

## Chapter One

I was nine when I first heard them.

It was a dusty hot Oklahoma summer, and my dehydrated tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth. I pressed my head to the window glass, smelling the chicken soup odor of my body, not able to even turn the page of my book. Dad said our air conditioning was going to get fixed in the morning, but I didn't believe it. Everything had a habit of remaining undone here.

My Gran was in the other room, sleeping, Mom said, sweat streaking her powder-pale face. Gran's breathing left lingering rattles in the air. No one wanted to tell me how bad it was, but I knew. I'd seen the hospice worker, Charlotte, as she washed her wrinkled hands at the end of the day. Her eyes said she was disconnecting so she wouldn't feel the bad news when it came. It was a look I knew well. Mom wore it the nights Dad came home late. Whiskey'd be on his breath, every time.

As I sat, a ball of smell and damp, I heard a soft croak through the window. Rawwwwk.

I peered out into my yard. There was Charlotte, wringing her hands. She had a funny look on her face, eyes too wide, staring up at the sky. She turned, and I ducked down. I didn't want her to wilt me with that strange stare of hers. Charlotte never liked it when I got "underfoot", as she called it.

She eventually left, but that soft croaking filled my dreams that night, and my head tied that inhuman sound to her withered old face, staring, staring with those eyes. I knew the sound wasn't hers, but my mind made it so anyways, made that croaking grate at my bones and soul in my nightmares.

When the dawn peeked through my window, I heard Mom scream, and I didn't need to leave my bed to know why. Gran was gone.

Men took her frosty white body away, it looked just the same as it had when she'd been living in it for the past week, and I wondered why anyone had tried fooling themselves into thinking she'd turn around.

My Mom cried. She cried thick gasping tears that ran down her face and through her hands. But, even then, I knew she'd been readying for this, knew she'd heal. So, it wasn't Gran's death that broke her. It was when the police knocked on our door two days later, asking her where Dad was. It turned out Gran's heart had been missing, they'd really like to know who took it, thankaverymuch, and since he'd been missing since the death...

The last time I saw my father, it was with my ear to a crusty black phone, watching his hand leave a smeared print on the glass between us. "Di!" he said. "I didn't do it. You know what they said, but you have to believe I didn't do it." I shook my head. I wanted to know why he'd killed Gran. His meaty hands slammed on the shelf, his eyes bugging from his head. "I didn't do it, Di! Don't let them tell you I did! It was them! It was that!"

But he never told me what it was because the guards grabbed him. Guess they didn't like

**Commented [LM1]:** Add comma

**Commented [LM2]:** "unable" might be smoother

**Commented [LM3]:** Insert em dash here (—), deleting comma and spacing

**Commented [LM4]:** Unclear if this refers to Mom or Gran. If Gran, I'd move this phrase so the line reads, "...in the other room, sweat streaking her powder-pale face—sleeping, Mom said."

**Commented [LM5]:** Typo correction: disconnecting.

**Commented [LM6]:** Sound effects typically are italicized

**Commented [LM7]:** Missing word, "to"

**Commented [LM8]:** Could replace this with "gaze"; "staring" was used two sentences ago, and it might be repetitive on the ear as-is

**Commented [LM9]:** A couple options to fix this run-on sentence:

1. Replace comma with period and begin a new sentence here
2. Replace comma with a semicolon (;) or em dash (—)

**Commented [LM10]:** This should be a comma

**Commented [LM11]:** This should be an em dash too, since it's an interruption.