

The Narrow Gate

Chapter One

Elise Delcroix was coming home after eleven years for the recognition and retribution she knew she deserved.

It was dusk. The sun tipped across the hills to play softly and lightly upon the old red-dog road, now devoid of the coal slag that gave way to that euphemism. An enormous slate dump, no longer emitting the smell of rotten eggs as it had in the days when the interior smoldered incessantly, stood as a reminder that the green hillside was once blackened and stripped of its beauty. Even now, the tiniest of saplings wouldn't brave the old mining residue. The road passed beneath the teetering chute of the old coal washer crossing high above it, used in its day to send freshly mined coal to be cleaned of soil and rock. It was another era when the men of No. 9 Mine worked here.

The sleek, silver Lexus IS08 hugged the winding curves of the road quickly, knowingly, despite the length of time that had passed since its driver ventured this way. Elise laughed nervously as she passed under the coal washer at ten miles above the speed limit, succumbing to the ancient fear she'd always harbored that it would fall. It was a ridiculous notion that rose up in her, causing her to press harder on the gas pedal, and then faded as she slowed her car down. Although only thirteen miles southwest of metropolitan Pittsburgh, she felt as if she were entering another world altogether. It was the land of her childhood, and it jumped out to both

welcome and admonish her with every arc of the road and rolling pitch of the hills she now navigated. Her hands were moving the steering wheel, yet the car seemed to travel on its own. Perhaps she just could not accept that those instinctive movements still lived so easily within her memory.

Elise shifted her large body in the soft leather seat, seeking comfort that would not come. She was not a particularly fat woman, although that changed now and again as her weight fluctuated, but at nearly six feet tall and built like a linebacker, she did not fit easily into a world that worshiped economy of size and weight in its female members. She'd purchased the Lexus two days earlier when she decided to come home. It accommodated her comfortably, and it would show them that she was a success, that she had done better than they had expected of her. In this, as in all else, she was determined to show this town which of her father's children was worthy of respect.

Elise knew her current discomfort didn't come from her size or the curve of the road but from the mix of emotions lodged squarely in her midsection like the onerous weight of a meal gobbled down in haste at a cheap diner. A decades-old sign welcomed her to McDonald.

She passed the stately homestead of John N. McDonald, the town's founder, and knew she was home, back in the belly of the southwestern Pennsylvania valley that had greeted her at birth and raised her up until the day they all turned on her and she left, vowing never to return. Life felt so large, unwieldy, and unfair back then. Now everything in McDonald looked small

and humble to an eye accustomed to the expansiveness of New York City and her trendy condo in Riverview, on Long Island.

Elise turned left off Main and headed up Fannie Street, the ancient brick road rumbling under her tires and vibrating her body from end to end, filling her with the unique, lulling Circadian rhythms of her youth. Nowhere else in the world could she go to create this exact experience. It returned her to the back seat of a dozen different cars, driven by family members shuttling her from one home to another. And, as she'd done in her childhood, she now hummed along tunelessly with the sound of the street, its cadence moving through her bones, her memories, and her heart, until it dropped her in front of a plain, gray house with a sagging front porch. Its swing was long gone, the flowers in the front lawn drooping and half dead. Noelle Delcroix stepped out onto the porch, a drink in hand. Elise turned off the ignition and, with a sigh, got out of the car.

“Well, look what the cat drug in.” Noelle’s words slurred.

“Hello, Mum, it’s nice to see you, too,” Elise answered.

“You’re not here to see your old mum, are you?” Noelle said. “I know why you’re here.”

“He’s my father,” Elise said. “I owe him this much.”

“You’re wondering what you’ll get,” Noelle snorted.