on privacy. Crawling ivy framed the front door and on each side, bright yellow mums filled large wooden planters. Inside, hand-woven carpets from Kashmir, Cappadocia and Iran adorned restored parquet floors. Eclectic furnishings from across the globe graced every room, making High Hill the Delito historical museum. *Who wouldn't want to live here?*

The family was due to arrive at nine to schedule Gram's wake and funeral, arrange for flowers, food, lodging for visitors, and all the small things that busy a mourning mind. Gram's housekeeper brewed coffee and tea, and organized doughnuts and muffins on paper doilies set on silver trays.

I lit a half dozen bayberry candles and sat on an antique church bench in the foyer, staring at my fingernails, with Marcia by my side. We didn't speak, nor did we need to. As different as we were, she and I had been best friends since the second grade. Though I had little interest in local news, I was aware of the daily price of gold and silver, and the political situation in every country, at least the nutshell version. Marcia couldn't distinguish between Cairo and Calcutta, but she could tell you who was married, headed toward divorce, and who had garden tools on sale.

I felt like a Catholic schoolgirl outside Mother Superior's office, a common feeling when Mother came to call. I stretched my knit dress to cover my knees.

A car door slammed and my gaze snapped to the window. A chauffeur stepped out of the black Lincoln Continental and opened the passenger door with precision, as if his passengers would accept nothing less. I met them at the door while Marcia stood a safe distance behind me.

"Hello Mother. Sam." She and I touched cheeks, as if it meant as much as a hug or a kiss.

Fragrances of perfume and hair spray trailed Virginia Bender through the foyer, into the parlor and back, as I dutifully tagged behind. She inspected every corner of the room, chin up, head rigid as her eyes scrutinized every minute detail until her attention fell on me. "You must do something with that god-awful hair. Let me fix it." She lifted her hand to straighten my part.

"Lovely to see you too, Mother." I brushed her hand away.

"Call my salon, dear. I'm sure they'll squeeze you in, considering—"

"Considering what?"

She gripped my arm as if I was five and tugged me back to the foyer away from the others. "That everyone in town will see you at the wake. Don't embarrass me." She nodded at Marcia as if her scolding applied to both, and returned to the parlor. I did not.

"Embarrass her?" Marcia's eyes rolled. "You lost your grandmother and that's what she's worried about?"

I said to her, "I haven't lived with her for ten years. When will she treat me like an adult?"

"They never do."

The grandmother clock, partner to the grandfather in New York, chimed Aaron Schaeffer's arrival. As corporate attorney for Delito, Inc., he had been Gram's closest friend for as long as I remembered. Believing he was a blood member of the family, I'd called him Uncle Aaron until my teen years when I discovered he and Gram were also lovers. Oops.

Sam entered the foyer. "Good to see you, Aaron." The clock chimed on. "Now that we're all here, let's get to work."

I interrupted, "Aaron, thanks for coming so soon."

The housekeeper took his coat.

Sam grabbed a coffee and took a seat beside Mother.

Aaron held my hands to his heart for a long time, his eyes puffy as if he'd been crying. "She was dear to me. More than a client and friend, she was—"

"I know she was."

Aaron nodded at Marcia, then greeted Mother.

When I saw the company car, a white limousine, enter the long straight driveway, I hurried to the door. Michael stepped from the rear seat. *Thank God*. He draped his overcoat over one arm and carried his briefcase with his other hand. Vinny Ferro exited the opposite side and followed Michael up the gray slate path. Dried crimson leaves cracked beneath their feet. I waited by the open door. Weathered and worn, it looked the way I felt. But Michael was here now. No detail would be overlooked. No mistake would slip by. He would watch my back.

After setting his case in the foyer and balancing his folded coat on top of it, I expected an embrace, but he merely kissed my cheek, no more affectionately than he'd greet an acquaintance—no more than Mother and I had greeted each other.

He leaned closer and whispered, "Virginia and Sam are watching in the mirror."

Vinny scanned the foyer furnishings. "I'm sorry for your loss, Miss Delito."

His condolence acknowledged, I gestured that he enter the parlor and leaned toward Michael. "Stay until plans are complete, then you should go to the plant. I can't think about business right now. I don't remember my schedule or where I'm supposed to be. It frightens me that I can't concentrate. My mind seems to be slipping away along with confidence to make decisions."

"Don't worry about business, I'm here. I'll see that Vinny is useful, too. He insisted on coming. I hope you don't mind."

As Vinny followed the housekeeper toward the kitchen, I shrugged. A low-level employee didn't belong at an intimate family meeting, yet I realized Gram was also Delito, Inc. and vital to more people than only me.

Michael ran his hand down my back, following me to join the others. I sat across from Mother and Sam, and Michael took a seat next to me, but not too close. The sides of opposition were clearly defined. He recorded funeral particulars in his ever-present notebook then tucked it into an inside jacket pocket. Now I could be sure everything would happen precisely when it should. The full itinerary was determined within the hour.

"I'm taking a room at the Regency for a few days," he said. "It'll be more convenient than driving from Hartford, and I'll be nearby if you need anything."

My fingers brushed against his hand.

"Sam, come ride with me to the office. I've got the car." He also signaled Vinny to exit and discreetly winked at me.

Sam mumbled, "Exotic flowers, more limos. Too much money. The Old Lady is gone after all."

He always called her that, The Old Lady. Gram never minded, but I did. I bit my tongue.

"You couldn't wait two minutes. You had to say it in front of her." Michael nudged him outside.

"I didn't mean anything by it. It was a joke between us."

I barely heard Sam's halfhearted apology. A joke? They'd no sooner passed through the door when a sudden gust of wind slammed it shut. Its chill swept through me and roamed the house like a familiar spirit.

Gram had just said goodbye.

The limo vanished from sight and I couldn't help but smile. *Michael, the perfect man, takes out the trash without being asked.*

WITH HIGH HILL EMPTY of guests, the housekeeper tidied up and left for home. I lay on the sofa and pulled a blanket over me. It was nearly four when I awoke and dusk was near.

Wandering from room to room, feeling only the stillness, hearing only silence, I sensed Gram's presence. *Are you here? You're in my thoughts.* I recalled the things I should have said to her, but didn't. All the things I wanted to say and needed to say, but never could say.

