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Prologue

Sometimes, when I'm weeding a row of peas or beans, my leg will start to ache again. I'll crawl down the row to the lawn and roll onto my back. Lying there beside my crutches, listening to the tick-tick-tick of the corn leaves in the humid breeze, I think about Michael. If my concentration is good, I can almost feel him dragging his finger lightly—so lightly—along my jaw and down my neck to the dip in my collarbone, and I can bring on that flash of longing.

I don't know why I do it to myself. Maybe to make it all real again.

Then I'll hear a voice calling to me from the porch, "Ace! Ace!", reminding me of the way things are. And I'll wave idly without opening my eyes, wondering if I could have figured everything out differently, in a way that was more true to myself. Maybe the way I did it was true to myself. It's hard to say, when you're eighteen.

It's not like there's a "find yourself" kit or road signs that say "This way to being your own person." If you're lucky, maybe there's someone who can help you, like a fat lady on the beach might yell "Keep going! You can do it!" if you're a lousy swimmer and in way over your head. The funny thing is, that person is never who you think it's going to be.

It's never who you want it to be.

Chapter 1

Rebecca felt herself swoon as Conrad wrapped his muscular arms around her. Every part of her wanted to give in to him, to claim him, finally, as her own, but summoning all her strength and her will, she clawed at his chest.

“Let me go!” she cried. “You know I am betrothed to another!”

Holding her easily with one arm now, Conrad gripped both her wrists in his free hand. His face was clouded with anger. “Why is he tending to another now and not to thee?”

Rebecca averted her eyes, not wanting him to see her uncertainty. “She’s ill and in need of him.”

“In need of him, perhaps,” said Conrad, brooding, “but not ill.”

Rebecca slapped him sharply across the cheek. “How dare you! He’s a better man than you’ll ever be.”

Conrad released her, roughly pushing her away from him. “Why do you fight me so?”

“And why do you tempt me so?” She cried in anguish.

When he looked down at her, his eyes were full of longing but his voice was bitter. “It’s not me that does the tempting, lass. It’s thee.”

“I’ve done nothing to encourage you!”

His expression softened. “Nay,” he said tenderly. “All that you do—all that you are—encourages me.” He reached down and fingered the tendrils of hair that had come loose from her braid, then dropped his hand to caress her—

Oh, Conrad, tempt me, I thought, holding my breath and turning the page. I was so lost in the thought of where his hand was going that I didn’t hear my father until he was right behind me.

“Still reading Moby Dick?” he said, walking past my chair and sitting down in his own at the head of the table.

I jumped, sloshing some orange juice out of my glass. “Yes, uh-huh, Moby Dick.” Steady, I told myself. Remember, to him it’s just Moby Dick. After learning a while ago that my father hadn’t ever read it, I had cut the cover off a paperback copy I bought and used it as a fake cover whenever I read a romance novel.

I shoved Rebecca’s Folly into my backpack, before he could get a closer look. He thinks that romance novels are written by the Devil himself and has told me not to read them. “They’ll put a wall between you and God,” he’d told me once, plucking Keeping Courtney out of my hands with his thumb and index finger like it was dirty Kleenex and dropping it into the trash in the kitchen. “Is that what you want?”

Knowing what he wanted to hear, I’d said no. But I’d been thinking, What I want is to find out if the Earl will discover that Courtney is really his long-lost daughter before he kisses her.

My father picked up his newspaper and said, “Seems like you’ve been reading that book for a long time.”

“It’s a long book,” I said.

“You’re so good about staying on top of your studies, Grace,” said my mom, bringing my dad his coffee. “Never causing us a single worry. Isn’t that right, Dan?”

Now? I wondered, tucking my hair behind my ears. Should I ask my dad about the concert now? It seemed like the right time, since Mom had just said what a good student I was. If I waited too long to bring it up, it would mess up his routine and he was all about routine. 7:17: Brush teeth, trim nose hairs (as needed). 7:22: Put on coat and rubbers. (Liv can’t walk past them without snickering, “Doesn’t your dad know you shouldn’t re-use rubbers?” But that’s Liv for you.) 7:26: Fake-kiss Mom and say goodbye to me.

My dad grunted, already lost in some article in the business section. “People complain about Michigan winter potholes, but then they complain about taxes!”

Mom slid a plate of eggs under the edge of the newspaper. Seeing them, my father sighed and set the paper down beside his fork. There was lots of room for it there, since our table is big enough for eight people. I don’t know why they bought such a big table when there has only ever been the three of us. All it does is make the house feel empty.

Dad bowed his head. Mom and I automatically did the same, but I'd stopped closing my eyes a long time ago. The first time I kept them open, when I was five or six, I squinted my eyes and looked at the ceiling, wondering if God would smite me with a bolt of lightning. When he didn't, I was a little disappointed. Where was the God who knew my every thought and watched my every move? Maybe he was distracted, or away watching someone else being naughty.

After that I sometimes tested God, lying about having said my nightly prayers, or, much later, about where I had been with Ryan. It was like having a conversation with God. I was saying, "What will happen if I do this? Nothing? Okay, what about this? What will you do to me now?" And he was saying...well, nothing.

"Lord God Almighty," my father prayed. "Give us the strength to stay on the straight and narrow path that You have set before us, wavering neither left or right, but always keeping our eyes fixed upon You, the great giver of peace and life. May thy will be done on this and every day. Amen."

"Amen," said my mother.

I let out a sort of sigh, "Ahm," then leaned back in my chair and watched my father eat. Cut, cut, chew. Cut, cut, chew. "Geez," Liv said once, after going out to dinner with me and my parents and watching him eat. "He's the only person I've ever seen who can make eating look like work."

