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The Heroines

✧ A NOVEL ✧

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The Heroines

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I was so angry with Mother! I stormed down the prairie trail, flip-flops slapping my heels. Walking the mown path through the fifty-acre prairie was the only way to cool my head. Hell hath no fury like a pissed-off thirteen-year-old girl, especially a late bloomer, impatient for her body's transformation. I was pigtailed, knobby-kneed, and flat-chested, thirteen, but physically more like ten.

Retreating to the woods was an act of rebellion. My mother had forbidden me to go there at night, so I could hardly wait to get through the prairie and reach the dark and leafy trails. The sun was dropping behind the trees, and the cicadas rattled like electric maracas. The prairie grasses and wildflowers reached my shoulders, the flora so thick even someone as furious as I wouldn't dream of walking through it. I stuck to the path. Out on the prairie, the temperature dropped by five degrees, but it was still muggy. The noise from Route 41 sounded louder at night, cutting through the woods and across the power lines. A far-off motorcycle gunned it, probably passing another car. The engine whined, built up steam, then faded away. The sound of impatience. And escape. I could relate. An

M-80 boomed. You heard them less frequently as the July days marched past the Fourth, but then one would boom on the twentieth. Boom! Somebody out there just couldn't stop.

I couldn't stop either. The scent of clover, the *chicka-chick* of some odd bird. Mother had gone too far with Deirdre this time, and I couldn't stand it. I wished Deirdre would move on! Find some other bed-and-breakfast to colonize. Though *colonize* wouldn't have been my word at thirteen. Back then, I probably would have said, *Move your butt down the road, girlie!* Constant coverage of the Watergate trials and Deirdre were hard rivals for Mother's attention, which I craved in a classic pubescent way. I longed for motherly fussing precisely when my mother wouldn't give it; and I cringed when she touched my hair or asked how I was doing when I had a perfectly marvelous funk going. Her timing always seemed to be off.

But tonight Mother had gone too far. The weeping Irish girl had moaned so much that another boarder had complained, so Mother had given her the farthest room away from him: my room. My sanctuary with the dormer windows and peerless cross-breezes! And Mother hadn't even asked if I would mind. Even though three other rooms were empty, she volunteered my room, as if it were hers to give. I had spent the summer modifying the posters and pillows to my new tastes: my growing collection of Zeppelin albums, my purple beanbag chair. All bought with money from chores. Now I had to relinquish it to a pouty Irish girl who possessed everything I craved for myself: flowing blond hair, angelic skin, perfect curves. I would be stuck on a mat in the musty cupola with the dead horseflies and cobwebs. Unlike some boarders who came for a week or two, Deirdre hadn't specified her departure date. I could be trapped in the cupola for a month. I looked across the prairie at the fireflies flickering in the weeds. Maybe I'd camp in the woods.

Humidity blurred the peach half-moon. I usually took this walk earlier, but the weeping Deirdre had monopolized Mother, and I'd had to clean the whole kitchen myself. While I swept the

remnants of our cook Gretta's potato salad and sauerbraten into the waste pail, Mother and Deirdre sipped ginger ale in the dining room, and Deirdre blathered about some boyfriend of hers who died. Gretta had the evening off, and Mother wasn't budging, so I had to rush to stack the plates and wipe clean the counters and sweep the great linoleum floor.

I swatted my arm and hurried through the woods toward the pond where a great blue heron I had named Horace lingered at sunset. I always tried to spot Horace before he detected me, but he took flight at the snap of a twig, unfolding his six-foot wingspan and gliding across the murky water. It was getting late. I had missed him tonight and it was no accident. It was Mother's fault. And Deirdre's too.

The residual buzz from a joint I'd smoked that afternoon with my neighbor Albie tilted my senses. Albert Gallagher was fifteen, a longtime nerd who'd recently morphed into a stoner. I wasn't a particularly capable joint smoker, and after a couple tokes, I noticed how the birds suddenly seemed to be having genuine conversations. I could deal with the whole alternate reality of the sound of the creek, but gawky and pimpled Albie was another story. He smiled at me too widely, his braces glinting, and I saw the chemistry-set dork of yesteryear. He had to be pretty desperate to hang out with me. I was not one of those thirteen-going-on-twenty-two type of girls. But I was grateful for his companionship in the summertime especially, and Mother hadn't really acknowledged that he wasn't the innocent boy he used to be. Her vigilance had waned precisely when it should have sharpened. She knew that Albie and I "took hikes" in the afternoons, but she had no clue about my nighttime excursions alone in the woods.