You appeared to have everything a person could want, yet when you smiled, your eyes seemed to weep. You thought I didn't notice, but I did. I wanted to ask why. But I couldn't. This thing was always between us—between you and everyone. Did you never beat your demons?

In a bedroom Gram had reserved for my overnight stays, I removed my knit dress, pulled on a cable knit sweater and jeans, and tucked them into knee-high leather boots.

Passing through the den and out the French doors to the rear flagstone patio, my hands punched into my pockets. Stomping around the perimeter of the grounds, I was angry at Gram for dying, like I had been when my father died. The stone wall dividing the fields was a natural place for separations and farewells. Alone, abandoned and lost, I sat numb on the largest boulder, hammering my fists against my legs in a rhythmic mantra that wooed me into a trance. My stare locked toward the horizon. Blue and lavender splashed the sky like a watercolor wash. Tendrils of the old weeping willow in the far west field swayed like a forest of seagrass turned upside down. The field's tall, dry vegetation waltzed in glorious waves in a crisp breeze. Golden sun bathed the meadow, making it appear more like the sea than the earth, an ocean mirage from another time. Or a recent dream?

Red slashed the skyline as the sun died in dark clouds. The wind smelled electric. Rain stung like ocean spray. I raced the storm back to the main house, bolted the doors and drove across town to my apartment.

COVERAGE OF GRAM'S DEATH dominated the news for three days. By the time of her wake, the feeling of loss in town had reached a fervor. Four patrol officers directed traffic at the funeral home parking lot and nearby intersections. The line of mourners stretched to the street as community leaders and curiosity seekers arrived to pay respect. Though my immediate family was small in number, Gram's influence had impacted business and government across the state. And though the Delito fortune was a distant memory, we remained Barrows' royal family.

Marcia and I sat quietly until public entry began. Our high school acquaintances would likely attend, and she seemed eager for reunion.

When the crowd filed in, Aaron Schaeffer and I joined Mother and Sam in the viewing parlor. Michael was somewhere nearby.

A pleasant scent of lilies competed with roses. People knelt at Gram's open coffin to mutter prayerful farewells, then greeted the receiving line saying how sorry they were, how wonderful she looked and how much they'd miss her. I didn't mind that their words of sympathy were likely superficial, they eased my pain.

Marcia stood behind me, ready to remind me who was who. Small clusters of guests gathered in various parlors for conversation. After an hour and a half, the steady line of strangers made me realize that outside of business, I had few good friends. Then I saw him. Jimmy Cassella, my first love, and he needed no reminder. We were the couple everyone had envied. “Sure to be married,” everyone had said. Marcia still hoped.

He caressed my hands as we spoke. “Need a break? Walk with me and I’ll find some coffee.”

Marcia poked me from behind until I consented. “I’d love a cup of coffee ... served with fresh air.”

We passed through the outer parlor where Michael conversed with Vinny and other Delito employees. Their contrast stark, Michael was meticulously tailored—smooth, polished and perfumed, while Jimmy was earthy and rugged with thick brown hair that needed trimming. What was likely his only suit, fit snugly across his broad shoulders.

“You look great, Laura. Tired, but great. This has to be hard on you.” Jimmy rushed the words. Then turned his head before I could see him blush. It was something he’d done for as long as I’d known him, like calling me Laura. Being near him felt like slipping on worn loafers, marred and scuffed, but broken in and comfortable. The circumstance was wrong, but I couldn’t deny our physical attraction, even though I wanted to.

The son of the funeral director delivered foam cups of strong coffee from a service room. Jimmy and I were soon out the door and strolling down a footpath narrow enough to force us close. We sat on a wrought-iron bench that felt cold against my legs even through my wool skirt.

“Marcia tells me you’re in the construction business.”

He roared a deep belly laugh. “Yeah, she keeps me up-to-date about what you’re doing, too.” He slid closer and rested his arm on the back of the bench as if we were still teens at a drive-in movie. “Isn’t it funny we never run into each other?”

“I don’t see anyone in town. I’m in and out of the office and rarely go out. My small apartment at Victoria Towers is adequate for now with minimal furniture, no pets, and neighbors I’ve never met.” My hand landed on his knee in an automatic and natural motion until I realized what I’d done and jerked it away.

He swiped his chin. “I know the Towers. They’re well-built.”

At the entrance of the funeral home, another group of visitors had arrived—my cue to remove myself from increasing discomfort. “I should go. It was nice to see you.” My words sounded unconvincing and I didn’t want them to be. “I mean it. I’m happy to see you.”

Jimmy walked me back to the door and paused, turning the moment delicate. “Laura, I’d like to ... Call me ... I mean, if I can do anything.” He kissed my cheek, lingering a little too long. Breathing a little too deep. Squeezing me a little too tight.

I backed away.

Michael stood outside the door. I didn’t know how long he’d been watching. “Del, someone’s been asking for you. She said you don’t know her, but she must see you.”

His arm around my waist guided me through the viewing parlor to a corner sitting area where the woman waited. She appeared to be well into her seventies, maybe eighties, with blue eyes, gold framed glasses, and a light wool coat that smelled of mothballs.

“Laura Delito, this is Emma Collings,” he said.

The woman’s gaze shifted from Gram’s coffin. Her head tipped upward as she stared. “You have her eyes.” Her expression lightened with a hint of a smile. “Can we talk alone?”

Our conversation might need a quiet place. A simple look toward Michael was enough. I didn’t need to ask.

“There’s a vacant meeting room off the outside parlor.” He helped Emma from her chair. After seating us in the private room, he left, closing the door behind him.

“You knew my grandmother?”

“We were close friends. More like sisters.”

I slumped backwards in the Queen Anne chair. I knew little of Gram’s early years. She’d never spoken of them, and I was sure I hadn’t heard of Emma Collings. I’d have remembered the name.

“How did you know her?”

Emma remained focused on my features. “It was a long time ago.”

I’d often wondered if the cause of Gram’s pain was rooted in her childhood. Part of her had been closed. Isolated from everyone. Whatever her secret, it didn’t deserve the misery it had inflicted, especially after so many years. I’d often wondered, if she *had* shared her burden, would I have said, “Is that all?” I knew enough about Mother’s side of the family, but on the Delito side, all I’d been told, apart from the typical press release version, was that Gram was born and raised at High Hill. Emma Collings might add color to that sketchy picture.

