



*Beyond
the
Clouds*

WOMEN OF MIDTOWN

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN



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Prologue

OCCUPIED BELGIUM • AUGUST 1917

Finn dragged himself another yard in the mud as agony shot through his mangled leg. He needed to hide. The pilot who shot him down had probably already landed at the German airfield two miles away, and it wouldn't be long before a search party was sent to capture him. Finn's airplane had burst into flames moments after he crashed, and now it billowed sooty clouds of smoke that acted as a signal to the Germans. And Germans sometimes shot downed pilots rather than take them prisoner.

A village was only a few acres away, but Finn's chances of getting there with a busted-up leg weren't good. He clenched his teeth and elbowed another few feet through the sludge, struggling to keep his head up so he wouldn't suffocate.

He couldn't die now. Delia hadn't forgiven him yet. She was the best, purest part of him, the shining inspiration that fueled his dreams ever since he was a kid. He *had* to survive, if only to get home and win her forgiveness. He crawled through the mud with renewed determination.

“Monsieur, laissez-moi vous aider.”

The urgent whisper startled him, and he lifted his eyes to see a woman hunkered beside him. Frizzy copper hair surrounded a face filled with fear, for the Germans would shoot her too if they caught her helping him.

She repeated herself, and his pain-addled brain struggled to make sense of the French words. She was offering to help him. A boy stood behind her, who looked barely old enough to shave.

“Run,” he gasped. “They’ll be here soon. *Run.*”

The woman ignored him and crouched down, slipping an arm beneath his shoulder. “*Pieter, aidez-moi.*”

Pieter rushed to his side, looping Finn’s other arm over his own shoulders. Together they hauled him upright. Pain jolted through his body, and he nearly screamed. Instead, he gritted his teeth and forced his good leg to move while his right leg trailed uselessly behind.

The rumble of an automobile sounded in the distance. It was the Germans. Only Germans had gasoline rations, and they’d be here soon.

Waves of agony rolled through him as he focused on the timber-framed cottage straight ahead. A little girl held the front door open. The woman started issuing orders to other children inside.

“*Vite, remonte les planches.*”

Quick, pull up the floorboards, she had ordered. Finn understood the words but couldn’t make his brain work well enough to reply in French.

“Don’t risk your life for me,” he said. She had children. They’d be orphaned if the Germans found them.

The floorboards had been pulled up, revealing bundled newspapers and tins of beef hidden below. In short order the mother emptied it, and Finn rolled into the shallow hiding place. His spine slammed against the foundation stone, shooting another wave of pain down his leg.

He got a look at her panicked face as she prepared to cover him with the boards. “Madam, thank you. I owe you my life.”

Darkness descended as she replaced the boards and dragged furniture over them. Lying there in total darkness, he started praying. The Germans were coming, and his odds of surviving the next few minutes weren't good. If by God's grace he managed to get home, he would find a way to thank this good woman, and then he would fight to win Delia's forgiveness.



NEW YORK CITY • SEPTEMBER 1917

Today wasn't the first time Delia Byrne had to scrub congealed egg yolks from the front of the building, but it was the worst. In addition to the eggs spattered on the stately old law office, the vandals had scrawled slurs in red paint across the plate-glass window. *Kraut lover. Pacifist cowards. Traiter.*

"They misspelled *traitor*," Delia said with a nod to the word that obliterated the elegant gold stenciling of the Chandler Law office.

"I suppose we've been called worse," Reginald said as he surveyed the damage. As always, she and Reginald were the first to arrive at the office this morning. Wesley Chandler, the owner of the firm, usually arrived a few hours later. As a widowed father with a teenaged daughter who was running amok, Wesley made a point of having breakfast and dinner with his wayward daughter every day.

"Let's try to get this cleaned up before Wesley gets here," she said. They were due in court at eleven o'clock for the Baumeister case, and she didn't want Wesley distracted by this latest attack

of vandalism. If they didn't get the egg off soon, the heat would bake it onto the bricks.

The law firm kept wire brushes, scrapers, soap, and buckets for precisely this sort of vandalism, which was becoming depressingly frequent ever since America entered the pointless European war. Defending the city's immigrants from anti-German hysteria carried a cost, and it was likely to get worse unless decent people stood up to the bullies.

Once armed with soapy water and a wire brush, Delia attacked the dried egg yolk with gusto. She hated this war. Actually, she hated *all* wars, but this one seemed especially tragic. It provoked knee-jerk hatred toward anything German, even though few people even understood why America had joined the war.

