

Chapter 16: Rebecca

BACK IN THE spring, several months before my parents were killed, I found my father sitting in a lawn chair under an elm tree on the far southwest corner of the farm. I'd looked everywhere for him before an old memory surfaced, a memory so old I wasn't entirely sure if it was remembered, or dreamt.

In the memory, or dream, it was just the three of us, my mother, father, and me. I was skipping. I remember that clearly. I'd only just learned how, and I was taking great pleasure in performing huge, leaping strides over clumps of wild-growing daffodils and jonquils, enjoying the breeze and the sound of my parents laughing. We were headed toward the elm on the back of the farm. My mother carried a quilt, a faded yellow and blue star pattern held close in front of her growing belly, and my father carried an old, wooden picnic basket. It was one of those memories that seems too good to be true, but it was there, tucked into a back corner of my consciousness.

On the present spring evening, exhausted and irritable after a Saturday morning of doing yardwork for my father and an afternoon of running errands for my mother, I followed my instincts to the old elm. My father was there, sitting quietly, and I took a seat on the ground beside him. He was dressed in an untucked button-up shirt, an old pair of khaki pants, and loafers so worn out they'd gone from black to gray. He never had been good at casual wear, not even back in his farming days, preferring starched shirts to the worn coveralls and denim other farmers wore. I was sure that said something about him, pointed to some insecurity, but I'd never attempted to explore the issue with him.

He was always a taciturn man when not in front of a crowd, and that day he'd seemed especially reticent, curtly outlining my list of chores before leaving me alone with my work. He spared me a glance as I sat, maybe even a slight nod, but said nothing. I didn't speak, either, just sat cross-legged, enjoying the view of gently sloping fields, freshly plowed and waiting for soybeans. Something about our shared space reminded me of my childhood, back when I helped him plow and hoe and pick, before he'd banished me to the house to help my mother.

"Remember when you used to work with me out here?" he asked, as if reading my thoughts. "You were a big help. Hardworking. Did as much as any boy could have done, and probably stronger than half of them."

I was surprised at the compliment; that wasn't my father's style. "I remember," I said. "I enjoyed it. It was nice, working out here with you." It felt odd to be so candid with him, but it was true. It had been nice.

He grunted, but said nothing. I had a feeling he wanted to talk with me about something specific; he'd never made small talk with his children. I waited.

"Your mother is sick," he said. "Cancer. She let it get away from her. Had blood in her stool the last year, but never would make an appointment with the doctor. By the time I got her to go, it was too late."

Too late? "You mean"

"Three months, maybe. Maybe six. No way to know, is what the doctor said. She's not hurting. Not yet, anyway. Says she isn't. But it's just a matter of time."

"Daddy, I—"

"Nothing you can do to fix her," he said with a wave of his hand. "Just thought you should know. With my heart the way it is, I'm going to need some help. Can't take care of Callie and this place. Not by myself."

I'd known the time would come, of course, but it had always seemed far off, something I could put on a back shelf to worry about another day. Now that day was apparently here.

"Rebecca," he said, and cleared his throat. I looked at him, my eyebrows raised, waiting. "Was I a bad father?" he asked, and I picked up on something in his voice, a softness I'd never heard before. "I think I must have been," he said quietly, nodding, as if to himself. "I do believe I was." He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped at his eyes.

My father could work a crowd into cheers and whistles when he had his political suit on, but at home, with us, he was stoic. Distant. I'd seen more vulnerability in my father the past five minutes than I had in my lifetime.

When my initial shock dissipated, I struggled with another dilemma. He'd asked a question, and some small, dark part of my heart wanted to answer it honestly. *Yes*, I wanted to say. *You were. You were cold and absent and disapproving. Instead of a real father, you were a façade, whatever the constituents wanted you to be. You made us smile when there was nothing to smile about, paraded us around as if we were your sideshow. We were fodder for voters, pretty faces on campaign posters, only to be dismissed and forgotten once the Rotary fundraiser was over, Miss Teen Soybean was crowned, the Busy Bees had pledged twenty quilts to the local Red Cross*

Shelter, and the show was a wrap, the cameras and microphones packed away. As soon as we stepped out of the spotlight, we ceased to have value. We weren't individuals; we were tools, used until no longer useful, then tossed aside, broken and neglected.