“We were both near twelve when we lived at The Farm. I loved Maggie and cherished her stories. I know it sounds, ah, odd, but I enjoyed our time there.”

Her pauses were laced with confusion and her most conspicuous error was that Gram was called Rosa, not Maggie. Yet, she said the name so definitively. Either she’d wandered into the wrong funeral parlor or Gram’s past hid more secrets than I suspected.

“She told stories of her father’s travels and the places he would take her one day.”

That much was probably true and consistent with Delito’s growing business.

“We had great fun, milking cows, drawing pictures, dressing up. I remember like it was yesterday.”

Gram milking cows? This woman is freaking me out.

“Play was a wonderful escape.” Emma reached into the small purse she clutched on her lap. “I kept something that belonged to her. You should have it.”

Inching closer, I brimmed with the expectation of new information.

“I had forgotten about it until I saw her obituary in the newspaper.”

Fetching the treasure, Emma dropped the bundle onto my open palm. A lace border framed a linen handkerchief. The old woman’s eyes encouraged me to unfold the loosely wrapped gift. A three-inch golden key hung on a gold chain. Pinched between my thumb and forefinger, I examined the unusual design. “It’s lovely.”

She snatched my wrist with unexpected strength. Her voice rang with sudden urgency. “Maggie begged me—”

Her eyes had a faraway look as if she were glimpsing another time, as if she were there, a child again, not hesitating as before, but swept to her past like driftwood torn from a riverbank by spring floods.

“She begged me—to guard it with my life.”

With hands trembling, her expression changed as if memories from decades ago surged into her. Her eyes exposed a troubled soul. Same as Gram’s eyes. I was lured by them. What had they seen? They’d seen that part of Gram’s life never shared.

Grandmother. Someone wonderful.

Something horrible.

A knock at the door startled me, and yanked us back into real time.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Michael leaned in. “Your mother is preparing to leave.”

“Damn.” The word escaped my lips before I could stop it. I covered my mouth. “Please excuse me, Emma. I’ll be right back. There’s so much more I need to know.”

Only a few minutes passed, but when I returned, Emma was gone. Perhaps she’d traveled too far into her past, too deep into her mind. Maybe she couldn’t, or wouldn’t, allow herself to remember. Or perhaps she remembered more than she could bear.

A disconcerted feeling that nothing was as it seemed to be was all that lingered of the old woman’s visit. My world turned on end. I’d been doubting my career as jewelry designer and questioning my life’s purpose. I was a guest in my own apartment, suffered a dreadful relationship with my mother and worse with her husband. And I was unsure of how Michael and I fit together. Now, all I had known about Gram, the one person I trusted, was gutted.

The gold chain of the antique key slithered between my fingers as it fell into a graceful swag, swaying like a clock’s pendulum. But even time seemed warped as I faced the fog of my family’s past and of my future. Guardrails were torn off my road, outlines erased from my story and my colors were spilling out.

I closed my hand and held tight to the only truth I could grasp—a golden key wrapped in soiled linen.

~ TWO ~

1899 • Spring

MAGGIE DELITO HID in her secret place high above High Hill’s west field. The massive limbs of an old weeping willow tree easily held her twelve-year-old frame. Father knew of her secret place, and she peeked through the willow’s trailing branches to see him crossing the field toward her. With each step, he planted his walking stick into the earth and pushed it away as if driving a raft upriver. His gait was determined, his path direct. His leather boots crushed a trail in the tall grass, though he spared wild flowers if he could.

Father touched a flame to his pipe until puffs of blue smoke curled up from under the brim of his woolen hat. He tugged at the ends of his mustache, something he did when he was troubled, and twisted them upward to form a deceptive grin, masking what his purpose might be.

Twigs snapped underfoot as he neared. At last, his broad shoulders rested against the tree as he tapped his staff twice against the bark, his signal for Maggie to descend.

Eager arms and fit legs hugged the familiar limb as she eased toward the trunk. A small branch snagged the ruffle of her blue calico dress, but a sharp tug freed the cloth. Father waited below with his good ear tilted as if he listened for the sound of skirts rustling against bark. He braced himself against the trunk when she stepped onto his shoulders.

She slid to the ground and stood before him, hiding the tattered fabric. Father glanced at the dress clenched in her fist and offered a forgiving smile and an outstretched hand.

Not a word passed between them as they strolled alongside the stacked stone wall that divided the east and west fields. Father cherished the open space in the middle of the meadows. It was *his* secret place. He leaned his walking stick against the wall and snuffed smoldering tobacco from his pipe before setting it on the stone. With his handkerchief wrapped around his forefinger, he wiped smudges from her face. Their eyes didn't meet until he lifted her onto his lap and snuggled his arms around her.

"You're leaving again, aren't you? Like last year and the year before. I don't want you to go." She jumped off his knee, pulled herself free, and socked his legs with her fists.

He let her.

"Business demands I leave within the week, but until then, we will spend all of our time together." The tips of his fingers brushed her tousled hair, nudging curly auburn bangs away from her eyes. "Who is hiding under there?"

Maggie's chin puckered and quivered.

Father angled his head. "Are you about to irrigate the fields?"

She held back a smile to punish him—and stifled her tears to please him. "Only you and me, you promise? Not Sally and not Carlotta?"

"Do you call me Antonio?"

The absurd suggestion made her giggle. "Father, I could not."

"Then you must not call your mother, Carlotta. Even Salvatore addresses her properly."

"I don't care what Sally names her."

His eyes rolled in an exaggerated and comical way. "And you must not call your brother by a woman's name. Address people by proper Christian names."

"He lets me call him Sally." She paused and glanced aside. "So long as no older boys are near."

"Carlotta did not give birth to him, yet he shows her more respect. What am I to do with you?"

When Father traveled, a carefree life had been impossible for Maggie. Carlotta claimed her stern discipline was necessary to "compensate for Father's pampering." Pampering! Normally, High Hill was the family's sanctuary from the noisy, dirty streets of the booming manufacturing town of Barrows. But when he was gone, Carlotta refashioned privacy into Maggie's prison. No tutors. No friends. No visitors. She was locked in her room at night while Carlotta visited the town or tavern. Even servants were sent away. Telling Father would surely worsen her plight. And she did not tell

him Carlotta, during a berating, had admitted she had agreed to bear a child merely to satisfy his condition of marriage. *As long as I mind boundaries, nothing bad can happen.*

“I wish I’d been born to Sally’s mother. Carlotta hates me.”