"And how much is the Baumeister case going to cost the firm?" Reginald asked as he watched her scrub. Reginald managed the finances for Chandler Law and cared too much for his manicure to help with the scrubbing. With his ruthlessly groomed Van Dyke beard and piercing black eyes, he reminded Delia of a hawk on the lookout for anything that could endanger the firm's bottom line.

"Wesley is donating his time, so it won't cost us anything."

"Wrong," Reginald said. "It's cost us the Darlington Hotel contract. Yesterday, Mr. Darlington notified us that he no longer wants Wesley to represent his hotel and has demanded a refund of his retainer fees."

Delia winced. The Darlington was a luxury hotel a few miles north of here. Wesley handled their legal issues, and it was a lucrative contract.

"How much are we going to lose?" she asked.

"Eight hundred dollars per month, plus two percent interest and a five percent sliding contingency rate." The answer was typical of Reginald's painstaking attention to detail when it came to money and financial security.

She and Reginald were kindred spirits in that area. After growing up in an orphanage, Delia paid scrupulous attention to her

financial security, and losing the Darlington contract was going to hurt the firm. Wesley was a rich man, but he had been losing clients hand over fist ever since he publicly denounced the war.

“You probably put Wesley up to taking the Baumeister case,” Reginald accused. “The two of you are always willing to put principles over profit.”

Delia lifted her chin as she sloshed hot, soapy water on the congealed egg yolk. If anything, she was the one to rein Wesley in from pursuing his more chivalric impulses, but it wouldn’t be wise to point that out to Reginald. There was already gossip in the office about the unusually close relationship she and Wesley shared.

“We’ll simply need to find more business,” she said primly.

“Or perhaps we ought to quit defending Germans.”

That wasn’t going to happen. Wesley was too high-minded to overlook blatant injustice, but they needed something to offset the witheringly bad publicity they’d been getting ever since they volunteered to defend German immigrants who’d been harassed after the war broke out in 1914. Everything got worse once President Wilson brought the United States into the war a mere five months ago.

“I’ll bet you didn’t account for cleaning up this mess in your awe-inspiring daily calendar,” Reginald said.

She hid her smile at Reginald’s backhanded compliment to her “awe-inspiring calendar.” She kept columns for tasks, reminders, a correspondence log, color-coded priority tags, and a deadline tracker.

“I build in a fifteen-minute allowance for unexpected tasks every day,” Delia said, but if she didn’t get this mess cleaned up soon, she’d find herself behind schedule.

“I don’t know why we should even bother scrubbing up,” Reginald said. “We’ll surely get hit again after today’s court case.”

Delia dropped the wire brush back into the bucket to let the blood flow back into her tired arms. A pair of businessmen sent disapproving looks at her as they walked past the law firm on their

way to work. She smiled at them anyway. It was easier to let them believe this didn't hurt than to show the truth.

"We'll just have to endure the slings and arrows," she said with a teasing glance at Reginald. "We should be used to it by now."

"And yet it never gets easier," Reginald said before turning his back to retreat inside the office.

Delia's attempt to clean the building ahead of Wesley's arrival failed. Her employer showed up earlier than usual and stood before the spattered gunk and painted slurs with an inscrutable expression, yet she knew it had to hurt.

He was dressed for court in a formal charcoal suit, matching vest, and starched collar. His dark hair was immaculately groomed, with only a few strands of gray at his temples. The dismay in his dark eyes caused the faint lines surrounding them to appear a bit deeper.

"The price of business," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Are we prepared for the Baumeister case?"

She smiled. "We are," she said with confidence, although she'd need to tidy up first.

It was important to appear prim and businesslike when she sat beside Wesley in court. She always wore a crisp white blouse paired with a dark tie and slim skirt, the female version of a professional business suit. A smock had protected her clothes while she scrubbed the egg yolks, but tendrils of her ebony hair had escaped her chignon and would need to be restyled.

By eleven o'clock they were in court, Delia sitting at Wesley's right-hand side. As his legal assistant, she compiled case law, drafted preliminary legal documents, and assisted him in the courtroom during his arguments. Her biggest asset to Wesley was her unique memory, able to supply him with instant access to statistics, relevant case law, and catch opposing litigants in contradictions.

