

The Delengrad Trilogy

Book One:

Regina

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Cover and Book Jacket Created by: Crystal Maloney

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Regina and the Delengrad trilogy are an original creation by Mary Ann Moody.

Regina is dedicated to my wonderful parents, Richard and Linda Mangrum. Their love and encouragement molded me into the eccentric writer I am today, and I thank you both from the bottom of my heart. I love you both.

To the inhabitants of the real Lee, Texas:
Thank you for the best childhood a writer could ask for.

And a huge thank you to Crystal Maloney
for creating the cover and book jacket to Regina.

M. A. M.

Prologue

Dreams are real.

Scientists say they are not sure why we dream. They assume dreams are a combination of verbal, visual, and emotional stimuli combined into sometimes fragmented nonsense. No one can be sure what they are, but dreams have inspired people. Stephen King said he received inspiration for his books from his dreams. I thought it was an entertaining idea.

I read an article online that said *early civilizations thought dream worlds were real, physical worlds that they could enter only from their dream state*. I thought it was very interesting. A man said his college Sociology professor taught a theory: our souls leave our bodies when we sleep and our dreams are remnants of its experiences. That was my favorite theory. I can think of that now and not cry. The pain of his betrayal still lingers.

For me, my dreams led to my real self and to my real home. I realized the repetition of my dreams when I was a little girl. I didn't care about them until I moved to Lee, Texas. This is the story of me, the life and dreams of Regina Roth. Regina no longer exists, but through her, our stories will finally be told.

Chapter One

I didn't discover the plot to murder me until it was too late. I never saw it coming. It started with the need to leave New York for Lee, Texas. Leaving my home, my summertime youth, my closet, our upper west side apartment, my friends, and boyfriend made me angry. My heart filled up with an intense ache. It hurt so much in my chest. I couldn't help but cry the whole way to the airport. I knew I upset my mom. I felt her eyes on me the entire day and saw the tears that escaped her eyes. She felt miserable for me and I knew I shouldn't be so selfish, but I couldn't help it. I was in mourning, too.

I was in denial after daddy pulled me aside to tell me the terrible news, we were going to my mother's hometown for the summer to help her mysterious father bury his wife, my grandmother. My dead grandmother was as much of a mystery to me as my grandfather. My mother never talked about her parents, let alone her life before she met my father. Daddy said she didn't get along with her parents and once she graduated high school, she left and never returned.

"Never?" I asked him that day. I felt full of doubt when he first told me.

"Never." The dark look in his eyes haunted me. "She never wanted to return. Regina, your mother's parents are religious fanatics who disapproved of everything she did. They looked down on her and judged every decision she made as if they were the Universe. The town is tiny, and the people are snotty and judgmental. Plus, everything closes at dusk. Lee is never a place I would want to live."

I shuddered at the thought. Daddy sounded so firm and serious. I become scared of the man I would meet. My mother's father. I was curious about him, but I let my imagination run away with me. I pictured him as seven feet tall and towered over me. He had menacing red eyes and thin red lips. His judging eyes would mistake me for a sinner and I would spend the whole summer running from this wild, religious freak.

I let out a deep breath while I waited for the plane to board. The plane was right outside the window, getting ready to whisk me away. My family and I would soon board into the first-class section. Then the plane would take off, and take me away from New York and every wonderful moment I longed to have. I felt my stomach turn. I knew I was going to throw up and ran into the nearest bathroom.

I felt something terrible waited for me in Lee and I was scared.

I washed my face with cold water and took deep breaths after my anxiety attack passed. The lights flickered as I washed my hands. Why was I panicking so badly? I know I'm leaving my home, but I can live with that. It's only for the summer, not forever.

"So why can't I breathe? Why can't I stop shaking?" I asked my reflection.

I took more deep breaths and tried to get hold of myself. The dingy light turquoise tiles on the walls made my stomach turn. I moaned as my head spun. The room smelled bad which didn't help my nausea. My blonde hair looked grossly pale and unwashed under the low lights. My blue eyes did nothing to hide the fear behind them. Everyone says I'm such a pretty girl, but the person staring back at me in the mirror was scared and far from pretty.

"Everything is going to be okay. I'm going to be okay." I told myself over and over. I repeated the mantra in my head and felt better with every deep breath. Eventually, the room stopped spinning.

“Flight seven fifty-five for Austin Texas now boarding first class and handicapped passengers at gate seven. Boarding for flight seven fifty-five, Austin Texas, first class and handicapped passengers, gate seven,” the announcement said.

That was me.

Before I left the bathroom, I gave myself a hard look in the mirror and repeated, “I am going to do this because I am strong. My mother needs me. I’m going to find an adventure in Lee and return to New York where I belong.”