Father made the sign of the cross as he did when anyone spoke of his first wife and greatest love. “You are my world. Had Carlotta not given birth to you, I would not have my beautiful Sunshine.” He winked. “Even with your childish pout.” With the softest touch, his finger raised her chin until their eyes met.

Maggie locked her hands on her hips and demanded, “For how long will you be abroad?”

“Four months. Perhaps six. Until Christmas, I expect.”

A long, slow shiver rattled her.

“Are you cold?” Father briskly rubbed her arms.

“Not cold. I’m ... I’m ...” Maggie considered the most descriptive language she could recall from her dictionary studies. “I’m fraught with worry.”

“Fraught, are you?” Father choked on his laughter, but a broad grin bared his thoughts. “You have been reading too much of somber poets. There is no cause for concern, the servants will care for you. I have made this journey many times and will bring wonderful things when I return.”

From an inside coat pocket, he pulled his compass. He was never without it. Fashioned like a pocket watch, a photograph was tucked in its cover like a lady might keep in a locket. “I carry a portrait of you and Salvatore. Yours is the face I see when I feel lost, and I am reminded of where I must return.”

He adjusted the shell comb in her hair, a gift from his last visit to London. Since that visit, the combs had been manufactured at the Delito factory. “I will bring something special, perhaps a golden brooch or rose cameo from Florence that you can keep in your treasure chest.” The fancy jewelry box from Morocco had been carved especially for her, with a strong lock and a key that only she possessed. The chest would be a safe place to hide secret things if she had any. She clutched her father tighter.

“You are my big girl now. Do you remember the time I sailed with Nellie Bly?”

“I remember.” Father had repeated the tale many times.

“It was autumn when I left. A season of storms.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance as if even nature responded when Father spoke.

“The first night was the roughest.” He hoisted Maggie onto his knee and pitched from side to side like a rocking ship.

A sudden current rippled across the fields. Swaying grasses changed to cerulean blue and the fields *became* the sea. Ocean swells tore the horizon. White caps and wind. She took shelter in the warmth of Father’s woolen coat and pressed against him, listening to the steady beat of his heart, she felt safe.

“Nellie was there. The young woman exploring the world showed more courage than some who sailed, and her actions helped the weak and the poor and the ill.”

Father suggested a broader boundary when he spoke to her of Nellie. *I’m not Nellie.* Though she wanted to be. Nellie was a model to follow, a friend she could hold inside herself to measure her

deeds and weigh their merit. She would make Father proud. Yes, he would leave and return, only to leave again. It was meant to be.

Maggie raised her head. The storm was now upon them. Rain stung her face.

“Salvatore will be joining me on this voyage.”

The cold slice of a dagger could not have hurt her more. “NO!” Abandoned and betrayed and far more than angry, a wave of fear swamped her. “Not both of you.”

“He is almost eighteen. Time for him to take his bride.”

“Sally fears the water, but I love the sea. Father, take me. I’ll bring home his bride. We’ll become friends. I can tell her what a good brother he is and what a fine husband he will be.”

Father gripped her arms and glared into her eyes. “Margaret Rosa. Salvatore will journey with me and that is my final word.”

“You can’t leave me alone with her. You don’t know what she’s like when you’re gone.”

“What do you speak of? What do you fear?”

Maggie pushed and pulled and freed herself from his hold. She slapped the top of the wall and ran as fast as the wind, fleeing his words as if the devil had spit them into her ears. Footsteps pounded so hard against the earth, they shook her bones.

Father called after her. “Who frightens you?”

Maggie glanced back over her shoulder. “Carlotta Delito.” She screamed, “CARLOTTA.”

~ THREE ~

1974 • October

THE NEXT MORNING I stood rigid throughout the funeral mass at St. Anthony’s Church, fighting to hold myself together. The gray day paled the hues of stained glass windows. Light from candles and chandeliers glinted on gilded religious icons. Aromas of incense, flowers, and woolen coats damp with rain, filled the space. Organ music accompanied the full Sunday choir. Gram’s casket, flanked by six candles, sat perpendicular to the altar in the center aisle as if she was set to lead a board meeting at the home office. I focused on a single flickering flame, trying not to visualize her body in the box.

Michael stood at my side, guarding me with gentle strength. At the conclusion of the ceremony, he escorted me down the aisle. Mother and Sam followed. I passed pew after pew without emotion, discreetly scanning the crowd for the old woman who had disappeared from Gram’s wake, leaving too many questions unanswered, but Emma Collings wasn’t there.

Jimmy Cassella was seated in the last pew. His quiet presence comforted me.

Friends, distant relatives, and close business associates were invited to High Hill following the graveside service at the cemetery. Michael had scheduled everything from cars to catering, leaving me free to reminisce with guests. The afternoon was long and filled with more tension than I expected, yet also relief, because the worst was at last, over.

CLOUDS BLANKETED THE NIGHT, warming it more than normal for mid-October. Only Marcia and I remained in the dining room at High Hill while the housekeeper tended to other areas of the house. Unsure of what I thirsted for, I considered the bar selection, raising bottle after bottle, inspecting labels, sniffing contents, then returning each to its place, unable to make this smallest decision. Nothing would fill the emptiness I felt in my soul. I wanted to run. To be alone with my pain, yet, I needed to be held.

“Seen any good Scotch?”

Marcia squinted. “When did you start drinking Scotch?”

“Since vodka made me sick. It took four years to acquire the taste.” I found a fifth of 12-year-old Chivas.

“Four years! That was a stupid waste of time.”

I filled two glasses with ice and our drinks, then sat at the dining table where Marcia and I picked at leftover cold cuts and frosted Italian cookies and drank good Scotch and cheap wine.

From the stack of sympathy cards, I snatched an envelope and read my name aloud, “Laura Delito. Whoever she is. Wherever she came from.” I sighed louder than I intended, it must have sounded painful.

A crafty expression crossed Marcia’s face. “Hey, who was that guy with Michael at the wake?”

“Which guy? What did he look like?”

“Cute, perfect skin, jet black hair, clean-cut.”

“If you’re asking about Vinny Ferro, he’s Sam’s assistant working the evening shift. And barely legal. Moved here from Providence, I think. Why?”

“Just wondering. So he’s probably not married?”