She fastened her eyes on Thaddeus Pettigrew, the city's attorney

who was trying to shut down all German-language publications for the duration of the war. With his pale hair and a wispy mustache, Mr. Pettigrew looked like a callow youth. But his voice rang out like whip.

“Mr. Baumeister’s newspaper is a clear and present danger to our republic,” he said while pacing before the judge’s bench in the walnut-paneled courtroom. “He could be sneaking articles into his paper to stoke anti-American sentiment. He must obey the city ordinance and start publishing his newspaper in English.”

Delia kept her face expressionless as she listened to each word, but inside she cringed for Franz Baumeister who sat on Wesley’s other side. Mr. Baumeister had lived in this country for thirty years. He worked hard, paid his taxes, and employed nine people at his newspaper that catered to the immigrant community. All of it could be lost because of an irrational fear that German language newspapers were disseminating enemy propaganda.

The only time Delia took her eyes off the city’s attorney was to jot a case name on a slip of paper. Wesley was a brilliant attorney, but he didn’t have a mind that could recall chapter and verse from two hundred years of legal tradition. Delia did.

When Mr. Pettigrew stated that the city was entitled to curtail civil liberties in time of war, she jotted down *Ex parte Milligan, Supreme Court, 1866*. It was a landmark case that ruled it was unconstitutional to suppress civil liberties during a time of war without specific evidence of danger.

Wesley glanced at the slip of paper she passed him. It caused a hint of a smile as he folded the note and slipped it inside his jacket, then coolly rose to his feet.

“Your Honor, I would call your attention to the Supreme Court’s decision in the 1866 case of *Ex parte Milligan*. It firmly established that the government may not suspend the civil liberties of civilians while civil courts are still functioning.”

He continued speaking while Delia settled back in her chair to watch Wesley in action as he eviscerated the competition. As

always, they were a one-two punch. She supplied Wesley with ammunition, and he wielded it in battle. Over the years they had developed a well-oiled routine in which she did the initial research, and he deployed it in court. He was smart, principled, and the man she adored.

How much longer could she wait for him? On the rare times they had frank conversations about their relationship, he insisted that he was too old for her. Was nineteen years too big of an age gap? Delia was twenty-nine and always wanted to be married before she turned thirty, but Wesley remained resolute in claiming that a platonic working relationship was best.

It would be easy to turn her attention elsewhere if Wesley didn't care for her . . . *but he did*. He gave himself away in every stolen glance, every affectionate brush of his hand that lingered just a bit too long. He showed it to her one rainy afternoon when he drew the shade down over his office window and kissed her until she was breathless. They had been standing beside the floor globe when he closed in on her, cupped her face between his hands, and kissed her as if his life depended on it.

That had been more than a year ago. A year! And still she waited for Wesley to shed his inhibitions and begin a normal courtship without fear of their age difference or his spoiled daughter.

Delia shook off her annoyance and turned her attention back to the courtroom. She ought to be grateful to have become infatuated with such a thoroughly good man. After a disastrous teenaged love affair, Delia once feared she was incapable of falling in love again, but Wesley disproved that. Finn Delaney was a distant memory, and Wesley was her future.

By five o'clock it was all over. The judge issued a bench decision in Mr. Baumeister's favor; it was a complete and total victory.

Delia had no one to celebrate the victory with. Wesley went home to his daughter, Delia to the dining hall of her apartment

building. In a restaurant crowded with hundreds of women, she ate alone.

The Martha Washington Apartments were designed for single women who might otherwise have difficulty finding a respectable place in which to live in Manhattan. When it opened in 1903, its twelve stories were immediately filled to capacity with five hundred female teachers, stenographers, nurses, and other professional women who could afford the rent. The first floor had an ice cream parlor, a library, and the dining hall where residents took their meals. Delia used to enjoy long, chatty dinners late into the evening, but that was all over. Now she ate as quickly as possible before heading up to her eighth-floor apartment to curl up with a good book.

She took another sip of tomato soup. Clattering utensils mingled with gossip and laughter from the women at nearby tables while Delia read the current issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* and pretended not to mind eating alone.

Hilde Wallace, with a clipboard propped in the crook of her arm, approached the neighboring table filled with schoolteachers.

Delia stiffened. With her cool, blond good looks and sharp features, Hilde was both pretty and mean. She was tall too. Was that why Hilde assumed leadership wherever she went? She certainly seemed to have a following at the Martha Washington. A gaggle of other women trailed after Hilde as she approached the teachers.