I stared into the mirror for another minute. The smell was not so bad now that I breathed it in for so long. I gazed at my tall, slim figure in the mirror. I didn’t want to leave this stinky bathroom now, but I felt silly about my anxiety. I looked myself firmly in the eye and walked out of the restroom.

My pep talk didn’t work. The moment I opened the restroom door, I felt like running anywhere but towards that plane. I felt my feet grow roots into the floor. My sweet father saw my hesitation and immediately came to my aid. I was happy mom boarded the plane and didn’t see my anxiety. Her happiness was the only reason I agreed to go.

“G? Are you okay?” my father’s voice called out with concern.

I laughed internally. My father was such a worrywart when it came to me. Plus, his nickname for me, G, was such a lame attempt to be cool in front of me and my friends, but I loved him for it.

“Yes, daddy. Just not feeling well. I don’t think breakfast sat well with me,” I lied.

“Well, do you think you’re ready? We can board.”

I opened my mouth to speak when the feeling of doom and vomit rose like a tidal wave intent on destroying me. I felt the heat in my cheeks and my breath quicken. I resisted the urge to dig my fingernails into the ground, refuse to go, and scream like a child in order to get my way. Never before had I felt such emotions of panic. I sat down heavily into the chair beside me.

“Regina, please don’t do this to your mother. We’ve talked about this before. It’s only for two months while we help grandpa George sort out the funeral and estate. He has no one to help him and nowhere to go. We have to make sure he has a home and someone to take care of him.” His face filled with fear. My parents were afraid I would not get on the plane for Texas.

“I know. I just needed a moment. I’m ready. Let’s get going,” I lied as I forced a smile. I successfully pushed the anxiety down and boarded the plane that would take me to my summer adventure.

Had I known the horrors that awaited me in Lee, I never would’ve boarded the plane.

Chapter Two

I felt better after I sipped on my cola and read my book. My feet relaxed in front of me and my stomach settled down. The plane was crammed with people. Thank goodness daddy had claustrophobia because a great benefit to traveling with him was his insistence on flying first class. I loved the special treatment, the spacious seats, the better food, and the free everything. If we fly overseas, we get free pajamas and slippers. The stewardess handed out drinks while everyone else boarded the plane. A cola settled my stomach nicely. I sat exactly where I wanted, which was as far from my parents as possible. It made me sick to watch them cuddle like two lovebirds. I noticed daddy didn't have anxiety about flying to Texas.

When he was a child, his friends locked him in a tiny closet as a joke. Since then, my poor father has been afraid of small spaces. I don't understand how a plane compares to a tiny closet, but daddy tried to fly regular class when we went to Maine for spring break. I was glad we picked a short trip. The plane was so tiny, daddy wanted to jumped from the plane.

I looked around while the stewardesses made drinks and handed out snacks. Dinner would be served later. I didn't want to talk to anyone so I put in my ear buds and enjoyed the silence. They never left my ears the entire trip. I watched the ground move under the plane as we prepared for takeoff. I knew this was my last chance to execute plan b, which was to throw a huge temper tantrum and get us kicked off the plane. We would be forced to drive to Texas and there was *no* way my parents were going to do that. Every second that went by, I knew plan b was a stupid idea. My body deflated while I let my breath, and plan b, go.

I looked at my parents as the plane flew high into the sky. I noticed they had their heads together and spoke of their excitement about going to mom's hometown. They appeared like two old people trying to regain their lost youth. *When will they realize they will never be young again so they should get over it?* My thoughts turned red as I looked outside. The beautiful New York skyline was a sight to see. I looked everywhere below as memories flooded my mind. Tears zigzagged down my face as I relived every second in New York with my friends. My anger threatened to boil when I looked back at my parents. They were making a toast together. I heard their glasses clink and I shut my eyes. They never looked at me or came to see if I was okay. I wanted some space, but not enough that they ignore me. I turned on my music and set the volume loud. I droned out their stupid teenage excitement about seeing my mom's high school and the places she hung out. My wet eyes threatened to close after so many days without sleep. Now that I was on the plane, I knew life would carry me to my destiny like a leaf in the river. After the airplane disappeared into the clouds, somewhere between my anger and rage, I fell asleep.

I sat on a school bus. It was nighttime, which was a pretty odd time of day to be going home from school. I looked around and noticed the familiar surroundings. We were driving in the country, on a lone gravel road. Renee and Jane sat in the back talking about something.

"Hey guys!" I said.

"Regina, you didn't get off at your stop?" Jane asked with concern.

"I guess not. I think I fell asleep. What are you guys up to?" I asked as I got up and sat in the seat in front of them.