I remembered Lena crying her first day of kindergarten. She had no backpack, no lunchbox, and no supplies, as if no one had remembered or even realized she'd be starting school. My mother was consumed with Callie, with suctioning out her nose, braiding her hair, checking and re-checking her pill box, filling out paperwork for her various medications, and writing pages of notes and instructions for her teachers.

Callie was going into second grade that year. At least that's what her records said, but she wasn't really. In reality, she was going into the same room of students she'd had for both her kindergarten and first grade years, a room full of students with varying disabilities and of varying ages, a room in which Callie would sit strapped in her chair in a corner out of the way, ignored until the odor of her soiled diaper reminded someone she was there.

I'd given Lena my own notebook, college-ruled and inappropriate, leftover from the year before, along with a pencil much too thin for her fingers. I managed to find enough change in the cushions of the couch to pay for her lunch, if not for mine.

Another memory in the never-ending reel: my father changing the locks when Lena was sixteen years old. I was home for the weekend seeing to Callie. I'd been angry at my youngest sister's absence, jealous, to tell the truth. I lived four hours away and couldn't seem to escape my family, while Lena, who lived in the same damn house, somehow managed to escape just fine.

She'd become a public embarrassment by then, and that was the tipping point for my father. He made a big production of going to town, returning with a couple of deadbolt locks he screwed into place on the front and back doors. Later that night he stood watching her through the back-door glass, downright gleeful at the moment she realized her key no longer worked.

Lena was belligerent, defiant, the tears long depleted. For a moment she looked as if she would smash her way in, but then she left, stalking down the long gravel drive on her way to who knew where.

I remembered my father's responses when I wanted to do what the other kids did. Work on the homecoming float. Go to the game. Go to prom. Go to college. *Who's going to help your mother?* Always the same question, to which I never had a satisfactory answer. *She has her hands full with Callie, and you have a responsibility to your family.* I strained against his

philosophy back then, believing I could someday be free. But I came to accept it later. As much as I'd tried to run from it—from *them*— it—and they— always managed to catch me.

I remembered his angry slap when I was thirteen years old and squirmed away from Mr. Cooper, an impossibly ancient man whose gnarled, yellow fingers and foul breath made me recoil. *You won't embarrass me in public*, my father said. *Act like you have some manners, girl. Do you know who he is? That's the banker. Hell, he funded half my campaign.* I remembered the next time Mr. Cooper reached for me, how I looked at my father's warning eyes and acquiesced. I remembered Mr. Cooper's arms encircling my waist, pulling me onto his lap, the hardness against my bottom something I didn't comprehend until later.

I remembered my father forcing me to accept Mr. Cooper's Sunday invitation to lunch.

I remembered the next Sunday, when he invited Lena instead of me.

She was seven years old.

I wondered if, prostituting herself down on that riverbank, Lena also remembered.

I sat under the elm and listened to a bobwhite's lonely call from somewhere in the branches over my head. *Bob-white!* An answering call soon followed from a stand of cedars behind the toolshed. When I was young I used to mimic that call, thumb and middle finger stuck in my mouth, holding my tongue flat. Every so often it worked, and I'd spend part of an evening halfway up the pecan tree in our front yard, holding court with the quail, our traded whistles floating across the pasture.

I watched the shadows stretching down the furrowed rows in front of us, smelled the aromas of soil and freshly cut grass. Butterflies flitted around fallen apples underneath the old apple tree. A more idyllic scene could hardly be imagined.

I studied my father, who looked old and tired and worn out. "You were fine, Dad," I said. I opened my mouth to say more. Closed it. Watched a ladybug wobble her way up a dandelion stem at my feet. We used to make wishes on dandelions, Lena and I, closing our eyes to blow dried seeds across the grass. Sometimes I wished for a handsome prince to sweep me into his arms. Other times I wished for a puppy of my own—not a mangy, smelly farm dog, but a puppy with a bright red ribbon tied in a bow at the back of his neck. Most often, I wished for Callie to be normal. If only Callie could be normal, I thought, everything else would fall into place.

"You were fine," I said again, barely able to force the words from my throat. I bent forward to send the ladybug on her way with a puff of breath before digging the weed up with my fingers.

Best to get rid of it while it was alive; otherwise, the seeds would spread and make more work for me.

I could have held my father accountable, leveling my accusations, but what was the point? As I've said before, it simply *is*. Things simply *are*. The past can't be undone. My parents were old, and they were dying. There was nothing to be gained by dredging up the past.

My father nodded, seemingly satisfied, and went back to staring across the fields while I ripped away at the roots.