Delia returned to her magazine to study the advertisement for the newest Mary Pickford movie. Wesley once told Delia she resembled Mary Pickford, which was flattering given Pickford's heart-shaped face and sparkling eyes. She was still studying the magazine when Hilde and her entourage arrived at Delia's table. She set the spoon down and braced herself.

"Hello, Delia," Hilde said. "Care to donate to the war bond drive? Everyone else I've spoken to is chipping in."

War bonds were used to manufacture machine guns, battleships, and bombs. All across America, people like Hilde were

shaking down civilians to collect funds. Contributing to the manufacture of weapons to murder people was abhorrent, but Delia kept her tone polite.

“No, thank you.”

Hilde smirked. “Oh, yes, Delia the pacifist. You’re obviously so much better than us. If you’re too pure and holy to donate to the war, perhaps you can bring yourself to give something to the Red Cross. Blanche will be happy to take your donation.”

Blanche Nesbit stood right behind Hilde. Blanche was the overnight desk clerk at the apartment building. Seeing her march in lockstep behind Hilde hurt because Blanche used to be Delia’s friend. Now she was one of many who’d turned frosty over the political divide.

Delia met Blanche’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I’ve been donating everything I can spare to the CRB since the first month of the war.”

“What’s the CRB?” Hilde asked in a challenging voice.

“The Commission for the Relief of Belgium,” Delia answered. “When Germany attacked Belgium—”

“They didn’t attack Belgium,” Hilde interrupted. “If Belgium would have allowed German troops to cross through their land on the way to France, Germany wouldn’t have had to attack them at all.”

Delia tried not to roll her eyes at the contradictory statement. Belgium had the bad luck to be located between two warring nations. They tried to remain neutral, but two days after Germany declared war on France, the Germans started rolling through Belgium in a stampede of plunder and destruction. Belgium had been living under the boot of German occupation ever since.

“Belgium is starving,” Delia added calmly. “Before the war they imported almost all of their food supply, but the German blockade put an end to that. They have no way of feeding themselves unless relief supplies are sent in from abroad.”

Hilde’s mouth thinned. “Why don’t they just grow some crops like any hardworking American would do?”

Because Belgium was the most heavily industrialized nation in the world. Belgium had factories, shipyards, electrical plants, and steel mills, but those industries didn't produce food. As a densely populated nation with scant farmland, famine set in soon after Germany blockaded the nation. This wasn't the time or place to educate Hilde about the economic constraints of Belgium, so Delia moved straight to her point.

"The Commission for the Relief of Belgium is keeping nine million people from starvation. It costs a fortune to keep sending ships filled with relief supplies to them. Anything I can afford to donate goes to the CRB."

Hilde tossed her clipboard onto the table, sloshing tomato soup on the snowy-white linen. "So you're too holier-than-thou to spare a few pennies for the Red Cross?"

Others at neighboring tables had quieted to listen. They only heard Hilde's loud statement that Delia refused to support the universally admired Red Cross, nothing about the valiant cause of the struggling CRB.

"Hilde, if I live to be a hundred, I'll never learn to be as cleverly mean as you. Congratulations! You've won the day."

"Let's move on," Blanche said, for once standing up to Hilde.

"Yes, let's see if we can find someone who doesn't hate their country."

Tension unknotted from Delia's shoulders as they left, although women at the tables nearby cast sidelong glances her way as they whispered behind cupped hands.

Although Delia remained steadfast to her principles, it never got any easier to be a pariah.



Finn Delaney leaned heavily on the cane as he limped down the gangway in New York Harbor. He wanted to kiss the ground, but the splint encasing his leg made it impossible. The best he could do was stand at attention and salute the Statue of Liberty. Ever since he caught sight of Lady Liberty as the troopship neared the harbor, he'd been struggling with emotions that careened between joy and some other feeling he couldn't name. Guilt? Grief? Whatever it was, he needed to get back to his squadron in France as soon as he could convince the Army he was fit to fly once again.

But first he had been ordered to report to Camp Mills, the training and embarkation site for the American armed forces. A sergeant had been sent to drive him to the brand-new installation that had been hastily constructed on Long Island.

"I read about you," Sergeant Lewis said, admiration in his gaze. "It's an honor to drive you to the base, sir."