They did not answer me. Jane and Renee looked out the window in a daze. I looked out the bus window and felt connected with the scenes outside. I gazed at the mobile homes and trucks as we drove by them. My vision was captured by the livestock of cows, sheep, pigs, goats, and horses. Sometimes, a deer ran by us. We passed large bales of hay, lakes, and little ponds with tiny

docks. I had never seen so much of the country. I am a born and bred New York City girl so this was something I was in awe of.

While I was in rapture with the scenery, Jane and Renee got off the bus. I looked up after a few minutes and they were gone. Their book bags and any trace of them were gone. I was confused because I did not feel the bus stop for them.

Before I could think any more of it, I looked out the window again and saw the familiar Fort Knox style house as we passed by it. The house was made of dark bricks with a ten-foot-high brick fence surrounding the property. Its massive roof peeked out, over the top of the wall. The bus took a sharp curve and slowed down. Ahead of us, a fog rolled towards the bus. Before I could worry the driver would go through it, the bus turned to the left and away from the fog. I let out a breath of relief.

The bus stopped and I got off. I felt happy that I made it to my destination. The bus drove away as I realized that I had no idea where I was. The tree line indicated a forest was fifty feet away. A deserted house stood in the distance. The overgrown grass swayed with the wind. I felt nervous and stupid. Why did I get off the bus? I looked everywhere for a street sign or someone who could help me. Panic made my breath come faster and the night grew cold. I hugged my shirt close to me to keep warm. As I stood there, I felt someone watching me. My eyes searched the dark tree line and scanned the road for signs of a person. I could not see anyone. It was so cold now. Someone was here, I felt it. Was I supposed to meet someone here? It could not be Jane or Renee. They would have gotten off the bus with me.

I shivered as I tried to remember. My life depended on it. Snow fell from the sky like someone was shaking it hard on the world. If only I could remember! I think it was a man and...

I woke with a soft start and groaned with pain. My back was killing me! After my fourth birthday, I noticed a horrible pain in my shoulders. Unfortunately, the pain never went away. If I stayed in one place for too long, my shoulders stiffened up, and I would be in an enormous amount of pain for a while. I wondered where we were when I realized I ached from the stupid airplane seat. I must've fallen asleep. I hoped we weren't near Austin! I was about to freak out again. I had not mentally prepared myself to get off the plane yet. I needed a few more minutes to deal with this whole getting off the plane idea.

"Don't worry sweetie, we still have an hour till we land," mom whispered gently.

I looked over at my mom and saw her sweet smile. Her golden blonde hair reminded me of Sleeping Beauty. Her brown eyes were full of love as she smiled at me, but not easy to see was her pain. Those eyes held lots of tears and pain she refused to show. Her petite body looked strong, but was about to break. After all, her mother just died.

"Thanks, mom," I replied.

The funeral notice for my grandmother, Lydia Underwood arrived by email two days ago. Mom cried for hours and would not talk to anyone except daddy. They stayed in their room for the whole night, talking and planning. I didn't care to know what they discussed because I didn't think their plans affected me. I figured mom and dad would leave me in New York while they went to the funeral. The whole thing would take three to five days, and mom would cry for a while, but she would be okay. I would definitely be there for her anytime she needed me. After all, she never talked about her mother or showed she cared. Things should be back to normal soon.

I smiled at my mom and gave her a nod. Daddy was fast asleep, his head on her shoulder. They must have moved seats when they finally realized I sat so far away. Maybe this trip would be

good for them, like daddy said. They needed time together to have some romance. The last thing my parents have had in these past years is romance. She laid her head back and closed her eyes.

My dream journal was in my carryon bag and I reached down to grab it. I've been writing in it for five years now. It practically jumped out at me when I saw it in the bookstore. Back then, it was a brand new green leather book with crisp golden pages. Now, it was a beaten up darkened thing with yellowed pages. I wanted to record my dream.

Dear Diary, I had another dream. This time it was on the 'lone country road'. Same as always, I was on a bus with Jane and Renee. It was night and I was fascinated with the country setting...

I stopped writing and closed the journal. I needed a minute to think. I ordered another cola from the stewardess and sipped on it. The sky was amazing at night. I couldn't see the stars too well, but the darkness reminded me of a scary movie. I opened my journal to the first page and read the first entry. My younger handwriting was messy, but easy to read.

Dear Diary. Is that what I'm supposed to write? Or is it, Dear Journal? Hmm... I suppose it doesn't matter. I bought this journal to help me keep track of my dream, so I hope I won't be writing in it much. I haven't told anyone about my dreams. Everything began when I was around five years old. I didn't take much notice to them at first, but now I can't shake the feeling I'm being watched and manipulated in my everyday movements. Maybe those books are right and my dreams are only images of things we see every day. I'm not sure, so this journal is going to hold my dreams.