“What did I just say? Young!”

Marcia’s brow drooped with disappointment before she countered, “He’s not that much younger than us.”

“Not in years, but he proves his immaturity every day.”

“He seems to fit right in with those corporate-type guys. Is he nice?”

“Nice enough, but I haven’t worked with him much. So, where were we? Oh, my name. Names.” I thought of all the names Gram had trained me to remember. *Would every little thing remind me of her?* It had taken years to stop obsessing about my dad’s death, and I didn’t want melancholy to absorb my life again. I’d been sipping drinks all afternoon and the hastily downed Scotch pushed me further from sobriety and closer to numbness—exactly where I wanted to be.

Marcia ignored my rambling, opened cards and read them to herself.

“It was good of your mom and dad to come today. You’re lucky to have them.”

Marcia agreed. “Listen,” she demanded as she waved a condolence card in front of my face. She checked the price on the back panel, then apologized. “Habit. It’s just a habit.” She read the handwritten message.

“Dear Laura.” Her eyebrows raised. “I wish I knew how to tell you how sad I feel for you. It’s too bad we had to meet again this way. Call me if I can help you or if you want to talk to an old friend. I think of you often. Always as ever, Jimmy C.”

The card whisked across the table like a Frisbee and landed in front of me.

“So, what do you think of that?”

I gulped my drink. “There isn’t a person I’ve seen over the last two days who hasn’t offered help.”

“I’ve had major talk time with our boy. I asked why he calls you Laura and not Del like the rest of us?”

“You did?”

“I wanted to know. He told me, ‘Del’ carries too much Delito baggage, but ‘Laura’ is his girl next door. He always asks for you. Not just since you came home, but all these years.”

“That sounds wonderful, but—I am a Delito and I do not live next door.” My head sank nearer to the table. “We view those years through different lenses.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t have a good thing going. It lasted six years.”

“We were kids. Besides six years isn’t so long when compared to a lifetime of misery. Geez, Marcia, it took me four years to like Scotch.”

We laughed.

“You two were perfect together.”

“A lot’s happened since, and there’s more of the world outside of Barrows.”

“What’s that got to do with Jimmy?”

“I want it, like my dad and Gram. It’s what Delitos do.” Ice rattled when I wiggled my drink.

“Put that down. We’re switching to coffee.”

“I’m not going backwards to Jimmy. I read that story and know how it ends.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“Sometimes I think you don’t know me at all.”

“Of course I do, because we’re so much alike. You think you’re different, big dreams and all. Don’t kid yourself. You want what I want. A family who’ll stand by me, a husband who adores me, and a cushy job.”

“Marcia, I’m all I have left.”

“That’s my point.” Her thrusting hands served as punctuation. “That’s why I’m worried.”

“Well, don’t. How did we get off on this anyway?”

“Jimmy Cassella.”

“Right. He can’t keep up. It’s a no-win deal for me, so forget it.”

“It’s not about winning. It’s about bending and sharing your life and not pretending your business will ever be as good as it used to be.”

My laugh exploded. “Bending! You’re the most stubborn person I know, and you’re preaching about bending? One tough divorce and you’re a relationship expert? You’ve been watching too much Phil Donahue.”

“For all his flaws, Jimmy’s come far and you have to admit, he looks good.”

We shook our heads in agreement, murmured lusty chuckles and sipped our drinks.

“Honestly, I don’t know what you see in Michael. He’s such a stiff.”

“He’s smart, witty and gorgeous. He listens to me. And he cares about me.”

“Rarely.”

“Mostly.”

“Jimmy has a good business and he just won that downtown renovation project.” Marcia’s eyes widened. “Everything about him looks good to me.”

“Then you go out with him. The last thing I need is another complication.” I sighed. “The business may erupt into chaos at any moment. I need my job. Most people don’t think so, but I do have to work. Every day brings a new battle with Mother and Sam. He never approves my designs first time around and has to impose his power and bully me to make some crappy change. And I have something important to take care of.” The tale of the elusive Emma Collings almost slipped from my lips, but telling a secret to Marcia was like buying a full page ad in the Sunday paper. “Besides, Michael and I are doing fine.”

“Yeah, *he’s* doing fine, that’s for sure.”

“Careful. I’m not so drunk I’ll forget what you say. And just because I didn’t comment, doesn’t mean I missed what you said about the business. That hurt.”

“Listen Del, the only thing Michael cares about is what you can do for his career. I don’t trust him and neither should you.”

“You disregard all he does for me? He’s strong in a way that’s different from Jimmy. He doesn’t panic at the thought of going to New York or New Delhi. He’s confident and loyal, and I need that now, more than ever.”

Marcia slammed her open hand on the table. “He helps you do what you’re afraid to do alone. Don’t count on his loyalty. He’ll take advantage.”

“Maybe that’s why I need him. When I’m with him, I forget how scared I am.”

The stiffness shook from my neck and shoulders when I stood and snatched my car keys. “Maybe, I need some air. Do you mind? I’ll see you tomorrow night. Okay?” When Marcia left the room to get our coats, I reached for the condolence card with Jimmy’s phone number and dropped it into my purse.

We met in the foyer. “Here, take this extra key to High Hill. For emergencies. In case we have to meet here again, or I might ask you to check something. Save me a trip across town.”

“Thanks. I’ll trade your old apartment key.”

“Keep it until I’ve moved out.” As we fiddled with key rings, I glanced up. “Hey, have you ever heard of a place called The Farm?”

She laughed. “Of course I have. We used to joke about it when we were kids. Don’t you remember?”

I shrugged.

“The Farm,” she insisted. “You know. It used to be Brookhaven Farm, now it’s the Brookhaven Center.” Her forefinger tapped circles at her temple. “Outside of Hartford. The Asylum.”

Goose bumps prickled up my arms.

CLOUDS HAD CLEARED and a full moon lit the night. After a short drive, I arrived at the Regency hotel a few minutes before 1:00 a.m. I strolled through the lobby as if I owned it and returned the desk clerk’s suspicious gaze with a brazen, “Hi, how’re you doing.” The elevator rose to the ninth floor. I knocked on the door of Michael’s suite, swaying on my two-inch heels while I waited. They say the full moon makes some people act crazy. I was one of them.