Finn suppressed a grin. "Thank you, Sergeant." He leaned heavily on his cane as he limped alongside the young soldier to an open-air Ford Model T painted army green.

Finn sat in the back seat as the automobile navigated around

vendor stands, dockworkers, and lumbering carts. The harbor was a chaotic mess. Flatbed wagons rolled along embedded railway tracks to deliver cargo to ships. The smell of exhaust fumes mingled with those of salty air and warm tar.

A wiry man ran toward the automobile, waving a stack of pages and shouting, “No more war!” He panted as he tried to keep up with the car, shoving a flyer at Finn that he instinctively grabbed.

“Back off, yellowbelly filth,” Sergeant Lewis growled, and then he increased the car’s speed by means of the throttle lever, leaving the protester behind.

“Sorry about that, sir. You can throw that trash away. Or use it at the latrine.”

It was an antiwar flyer filled with lies and claptrap about the war. Finn held the document aloft. “Is this common here?”

“Not at all, sir. Just a handful of cowards afraid to do their duty. Everybody hates those people.”

Finn didn’t hate the pacifists; they were just ignorant of what was going on over there. Nobody who’d seen the horrors Germany was inflicting upon Europe would spout such claptrap. He tossed the flyer over his shoulder, letting the wind carry it into the bay.

Soon they were out of the city and on their way to Long Island. Every bump and jolt over the uneven road shot pain up his leg. Medical facilities weren’t all they could be in France, and the fracture in his leg wasn’t healing properly. It ached all the time now, but he’d eat nails before complaining. The guys in the trenches had it worse than he did, although he thanked God when their automobile finally turned into Camp Mills an hour later.

The camp spread before him in an overwhelming panorama. Thousands of olive-green tents stretched as far as the eye could see. Though the hastily constructed camp was only three months old, the grass had already been worn away in the aisles cutting through the sea of tents.

They rattled along a dusty dirt path, kicking up clouds of grit that made his nose twitch. They veered around a supply truck

laden with rolls of canvas for more tents and squadrons of men marching in formation. Other soldiers were laying down boardwalks over the dirt paths, the noise of their clattering hammers filling the air.

“How many people are here?” he hollered to Sergeant Lewis.

“About ten thousand,” he called back. “A ship with three thousand men from the Nebraska National Guard left for France yesterday, and we’ve got another five thousand arriving from Ohio and Indiana this weekend.”

It was entirely different from what Finn had experienced in France. The old excitement he once felt took root. This was where he belonged, among men joined together in a common cause. After being trapped for six weeks in Belgium, followed by another week on a troopship, it was time to join the Army and fight for freedom.

Their automobile cleared the tent city, moving toward a row of wooden buildings housing the medical station, command headquarters, and the supply depot.

“That’s the administrative building,” the driver said, pointing to a boxy structure with two wings stretching out from a central hub. “We’ll have to go in through the back entrance since they’re laying concrete for the front steps.”

Everything about this place was new and smelled of fresh paint, sawdust, and wet concrete.

An orderly with a wheelchair awaited them at the back door, and Sergeant Lewis hopped out of the driver’s seat to open Finn’s door for him.

“I’ll be okay,” Finn said, grasping the handle of his cane and waving the wheelchair away. He wasn’t about to meet his new commanding officer looking like a cripple.

For the last two years, Finn had been flying for France as part of the Lafayette Escadrille, a squadron of American volunteer pilots who had no patience for President Wilson’s spineless stance on German aggression. Now that the United States had formally entered the war, the Lafayette Escadrille had been disbanded. He’d

have to sign up with the aviation section in the U.S. Army before he could be sent back to France.

His commanding officer had a different idea. “Why aren’t you in the wheelchair?” Captain Romano said the moment Finn limped into the office. Unpainted wood framed the tiny room, which hadn’t been wired for electricity yet. The only light came from an open window, where the tent city could be seen in the distance. Captain Romano stood and pointed Finn to the chair opposite his desk.

“I’m not that bad,” Finn said.

Captain Romano frowned. “I sent that wheelchair for a reason. From now on you will be expected to obey orders. The rules here are different from what you were used to in France, Lieutenant Delaney. The French were so grateful to have you volunteer pilots helping out that they overlooked the rowdy behavior of the Lafayette Escadrille. Now that we’re finally in the war, the aviators from the Lafayette Escadrille will be folded into the 103rd Pursuit Squadron, answerable to the U.S. Army.”