Anyway, my dreams started with a house. A big, beautiful house that I will run away from, screaming in horror, if I ever step into! I don't know what the downstairs looks like, but it is the upstairs and backyard where my dreams occur. Then, my dreams included these long, dark, and isolated roads. I assume the dreams take place outside of the city because there's lots of trees, grass, livestock, and no one for miles. Plus, the oddest occurrences have happened with my boyfriend Jeff. I used to feel sweet to him; want to do things to show him how much I love him. Now, I find any reason to fight and push him away. But, I feel that something out there is happy for our fights and pushes me to do it. I swear I'm not crazy! I just feel this pull.

Let me start from the beginning, a long time ago I started dreaming of a house. I don't know where it's located, but I will never forget it. The upstairs is open with large windows running along the wall that faces the backyard. The room has wood paneling and feels like a cabin. The backyard is large and open. It is enclosed by a long line of pine and oak trees. The woods. I feel that something is there. It's coming for me. The house won't protect me, in fact, it feels as if the house is an intricate part of someone else's plan. What plan that is, I have no idea, but my dreams return to the house consistently. I can be driving down a country road and pull into my "home". Then my dreams go crazy. There's an explosion, I'm running from something, trying to hide from it. I usually end up at the house. I look out the large windows and feel that something horrible is coming for me. Maybe it's searching for me right now?

I paused. Reading the first entry was fascinating and a little frightening. When I started this journal, I wanted to keep track of my reoccurring dreams. Not every dream was the same, but the ones with the house, roads, and mirrors were. I felt something chasing me every time I dreamed. I continued reading.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now descending into Austin, Texas. Temperature is a warm ninety-seven degrees with clear skies..." He went on, but I stopped listening.

"Great, I'm literally in Hell." I muttered with a mad giggle. I locked my journal and put it back in my bag. My worst fear was someone would find my journal and read it. Or worse, I actually find the house of my nightmares. Thank goodness they were only nightmares and not real.

Chapter Three

I have no idea what Austin looked like because the airport was located outside the city. Lee is so small, the closest airport is Austin, which was a whopping sixty miles away, so we had to drive the last hour of the trip. I was beyond bored! Everything was closed at the airport. We got our luggage and rental car quickly due to the lateness of the day.

We stopped for dinner at a rundown little diner in a town called Bastrop. The décor was a depressing yellow and green. It covered the walls and the bar stools. The stools sat around a dark faux wood bar. I looked for cowboys wearing spurs and Stetson hats. Hmmm. I didn't see any. Where were the southern bells with the hoop skirts? Some guys sitting on the stools at the bar turned to look at us. I wondered if they had guns. We chose a booth that looked the cleanest and sat down. I was not ready to talk so I kept the ear buds in. I was grateful to mom and daddy for keeping the peace and not yelling at me for not being a part of their conversation. They knew I would talk when I was ready.

"What ya'll want to drink?" the waitress asked. It sounded like she said it 'What cha'll want to drank?'

I giggled and felt daddy's elbow poke my ribs.

We gave her our drink orders. When she left, daddy turned to me. "So, I've deduced you're listening to us, but have yet come to speaking terms. Am I correct?"

I couldn't help but laugh. He smiled his handsome smile at me. My father's sweet blue eyes were full of life and humor. Soon, mom began laughing, too. I'm sure we were quite a sight, a couple of New York city slickers in southern territory, and laughing madly at each other. It felt good. It felt normal.

Then, I started crying, bawling right there in a hillbilly diner. I wanted to feel normal with mom and daddy again. My world was turned upside down with one email. Almost overnight, I was separated from everyone and everything I love. Feelings of panic, hopelessness, and denial crowded my everyday thoughts. Yet, here I was, laughing with my parents as if things never changed.

"Baby, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to make you cry," he said gently. He stroked my arm and handed me a napkin. I wiped my eyes quickly.

"No daddy, it wasn't you. This feels like being home with you guys," I said.

I felt mom and daddy trade guilty looks. I didn't intend to make them feel bad so I took a deep breath, swallowed the rest of my teenage anger, and looked at the menu. Mom analyzed my movements and decided I was okay. She gave her menu a glance, as well. I gave mom a little smile when I asked if she was hungry.

"Well, I do feel like I should eat something. I'm not sure what, though," she said. She eyed the menu in confusion.