I wanted mind numbness, heart numbness—not this. I shouldn't have come. I must look like hell. God, I certainly shouldn't have driven. Stupid. Stupid. I could accept that at times I wasn't a model of grace and propriety, that I wasn't the perfect Delito, that I didn't fulfill Mother's measure of an ideal daughter. She reminded me often enough. I could accept that I was flawed, but I couldn't bear that anyone else knew.

Michael's eyes squinted from the sudden glare of the hallway light. His fingers raked through his smooth, chestnut colored hair mussed from sleep. "Mmm. What a pleasant surprise. Am I dreaming?" He put his arm around me and steered me into the darkened room. "Are you all right?"

My left hand sealed his lips while my right hand grasped the drawstring of his loosely fitted pajama bottoms and tugged. Silk trousers slid past narrow hips and dropped to the floor. Then my eyes began a slow journey upward. Soft light from a street lamp, or perhaps the moon, shimmered over the sleek contours of his hips and chest. I buried my face under his chin where a trace of Obsession remained from the day.

In his caress, I felt secure in his arms. "Take care of me tonight."

He lifted me like a baby and carried me to bed where he set me down so gently, I wasn't aware I had stopped moving. Blame it on the Scotch. After he peeled my clothes, hung each garment in the closet and slipped into bed, I thought I heard his hand glide across the top of the nightstand and drop something into the drawer. He snuggled beside me, stroking my hair, and I fell asleep in his arms.

BY WEEK'S END I was feeling lost and lonely in my apartment. I was the gray ash from a burned out fire. My future dissipating like smoke from a chimney vent, if I had a chimney. How sudden. How shocking. I had no plan to mend my shattered life. I could return to Chicago and beg for my old job though that option seemed to be closed. Too defeatist.

The day was sunny, the air was crisp and fresh and each breath of it clarified my thoughts. There was something to be said for beige walls, empty shelves and clean slates. When old plans dissolve, new possibilities fill the empty space.

Mother, Sam and I met at Aaron Schaeffer's law office because he had urged a quick settlement of Gram's estate. Her death became final when he read her will:

I, Margaret Rosa Delito, a resident of the Town of Barrows, County of New Haven and State of Connecticut, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, do make, publish and declare this to be my Last Will and Testament ...

Sam held Mother's hand. Feeling my observation intruded on their privacy, I glanced away.

FIRST: I direct that all my just debts ...

Gram and I rarely discussed Delito finances. We did things like visit galleries, discuss art and architecture, window shop in Manhattan to monitor fashion trends.

SECOND: I direct that my Executor pay out of my residuary estate, without appointment, the expense of my last illness and all administration expenses together with all estate, inheritance and like taxes imposed by the government of the United States ...

We'd discussed economics, the market, and the price of precious metals and stones. We'd argued politics, Johnson's war policies, and watched Nixon's resignation on TV while eating pizza with mushrooms and sausage and extra mozzarella.

THIRD: I give all the tangible personal property which I own at my death, including any household furniture, automobiles, jewelry, art objects and other articles of household or personal use or ornament, to my granddaughter, Laura Delito ...

Mother seemed pleased. I didn't believe what I had heard, and waited for the list of conditions I'd refuse to meet.

FOURTH: I give, devise and bequeath the property which I own at the time of my death, located at High Hill Road, Barrows, Connecticut, to my granddaughter, Laura Delito ...

My throat tightened, and there was hardly a place to aim my eyes without feeling self-conscious.

FIFTH: I give, devise and bequeath the business and property which I own at the time of my death, located at Delito Circle, Barrows, Connecticut, to my granddaughter, Laura Delito ...

My God. Except for Mother's monthly stipend, that's everything. *What has she done?* No one was more stunned than I that Rosa had left all her worldly holdings to me, except that Sam's grip on Mother's hand appeared to tighten as he glared at me.

My cheeks must have turned red because I felt their burn.

My legs ached to run and never stop.

My heart pounded as if I *had* been running.

Mother had been distancing herself from the business since the day she married into it. She had competed with it for Dad's attention, and she'd lost. She'd come to resent the mere mention of business and rarely wore Delito jewelry for extra sting. She would have sold the business in a New York minute if Sam had allowed. Gram would have known this, too.

I stayed to ask Aaron what he thought. Because I knew nothing about the financial state of the company, he suggested an audit and set me up with a reputable accounting firm.

When I left, I found Sam waiting in the hallway. "Don't start." Oh crap. All I wanted was to leave without more drama. "I didn't ask for this, but I will accept the responsibility and I'll do my best to exceed Gram's vision."

“If you think this makes a difference in company management, put it out of your mind.” He would have grabbed my arm had I not lunged back. “This changes nothing.”

My fists tightened as I stepped away. Months of condescension fueled my rage, rage that bolstered my nerve. “I don’t care that you married my mother, but I am sick of you treating me like a high school part-timer.”

“I’ve been good to you and your mother. Do you think it’s been easy fitting into your family, especially with the business wrapped around you? You have no idea what you’re getting into. Without me, you’ll lose everything. I don’t have a problem with us working together.”

“Because we do everything your way.”

“The Old Lady spoiled you.”

“She groomed me and with proper promotion, my designs will double sales.”

He burst into laughter. “Okay, I’m willing to gamble on—”

“You don’t have to gamble my business on my talent. I don’t need you.”

Through the glass doors I spotted his Lincoln parked at the curb where Mother looked uneasy. The business could have been split any number of ways. Wasn’t she happy for me? No congratulations. No “I know you can do it, kiddo.” More than enough money had been provided for her, but was it enough to keep Sam invested? She never looked more helpless. A stray kitten desperate for care. *I know the feeling.*

Sam exploited weakness. Maybe exploit was too strong a word, but he definitely jumped on opportunity, that’s how he became involved with Mother. He was Delito’s account supervisor and after Dad died, they met at an ad agency Christmas party in New York. Soon, he was coming to Connecticut for meetings, then staying weekends and Mother melted. Recalling that difficult time infuriated me.

“You took advantage of my mother when she was most vulnerable. Married before Dad’s body was cold.”

“What are you talking about? I’m suggesting we work together. Your mother has nothing to do with this.”

“She passed control of the business to you, but I won’t.”

“I’m not the only one in a position to sabotage your plans. I may have to wait in line.”

Damn him. He’s already testing me and we haven’t left the building. He’ll be a monkey on my shoulder.

I could almost feel his breath on my neck.