“Understood, sir,” he replied. “I’m looking forward to returning to France and helping the 103rd get up to snuff.” Finn and his fellow pilots from the Lafayette Escadrille were the only Americans with aerial combat experience. They were sure to be an essential asset to the new squadron.

Captain Romano shook his head. “We’ve got plans for you Stateside. News of your escape from occupied Belgium has been printed in newspapers from coast to coast. You’re famous here.”

People had been singing his praises ever since he staggered across the border between Belgium and France, but he never tired of hearing it. For an orphaned kid who had dropped out of school to work in a fish cannery, it was heady stuff.

“How famous?” Finn joked. “Don’t be shy. I want to hear all about it.”

The captain ignored Finn’s grin and continued with his instructions. “The Army wants you to ride along tomorrow in a war bond

parade. There will be floats and regiments and plenty of music. You'll be in the back of a truck, and all you have to do is smile and wave to the crowd. People love a war hero, especially one famous for evading the Krauts. Incidentally, how did you pull it off? The newspapers were vague on that point."

It was the question everyone asked, but Finn vowed never to answer it. He smiled and acted nonchalant. "Pull what off?"

"How did you escape from Belgium back to France? That border has the most barbed wire, watch towers, and machine gun nests anywhere on the Western Front. How in blazes did you get through?"

"I guess the luck of the Irish was with me," he said with a shrug.

Captain Romano folded his arms and waited. Finn didn't budge. The silence in the room stretched and became uncomfortable. The ticking of the clock emphasized the standoff, but Finn would swallow his own tongue before he revealed the truth.

"I could order you to talk," Captain Romano said.

"With respect, it wouldn't do any good." Maybe refusing orders wasn't the best way to make a positive first impression on his new commanding officer, yet the Army needed Finn more than he needed them. He hadn't formally enlisted as yet, but if push came to shove, he'd go back home rather than inform on the people who had helped him escape from Belgium.

Finally, Captain Romano banged the desk bell, and the clerk opened the door. "Lieutenant Delaney, you're dismissed. Go to the intake office and sign your enrollment papers. And use that wheelchair. Again, so long as you are under my command, you *will* obey orders."

Finn nodded. "Yes, sir." While he'd never been much for following rules, he'd have to choose his battles carefully if he was ever going to get back to France.

The enrollment office had dozens of desks pushed together like sardines in a tin. The rattle of typewriters and the hum of voices

filled the cavernous space. Finn sat at one of the desks as a recruitment corporal fired off questions and typed Finn's responses onto the blank forms. Finn answered every question, agreed to all the rules, and signed away his freedom with ease. His commitment to the cause was unshakable.

It wasn't until the last form that he balked.

"Who shall we notify in the event of your death?" Corporal Nowak didn't even glance up from the typewriter as he awaited Finn's answer.

Heat gathered beneath Finn's collar, and his skin prickled. No one. There was nobody. All his life, Finn had been the most popular man wherever he lived, and yet he couldn't think of one person to put down on the form. He didn't have a single relative or truly close friend. He had precisely nobody.

But then why should he care? He'd be dead.

"Just skip that form," he said, glancing at the clock on the wall and wishing to get this over with.

"I can't skip it," Corporal Nowak rapped out. "The Army needs to know who to notify in the event of your death. I need a name and an address."

Did Nowak have to say it so loud? On either side of him, others were easily supplying names of family members and wives. Finn was tempted to reach across the desk and tear up the form. He scrambled for an excuse. "I'll fill it out later. I don't have the address."

"Then just give me a name," Corporal Nowak said in exasperation. "We can hunt them down and be sure they get the death benefit."

"How much is the death benefit?"

"Ten thousand dollars," the clerk replied. "Who do you want to get it?"

Delia. The only girl he'd ever loved. She was the first girl he'd kissed, and the only one he wanted to marry. He would go to his grave regretting the way things ended between them. He still owed

her three hundred dollars. The last time they saw each other, he tried to repay her, but she hated him too much to take it. She'd probably refuse the death benefit too.

"The name is Delia Byrne," he answered. It had been ten years since he'd spoken her name out loud. It felt strange to say it, as though the name was forbidden for him to utter. They had once been everything to each other. Now he couldn't even speak her name without feeling a rush of pained nostalgia and old regrets.

He straightened his spine and spoke more clearly. "Her name is Delia Byrne, and if I die and you can find her, give her everything and tell her that I'm sorry."