I understood her confusion. What the heck was a chicken fried chicken? And what similarities, if any, did it have to the chicken fried steak? Was everything in this place fried? For goodness sakes, they even fry the bacon. I was surprised there was not anything I could eat on this menu that would not ruin my weight. I continued looking through the menu and found the burger to be the safest to order. I think my parents were having the same problem. We looked at each other and said, "Burgers." in unison.

The burgers were good. Mom and I split a second one and daddy had three burgers total. I don't know what it was, but our moods were much higher after dinner. Daddy had us laughing at the menu. We loved it when he went through the items and gave a country twang to them. Mom looked happier. Her cheeks were rosier and her spirit seemed lifted. Daddy naturally has a

positive effect on us, but something about tonight enhanced his charisma and charm. Maybe it's the light, but daddy seems so happy, he's... glowing.

"I'm sorry, what?" I said to the waitress. I didn't realize she asked me a question.

"Can I get cha some dessert, sweetie?" she asked.

"Oh, no! I think I'm fine," I said with a genuine laugh and pat my stomach.

"Maybe we should get some dessert to take with us? I'm not sure if dad has food at the house," mom said.

Wait, what? Dad? Did she just call her father, dad? What happened to calling him George, or not mentioning him at all?

"You're not sure if George has food?" daddy asked mom with concern. My head tried to wrap around mom calling her father, dad. Deep down, I knew this was the first time I felt something was amiss. Something felt wrong about my mom's endearing comment. Well, that may not be true. I think the first time I felt something was wrong was after the email arrived to tell my mom her mother was dead.

The drive to Lee was long and dark. It was dark in the car and the country was quite boring. Reading was out of the question, the light would bother daddy while he tried to drive. I tried to become interested in the little towns we passed, but they were pretty small and we drove through them quickly. Besides, there was nothing to see. I didn't have service on my phone, so I let the music take over in my ears and I fell asleep.

I didn't have a dream and if I did, I don't remember it. The next thing I knew, I woke up in the car. We made it to Grandpa's house. The house sat in a wide clearing, surrounded by trees. They were thick and tangled together like crazed monsters longing to keep me here forever. I wanted to crawl into a ball and refuse to come out of the car. I pulled out my phone to text Jane and Renee, but I shut it in anger when I saw I didn't have service. This was impossible! I was going to be miserable, no matter what. No friends, no shopping, no good food, no New York, no cell phone service, and no Jeff. Maybe if I closed my eyes and wished hard enough, I would be back home in my room.

Tap, tap, tap.

Daddy tapped on the window glass. He wanted me to get out of the car. I was the only one left inside and I didn't want to step out. It would make my situation real if I did, like I decided to submit to the fate they led me to. I could almost picture myself in the backseat of a cab, off with Jane to some amazing place for dinner. Our rules were not firm at Will Lawson Academy, my high school, and it was amazing.

I fell from my daydreams and crashed into reality as I looked out the window at daddy's anxious face. I forced myself to open the car door.

Once I got out, I widened my eyes to the house in front of me. It was a beautiful cottage in the middle of the woods. The outside walls were built with big gray stones. It was questionably two to three stories high with ivy crawling up the outside walls. Only one window faced the rock driveway. It was tiny and possibly had white lace curtains. The car and I faced a similar two feet stone wall surrounding the outside patio. There was a door that led inside, but the patio was large and full of outside plants. As I walked closer, I thought I heard water to my right, but it was too dark to see anything.

I entered the patio through the charming little wooden gate. I noticed the concrete floor was cracked and old. However, the patio furniture was newer and looked comfortable. There were yellow and white striped cushions tied to white iron chairs. Similar cushions were on the little ottomans in front of the chairs. A cute little white iron table was between the chairs. A book was

lying on table with a bookmark keeping place the last page read. I was in awe. A little combination of the stars, the cool breeze, and that furniture, this could be a nice spot for me. I could definitely see myself out here.

“Not bad out here, eh?” Daddy said from behind me.

“Yes.” I turned to him. “Not bad at all.”

“Can’t get this in the city,” he muttered to himself.

I giggled at him. Daddy certainly knew my thoughts like they were written on my face. I walked through the patio door and found myself in a rectangle sized outdoor sunroom. The walls were made of empty wood frames with weatherproof plastic stapled into the frame. A little washer and dryer were to my right along with uneven concrete steps leading to an old white wood door. The rest of the room was loaded with things such as a freezer and wood/mechanical stuff. The door leading into the house stood in the middle of the wall to my right. It was distinctly red, though time had faded the color terribly. Between the two doors was a little rectangle sized window, looking into the house. The front door had the same uneven concrete steps just below the door. At the end of the room was another door. I wondered where it went.

“You can explore in the morning,” daddy said. He must have caught me staring. “Let’s get our things settled and assess the situation. Maybe we can try to get some sleep soon. I don’t know about you G, but I’m on New York time!” He put his arm around me and led me through the front door.