I didn’t flinch when he called out, “Laura. Watch your back.”

HIGH HILL WAS NOW MY HOME. I sorted, packed, and stored some of Gram’s personal effects, merging my modest belongings with the rest of her furnishings and the exotic accessories I treasured. Michael’s daily calls and frequent visits informed me of events and the mood at the plant. By Friday evening, an important change had become obvious.

“What a yummy surprise. I didn’t expect to see you till tomorrow.”

“I couldn’t wait that long. And I was hungry.” He raised a big bag from our favorite Chinese restaurant.

“Mmm. Excellent choice. I haven’t had dinner.”

“I didn’t think so.” He scattered pint-size containers on the kitchen table. “It’s still hot.”

“What did you bring me?” I grabbed two plates from the cupboard and a fork for me.

“The usual. Spicy garlic chicken and vegetables with pork fried rice.”

When he leaned forward to fill my plate, I kissed his cheek.

He dug in with chopsticks. “I was tempted to try something different.”

“You know I hate surprises.” I appreciated that he knew me so well, yet tears welled in my eyes.

He rose from across the table, stooped beside me, and hugged me. “Hey, what’s this about?”

“Moments before Gram’s death, we said the same thing about surprises.”

“The last thing I wanted was to—”

“I know.” I wiped my eyes with my napkin. “It’s my fault. Emotions are too close to the surface. Sit. Tell me. How was your day?”

“So-so.”

“Did something happen at the plant?”

“Not really.”

“But maybe?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on. You should come back to work.”

“I’m not ready. I need more time.”

“It might help to get away from High Hill for a while, at least a few hours a day. And it’s been almost three weeks since Rosa died. The time ... it’s been ... ah....”

“Proper?”

He nodded.

“I need a few more days.”

“If you stay away too long ... I don’t know. Patterns are forming in your absence. New leaders may emerge.”

“I understand. You’re right. I’ll go back sometime next week.” Regardless of what he believed, I knew the truth. Half of me hungered to prove myself while the other half struggled in doubt. A precipice was outside the door and I was afraid of the height.

~ FOUR ~

1899 • Spring

A WEEK HAD PASSED since Father and Salvatore voyaged to Europe. Maggie’s disquiet had grown with the passing of each dismal day. Tutoring, cancelled. Visits with friends, forbidden. Churchgoing, ceased. The cook and housekeeper had been sent away and the groundskeeper was instructed to come but twice a month. Most days, Carlotta left Maggie to fend for herself, eating any pantry food from a dwindling stock, then quickly returning outside to play where she remained

invisible. She had a sense her clever attempts to evade her fate could not be sustained for the months Father and Salvatore would be gone. Alas, she was doomed.

Early in the second week, she climbed high into her favorite willow tree, scrambling to the clouds, but the weaker branches did not support her. Her body bounced through the tree. Viny offshoots slipped through her fingers as she failed to slow her fall. She slammed to earth as good as dead. The impact forced the wind from her chest. Time slowed. The sky darkened. Light dimmed. Her eyes closed as she lay stunned and breathless on the ground, her face buried in grass and soil. Dizzy. Spinning. Burning pain.

Crows squawked in the distance. Maggie gasped as air tore into her lungs like a breath from God raising the dead. Her body wrenched as she anticipated movement, prayed her limbs would move. Fingers lifted one by one, then arms and legs. She cautiously rose, feeling where she hurt, spitting earth from her mouth. Her lip bled. Legs ached. Knees and hands felt afire as blood oozed from raw shredded skin.

She hobbled toward the house, following the stone wall where Father had bid farewell. Once a tidy boundary, the wall now divided times of serenity from those of abandonment. She hated the lovely damned wall.

Her every thought centered on herself—the stinging palms, her knees, her blood. She needed someone to hold her and mend her. *Had Carlotta returned? Would wounds ignite her mother's compassion?* There was no one in sight, but Uncle Elias' carriage was tucked beside the house nearly out of view. *Thanks to God.* Though not a blood uncle, Elias was so often at the factory and guest in the Delito home, he had earned the title. He would surely arrange for the physician.

Maggie limped in and out of the foyer and the parlor. Perhaps Carlotta and Elias sat in the library where Father often met with associates to speak of business and weighty subjects. *Perhaps he brought news of Father or the factory.* Shelves with books towered over the empty silent space. The last of fireplace embers glowed, yet doled no warmth, seeming it had not been attended since morning.

Maggie heard a thud.

She rushed to the kitchen, then to the pantry. No one there. Another thud and thump. Her head snapped left and right. The sounds came from above, from Father's chamber and Carlotta's.

She faltered up the staircase, stopping once to check her battered knees. Blood clotted and crusted over the dirty scrapes. She winched when she touched them.

Maggie heard moaning from inside the bedroom chamber. She needed someone. Anyone. She eased open the double doors and stared at the bed. There, she saw Carlotta's naked buttocks bounce as she squatted on Uncle Elias. He grunted as if she hurt him, yet he grinned. Maggie watched in silence. Carlotta's round breasts bobbed up and down. Uncle Elias watched them, too.

Carlotta stretched her arms until her hands gripped the headboard of Father's four post bed. She pushed herself against Uncle Elias and they bumped and rocked together. The bed knocked against the wall in a deranged rhythm, then Carlotta squealed.

Maggie's eyes gaped. She gasped.

Uncle Elias jerked his head and gawked at the intrusion of her shriek. Motionless, her discovery etched into her mind.

Carlotta snatched her dressing gown draped over a nearby chair and wrapped it around her body. Her face twisted to an angry scowl.

Uncle Elias pulled on his trousers.

Maggie ran. Down the stairs. Out the door. Across the field. Her heart pumped hard. Her bloodied hands throbbed. Knees stung with a thousand needles.

She ran and ran, twisting her head to look behind. Carlotta and Elias chased after her. Running. Faster. Closer. Closer.

She could almost feel their breath on her back.

When a firm hand gripped her shoulder, Maggie lost her footing. She and Uncle Elias tumbled to the ground and rolled together into the stone wall.

ELIAS CARRIED MAGGIE into the house and dropped her in the foyer closet. Carlotta locked the door, heedless of the girl's screeching and pounding as she stood before the foyer mirror fastening her hair into a loose knot. Porcelain skin flushed from running, she dabbed her face with a dainty cloth.