I waited until he had finished his eggs. Then, trying not to sound too eager, I said, "Did you think any more about the concert? Today is the last day to get tickets, so I kind of need to know."

His coffee cup made a little clink as he set it on the saucer. He wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I don't want you to go."

I tried again, thinking that he just wasn't remembering how tame the concert was going to be. "But there's nothing wrong with the music," I said. "There's no bad language or anything. And it's totally chaperoned. Remember? I gave you the list of parents who are going to chaperone? It's the senior class party."

"Grace," he said, like we'd been over this before, a million times. "You came home late last night when—"

“Five minutes! Just five minutes! Liv asked me to listen to the argument she has to give for debate team.” My feet were freezing because of the cold linoleum—our house never felt warm in the winter—but my cheeks burned.

“Still. You know how I feel about keeping your word. It’s our responsibility to teach you responsibility. I just want what’s best for you,” he said, shaking his head, like he was sorry to have to say no. “People pushing and shoving to get close to the stage, to get a closer look at half-naked rock stars—”

“Half-naked? They’re not—”

He held up his index finger, reminding me that I was interrupting. “Half-naked rock stars,” he said, “with everyone either wedged up against each other or trampling over each other. I’ve heard about them. That concert is no place for a girl like you.”

Stunned, I concentrated on the line of pulp scum that ringed the inside of my juice glass. No? He was really saying no? I had stayed home almost every weekend for two months to make it more likely that he would say yes to this concert and he was saying no because I had been five measly minutes late? And only because I was helping Liv!

“I’m 18,” I said, not looking at him. “And it’s the biggest event of the year. Everyone is going. Everyone.”

“All the more reason for you to stay away.”

I still believed I could make him understand. “What about when you were in high school? Wasn’t there like a big class picnic or field trip or something special you did at the end of the year—your whole class? That’s what this is, Dad. This is our big thing!”

“That’s true, Dan. We did,” my mother said. My father and I both turned to look at my mother at the same time. She’s quiet, my mother, and good at staying out of things. She was standing behind the stove, the island between her and us, wiping around and around the burners. He turned back to me and said, “There are really two things going on here. One, you didn’t respect your curfew. Two, you could get hurt.”

“So what?” I said under my breath.

In my family, no one talks back to my father. “What did you say?” he asked. “I just don’t get what the point is if you can’t have fun sometimes.”

Stabbing his index finger onto the tabletop, he said, “The point is to glorify God in all that we say and do. That would be the point, Grace. But since you and I can’t agree on this, let’s see what the Good Book would say. Exodus 20:12.”

My father loved playing this game, rifling through all the Bible verses in his head and pulling out just the right one, the one that would show me he was right. I’d figured out a long time ago that the game was rigged, but I plunged ahead anyway. “It’s just a concert—with adults!”

“Exodus 20:12. What does it say?”

I knew I should just give in. But I had been so sure my plan would work that I couldn’t. The disappointment churning in my stomach turned to anger as it rocketed toward my mouth. The only way I could throttle it back was by clenching the muscles at the back of my throat.

“I’m waiting,” he said.

So am I, I thought. Waiting to get out. Waiting to get away from you. Waiting for my life to begin. I sensed my mother hovering behind me, silently urging me to do what my father wanted.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. “Honor thy father and mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth you.”

When I opened my eyes, my father was sizing me up from across the table.

“Good,” he said. “Now we understand each other.” Not hardly, I thought, as he pushed back from the table and walked to the bathroom.

My mother handed me a plate piled with eggs and toast and smiled like she wished she could make things better.

“Thanks,” I said, spreading on a thick layer of Cheez Whiz, my favorite condiment.

I leaned forward and started wolfing down large chunks of the eggs. The waistband of my skirt cut into my stomach, reminding me that I had recently put on a few pounds. I didn’t really care. Liv thought the weight looked good on me. “It all landed on your butt and boobs. You look like G.D. Marilyn Monroe. The guys are going to be all over that!” Still, I looked at the last slice of bacon and considered not eating it.

My father walked by again on his way to the door. He stopped behind my chair and dropped his hands onto my shoulders. “We just want what’s best for you,” he said again.

I stared out the window, down the row of ranch houses that were exactly like ours. When I was a kid, I thought it was neat that no matter which house I was playing at, the bathroom would always be inside the back door, to the left. But now, in the washed out winter morning light, the houses looked like cells on a prison block. They looked like a suburban Alcatraz out in the middle of nowhere.

My father squeezed my shoulder lightly. “You know that, don’t you? Parents who let their kids do whatever they want—those are the parents who don’t care,” he said. I dropped my head, hoping that he would mistake it for a nod. “That’s my girl,” he said.

Walking to the door, he said under his breath to my mother, “And have her change her sweater.”

After the door closed behind him, I looked down at my sweater. It was snug but not really tight. “What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

She glanced at my chest. “I think he’s objecting to it because...”

“Because what?”

“Well, you’ve really...filled out, honey, and your father...it’s going to take him a while to adjust to thinking of you as a woman.”

She was trying to be tactful, but I didn’t have the energy right then to figure out what she was saying. “So I have to change my sweater...why?”

She sighed. “It’s obvious that you’re cold.” Then, even though it was just the two of us, she whispered, “You can see...everything. Maybe you should wear a camisole or a thicker bra.”

Normally I would have been mortified that my father had noticed, but I was too angry to care. When my mom tried to clear my plate, I snatched the last piece of bacon and shoved it into my mouth.

Licking the grease off my fingers, I watched the letters of my father's "Warning! In case of Rapture this vehicle will be unmanned" bumper sticker grow smaller as he drove away. If the Rapture had happened right then, if my father had been sucked up into heaven with the righteous, it wouldn't have been soon enough for me.

And I would've been thrilled to have been left behind.