Mom was already inside, putting her things down and making herself comfortable. I saw her take a survey of the house. I’m sure it felt different being in the house you grew up in. I wondered if things have changed since she’s been here. The front door opened right into the kitchen and dining room. Hmm, I’ve never seen a house that opened into the kitchen before. The kitchen was to my right and complete with an old iron stove, refrigerator, dishwasher and some decent countertop space. I hated the brown linoleum that plagued the floors. Though the décor was old, it made me feel as if we were in a cabin, a very outdated cabin. The dining room was to my left and had red walls with red carpet. There was a window on the far left wall in the dining area. I giggled at the feel of the room. The layout was backwards! I felt as if I was on vacation, like that time we went to Colorado. Yes, that was the way I should think of my life right now. Maybe I could live here for a little while.

I passed the dining room table on my way to the next room, which ended up being the biggest room of the house, the living room. It was longer and wider than the kitchen and dining room, and had a tall ceiling. I ran my gaze along the high walls and felt pretty impressed. The room was covered in dark wood paneling except for the massive stone fireplace on the right side of the room.

Now this room had windows! Massive windows ran from floor to ceiling on two sides of the room. The sunlight made the room bright, and fairy tale charming. I saw a double set of doors and stairs at the far left side of the room. The stairs went up, made a turn to the right, and went over a double set of doors. A deer’s head was mounted right above the double doors.

“That’s your grandfather’s room,” daddy whispered to me and pointed to the double doors. “The door you saw outside, on the sun porch, leads out from his room.”

I shook my hand to indicate I understood. Daddy left me alone to get our bags from the car. The furniture was worn and old. A brown couch with large flowers sat a couple of feet in front of grandpa’s room with a large wood coffee table. A cute tan loveseat was positioned parallel to the couch with a small matching nightstand. Two comfortable living chairs were right beside the

fireplace. I looked at the cute little paintings of fruit hung from the walls. Then I saw a microscopic TV beside the fireplace.

Oh, my! Might as well push that poor TV into that fireplace and put it out of its misery! I thought with a little laugh.

I spun with surprise to hear the large doors swing inward. My grandfather emerged from the double doors and into the living room. The couch was in front of him, but it could not hide his massive height. His eyes scanned the room and fell directly upon me as his smile widened. An impressive seven feet tall, my grandfather towered over everyone in the room. His bald head glowed from the lights over the artwork. He wore a blue and white plaid button down shirt, and tan pants with suspenders. His warm smile filled the room with sunshine and his blue eyes were watering with emotion. He held out his arms to me and I rushed to him, my blonde hair bounced behind me as I ran. I don't know why I did this except that I felt overwhelmed with emotion when he stretched his arms out.

"My granddaughter," he whispered and hugged me tight.

"Dad, this is Regina. Regina this is my dad, George Underwood," my mother giggled. She was busy helping daddy with our luggage.

He smelled of wood, like a carpenter and Zest soap. Those long arms wrapped around me and picked me up. I laughed at his exuberance. "Hello, Regina. It's nice to meet you."

"It's very nice to meet you too, grandpa."

His face was old but handsome. Missing was his hair and left pinky finger. I later learned grandpa lost his finger in a tractor accident when he was in his thirties. I loved his sweet face and warm hands. His long arms and legs had to conform to my smaller size, making him look like a giant. This did not seem like the man my mother described.

"And I'm sure you remember Jack," mom said louder. She was obviously a little upset about daddy being excluded from a warm welcome.

Remember Jack? How could Grandpa remember dad if they never met before? Daddy told me he never met mom's parents or been to her hometown. My grandfather put me down and reached out to shake my father's hand. They exchanged kind words of condolences while my mother pulled me aside.

"Go up the stairs and go straight till you see a door. It's small and I apologize for that but I hope you like it," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

My grandfather looked upset when he saw I was leaving but mom gently explained that we had a long trip and I wanted to get adjusted in my room first. The stairs were dark and creaked with every step I took, but they were amazingly sturdy. A steady stream of light came from above and I saw the second floor as I made the turn on the stairs. There was a door at the end of the stairway. The rest of the second floor was open, no door, separation walls or privacy. A king size bed with blue bedding was in the middle of the room with two bureaus and a nightstand on each side. I noticed there were only two windows in this large room. I guessed this was my parents' room. I moved on to my room.