"I told you Lottie, we shouldn't have," Elias called from the library. "Not with the kid here. She's old enough to know what's going on and too smart to believe an absurd fabrication."

"Shut up, you damned fool." She snatched a bottle from the spirit cabinet, poured a glass of whiskey and paced the room. "I've got to think."

"If she tells Antonio, he'll kill us."

A mouthful of spirit burned down her throat. Arms folded across her chest braced her bosom with exaggerated cleavage meant to distract. The white lace ruffles of her dressing gown danced on her breasts as she stepped toward the French-style doors. At thirty-three, her body was nearly perfect. Only the cursed stretch marks, tokens of pregnancy, scarred her flawless skin. She brushed against Elias like a cat. "He's not going to kill us."

Elias leaned against the stone fireplace, facing the piled ash below. "She'll tell him. You bloody well know she will. It's finished. Everything I've worked for. Why did I get involved with you? He'll discharge me from the business if he doesn't slit my throat."

She ignored his worried babble.

"You'll be out of his life, too," he warned.

"A blessed day."

"And cheated of his fortune."

"Shut up!" Carlotta grabbed a poker and jabbed the ashes as she contemplated the grim possibility Elias could be right.

"Think faster, Lottie. We can't leave the kid locked in the closet forever."

The smell of charred wood permeated the room though fire no longer burned. No amount of poking revived the flames. She tapped the iron tool against the stone, spraying fine gray powder to the floor with each loud clang. "What did you say?"

"You'll be cut from his inheritance."

"After that."

"We can't leave her locked forever."

“Oh, if only we could.” Carlotta set the poker down.

Elias’ snicker had never sounded so sinister. “My darling, I happen to know just the place.”

She bit her lower lip as they contrived a scheme. “I believe we have a plan, Elias Porter. We have a plan.”

THE NEXT MORNING, Elias Porter’s carriage bumped along a rutted road hugging the Connecticut River. Maggie bounced hard against the horsehair seat. Carlotta sat beside her. Elias sat facing them. They had been riding in a northerly direction for nearly two hours, or perhaps three.

“Where are we going?” Maggie asked.

Carlotta didn’t answer.

Maggie was dirty, hungry and hurt. Her knees were swollen red and blue and thick with scabs. Scraped hands burned. She’d not ingested food since yesterday morn and she still wore the torn dress and stockings soiled with mud and blood. Father would never allow her to be seen in such a state. She tried to brush the dirt with the back of her hand. “Father will be angry.”

Carlotta seized Maggie’s matted hair and pushed her head hard against the carriage window. “Look. One more word and I’ll drown you in the river, I swear I will.”

Maggie crouched on the floor and didn’t utter another sound. She pulled a blanket over her head, closed her eyes and hoped when they opened, she would see a better day.

The carriage wobble rocked her like Father had parodied Nellie Bly’s ship in rough seas. The woolen blanket she clutched felt similar to the coat he wore that day in the field. Then the image of Carlotta’s bouncing breasts, the first she’d ever seen, and the sound of Uncle Elias’ groaning slammed into her head. *In Father’s own bed! There would be hell to pay when he returned.* She drifted into sleep to dream of Father’s vengeance.

The carriage struck a deep rut. Blossoms bounced from the posy holder. Maggie woke with a jerk and tossed the blanket from her face. The midday sun momentarily blinded her. Tall spiked rails of an iron fence along the roadside appeared ethereal as they blurred past the carriage window. They rode through an open gate and followed a long straight path.

An ambulance wagon passed to exit the grounds.

The carriage stopped at a circle of grass in front of the main entrance of a grand Federal-style building. A broad porch with eight fluted columns led to the door.

“Where are we?”

Carlotta grimaced and held Maggie in the coach.

Uncle Elias approached the front entrance and spoke to the man who greeted him. His shoulders meaty, his arms as thick as hams, he was the biggest man Maggie had ever seen. He towered over Elias with eyes gone wide as if Elias was the last man he expected to see. Hair, the color of sand, grew far back on his skull making his bulbous forehead appear even larger than it was. A brown leather apron protected his clean pressed blouse.

The man glanced at the carriage and nodded several times while Uncle Elias spoke. They looked comfortable together, as if they knew each other—as if they shared secrets. She had often observed Elias at High Hill social functions and thought him to be a bit of a dandy. Most folks,

especially the ladies, found him to be charming, which made the man beside him an unlikely comrade. Yet they shared a bond so formidable, the chains connecting them could almost be seen.

Elias reached into his pocket, opened his leather coin purse and counted a certain amount. He handed money to the man, who wrapped his fist around it and slid his hand beneath his apron, coins clinking as they dropped into his trouser pocket.

The man entered the building then returned to the porch with a woman, who marched to the carriage and pulled open the door. Her strong, stubby hands gripped Maggie's arm. She resisted, burrowing deeper into the carriage compartment, but Carlotta pushed her into the woman's arms.

"Margaret, this is Matron Smythe," Uncle Elias said.

Maggie shielded her eyes from the sun's glare as she first looked to Elias then to the big man next to him. "Steward Heinz Brudolf," the man said, bending down toward Maggie's face. His breath stank of chewing tobacco.

Maggie turned toward Matron. A bun of brown and gray hair poised atop her head was tied so tight it pulled her skin upward. Tiny brown eyes hid behind silver framed spectacles. Flabby cheeks weighed her expression into a scowl, and her chin was as chiseled as a marionette's. She wore a gray striped dress with a white cotton service apron that smelled of bleach.

"You will remain here until your father returns." Elias unloaded a trunk from the carriage and set it on the porch.

Maggie's gaze snapped toward the carriage to Carlotta, but Matron Smythe yanked her up the three steps to the open porch where she read the brass marker beside the door. Etched into the sign, were the words: *Brookhaven Farm Lunatic Asylum*. All the horrific details of Nellie Bly's newspaper exposé came to mind.

"No!" Maggie jerked her arm from Matron's hold and ran after the carriage. Racing alongside, she tugged at the door with no regard for the torment of her wounds. "Let me in." The carriage rode faster until she could no longer keep pace. "Uncle Elias. Stop. Carlotta, please." She screamed as the carriage bounced down the gentle hill and out of sight. Her hands clenched at her sides. She kicked at the gravel road. "Take me with you," Maggie bellowed. "MOTHER! Don't leave me here!"

~ end of chapter four ~