Through the white wood door, my room was petite with a white wrought iron, double sized bed with an intricate Victorian inspired design. The bed filled the room and gave me just enough space for the nightstand, desk, and a small armoire. There was not enough room to walk, only maneuver. A cozy looking mattress and yellow bedspread with white sheets called to me. I could not resist jumping into the bed and letting the softness take me away. It was like floating on a cloud. After my little moment, I sat up on my elbows and surveyed the room. My dumb phone

still did not have service so I could not call Jeff. The tiny window I saw earlier was the one I was looking at now. I got up and opened the window shade. Sure enough, I saw the patio below.

For a second time, I surveyed the size of the room. Maybe this could work. My laptop would fit perfectly on the desk, not that there was much room in the first place. The desk would fit perfectly in front of the window, so I moved it. I opened the window to let the fresh air in. Thank goodness the window had a screen, mom warned me about the bugs and mosquitoes. I positioned my laptop in the right spot and put the chair in. The desk was cute and the change made the room nice. The desk and chair were painted white and made from iron like the bed. There was dust on the floor and probably in the sheets. Cobwebs hung in the corners of the room and from the armoire. I was too afraid to open the armoire. Perhaps I should come back to this one later.

But I had to hang up my clothes!

I turned around, gave myself a good ole' New York City girl pep talk, and opened the double doors to the armoire before I changed my brave mind. It was empty but for a few dead insects and cobwebs. Nothing I couldn't handle. I found the drawers underneath in the same condition. I breathed out a sigh of relief and realized I could not sleep in this room unless it was clean, but the room had potential to be such a cozy place for me. Once I painted and majorly cleaned, it could be something nice.

A knock was at my door and I heard daddy's voice call out. He must have the rest of my things. I took two steps to open the door.

"Hey, daddy!" I squealed.

"Hey sweetie! Like your room?" he asked with surprise.

My poor father. He tried to hide his surprise but failed miserably. I started to feel bad. I guess I gave my parents too hard of a time about coming here. It certainly was not as bad as I imagined. My dorm room was enormous compared to this shoe box, but it would work for a little while.

"Yes, it's pretty cool. A little small, but has great potential."

"Good! Need some help? I brought up the rest of your bags and your purse. You left it in the back seat."

"Thanks, daddy. You can leave them right beside the door," I said.

"You will be happy to know you have the only room with a bathroom. Your mother and I must share your grandfather's."

"I have a bathroom?" I asked.

He shook his head yes and pointed to the corner of the armoire. The door was so little and hidden, I would not have seen it unless I moved the armoire or someone pointed it out. This made me more excited. My own private bathroom!

"Uh, daddy? I need to touch this room up so I can be comfortable in here. Do you know where I could find a vacuum, some cleaner, and rags?"

"No, but don't worry about that now, sweetie. Are you hungry? Would you like to help me hunt for something to eat? We have the pie from the diner."

How could I tell him politely that all I wanted was to be by myself with my music and laptop? I had to ease myself into this situation by myself. I didn't want to be with anyone else, especially my parents. All I wanted was for them to forget about me while they took care of their business. I wanted this summer to fly by while I cleaned and explored my new world. I had a plan in mind and here he was spoiling it.

"No thanks, I'm not hungry. I'll go downstairs with you. I need to find some stuff to fix my room. I can't stay in here unless it's clean," I said as I shut the door behind me.

Daddy rolled his eyes as he tilted his head up in exasperation. He turned around and walked down the stairs with heavy steps. He muttered, "I don't see what the big deal is about a few dust bunnies."

In the kitchen, mom went through the fridge and made a grocery list. The old wooden cabinets creaked when she opened them in the quest for clean drinking glasses. She silently nodded her head as if confirming her suspicions. She rubbed her fingers on the glass and shook her head at the dust. I covered my face to hide my laughter. If there was one thing I definitely inherited from my mom, it was her war against dust and all things disgusting. Daddy and I exchanged a look between us. Of course, mom was in the kitchen getting it 'straight'. I knew I should have gone to her when I needed cleaning materials.

My parents are in love and respect each other, but they're very different. I never met two people so opposite, but so in love. Daddy grew up rich in a Jewish family and mom grew up poor in a Methodist family. Daddy traveled the world with his family and mom never left the state until she was in college. My father is the messiest person alive and mom is obsessed with keeping things clean. He is the math/finance wizard and mom can't solve a math fraction to save her life. I think the only thing they had in common was their love for each other.

As we approached mom, daddy put out his hands as if to say 'you first'. I laughed and walked confidently ahead of him. He knew he couldn't win with two ladies in his house. Cleaning was top priority for us because we could not be comfortable unless the house was clean.

"Mom? Where is the vacuum and cleaning stuff?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Dad doesn't remember where mom kept that. It's already so late," she said as she tapped her right index finger to her chin. This gesture told me mom seriously debated whether to stay up all night to clean or do it tomorrow. "Let's worry about this tomorrow. I saw bacon and pancake mix in the fridge. Let's have a quick snack and go to bed. Tomorrow we'll survey the "damage" and go to the local store so we can arm ourselves to kill the dust. Sound good?"

It didn't sound good at all, but the look on my father's face told me to be quiet and go with whatever mom said. Daddy nodded his head to show he agreed with mom.

"Sounds good mom, but why is the pancake mix in fridge?" I asked with joking disgust.

Chapter Four

Tonight was the first night in my vacation room, as I came to see it. I tried to make myself as comfortable as possible after our snack. The window was still open and I could hear mom, daddy, and grandpa talking on the patio. I had my laptop up and a movie on. This time I had on the Slumber Party Massacre, one of my all-time faves!

I hated to leave my clothes in the suitcase, but they were safer there than in the armoire. It was nice to take my time and put some of my favorite stuff out like Mr. Cuddles, my pink bear given to me when I was a child, my jewelry, some knick-knacks, and pictures.

I stood beside the bed, holding the picture frames and trying to decide which one was best when I turned my head to the desk. Someone was there, sitting in the desk chair and looking at me. My eyes scanned over it quickly so I did not realize what it was the first time. Chills ran down my spine. Did I really see that?

I quickly looked at the chair again and saw nothing.

Someone was there! I know I saw someone sitting in the chair sideways. The top half of their torso was turned with their hands holding the back of the chair. Everything happened so quickly, but I think it was smiling at me. I moved closer to the chair, trying to make sense out of the images in my mind.

Then, someone knocked hard on the wall beside the armoire.

I think I jumped a foot in the air and screamed a little. No one came running to my aid, so I must not have been too loud. Then again, I had a scary movie playing. Everyone probably thought my scream was part of the movie. My hands trembled terribly. I may question myself about seeing something, but I know I heard the knocks.

Knock, knock, knock.

There it was again! They were hard and sturdy knocks, one right after the other.

Of course, my first instinct was to run but I am a city girl. I don't scare *that* easily. I marched over to the armoire confidently.

At first, everything was silent. I stood in that little corner for almost two minutes and nothing happened. Wait! Could the knocks of come from the bathroom door?

Knock, Knock, Knock.

I jumped again and screamed my head off. The knocks did come from the bathroom.

But, everyone was downstairs!

I felt scared out of my wits and lunged for the bedroom door. I had to get out of the room! Unfortunately, the carpet in front of the door was old and worn. My foot caught and I managed to trip. My feet flew out from under me and I landed on my left side.

I got up, sort of, and rubbed my side. I stayed on the floor until the bathroom door clicked and inched open slowly. The hinges squeaked as the door opened all the way.

"Annnnnnaaaa," something whispered from the open doorway.

I bolted from the room and didn't look back. My feet took me downstairs and through the house. I had to find daddy. He would help me! They drank coffee on the patio when I came through the door like a lunatic. I shouted and pointed to the window of my room.

"Something's in my room! Someone is up there!" I screamed. Mom and daddy looked alarmed, at first.

"Snake?" grandpa asked with his eyes raised.

"No, grandpa! It was... well, I'm not sure. It, it was big enough to open my bathroom door!" I stuttered as I tried to explain what happened, but I left out the person sitting in my chair.

“Let’s go check it out,” daddy said after looking at mom. She gave him a look asking him not to carry on with this.

“I’ll grab my pistol, just in case,” he said as he got up slowly. We walked in the house and hid behind grandpa as we went up the stairs. We heard him mumble, “Hope I don’t have to do this every night for a spider. Damn city yankees.”

I saw mom and dad hide their laughter. Mom was right, grandpa was old school southern.

My room was empty. The bathroom door was open, but nothing inside. Grandpa searched my room for me. He was so sweet, he even checked under the bed. They all swore to me it was most likely a little animal.

“No one has lived in this room since your mother left. Probably some critter who lived in there. You probably disturbed his home when you moved in tonight,” he said. I knew that was not what happened, but for the sake of my sanity, I accepted it. “You in the country now, doll. I carry a pistol at all times and I suggest you wear my rubber boots when you go outside.”

“Why?”

“Snakes. Lots of snakes in the summertime, ‘specially ‘round the tank. You best keep your eyes open ‘round here.”

I shook my head to let him know I understood. I thanked them for coming to my rescue. Grandpa told me to come get him anytime I needed something. After I closed the door, I went to bed and tried to sleep. Even though they tried to convince me it was an animal, I know what I saw. The quicker I got this trip over with, the better.

After a lot of reluctance, I emptied my body of fear, and allowed myself to close my eyes. I kept my laptop plugged in and on the whole night.

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