The woods at night had always been a forbidden zone, and up until a few months before, I'd always steered clear of them after dark. Mother never said precisely why I shouldn't go into them, and as my irritability with her increased, so did my desire to venture farther into the woods. I was growing beyond Mother's con-

stant surveillance, and with every nightly walk through the woods that passed without incident, I became emboldened, venturing farther and farther into the dark.

A mosquito whined in my ear, and I swatted it, first calmly, then spastically. Between the black branches the sky was gray. I ran across a short extension bridge, making the chains and planks rattle like hell, then I flew into another small prairie. The sudden appearance of a Tudor mansion shifted everything. At this point in my daily stroll I always slowed down. I trailed my fingers along the flowers, suddenly elegant, suddenly cool. I pulled the rubber bands out of my hair and let my curly red hair hang. I imagined a handsome hero, half hidden by a velvet curtain, watching my pensive walk through the prairie and asking himself, *Who might that creature be?* I envisioned a future where every night I descended a spiral staircase, a butler handed me a champagne flute, and my dashing husband and I tangoed across the living room. Back then, I had no doubt that my life would have a happy ending.

After the second prairie, I wound up back in the dark woods. It was later, and therefore darker than I'd ever seen before. I turned onto a bridle path and heard something scamper through the fallen leaves. The cicadas' rattle grew louder, then suddenly stopped, as if warning me. A flame of fear blazed through my body; an animal, evil men, something was lurking and watching me from the dark corners of the woods. Two acorns thunked to the ground. Then I heard beating hooves behind me. I jumped off the path and pushed far into the brambles, swearing that I would never disobey my mother again. The scratchy, moist brush felt like a giant, thorny spider web, and mosquitoes immediately started to feast on my exposed skin. I turned back to look at the path.

I saw the silhouette of a man with billowing hair riding a horse at full gallop. Wood chips flew into the air behind him. In one hand he held the bridle, and in the other a flaming torch of such orange fire, I could scarcely believe it was earthly. I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed against a tree trunk, praying he wouldn't see

me, and wondering if this was why Mother had warned me to avoid the woods at night.

"Where is she?" he roared.

The horse skidded to a halt, and he waved the torch into the trees, turning them from black to flickering gold. My fingers trembled, and it took every ounce of strength not to wet my pants. He held the torch high, next to his face, and I saw his muttonchop side-whiskers, his thick beard. He peered down his long, sharp nose, then tilted the torch so it shone in my face. I crossed my legs and hugged myself.

"Where is Deirdre?" he shouted.

It suddenly dawned on me that this girl I'd been fighting with and hating and wishing would go away was a genuine Heroine. Boring Deirdre was one of them; even Mother hadn't guessed. Never before had a man leapt from the pages of a book to recapture a Heroine. Deirdre was so depressed—crying all the time and monopolizing Mother's attention—she must have come from some awful romance. Only a cheap book would have binding too weak to hold back a stereotype like this guy. All of this flashed through my mind while my body trembled with terror. For, whatever the plot line, however base the literary merit, this guy and his torch were close enough to set the tree on fire.

CHAPTER 2

+ *My bastardy + The secrets of the Prairie
Homestead + I question the fate of Heroines +
Mother-daughter tensions with a twist +*

Where I was raised is the first, most important thing to know about me, more important than knowing why Deirdre angered me so, or that my name is Penny, which I despised (but grew to love). Where I grew up explains why I've had such a checkered career with both men and jobs. I grew up in an unreal place, a house not of horrors, but of magic, my mother's bed-and-breakfast in Prairie Bluff, Illinois. But before I recount that summer when my estrangement from Mother peaked, the summer of 1974, when the first U.S. president resigned from office, I must emphasize that my younger years were happy. I grew up in a large, lovely home with acres of land to roam, with kittens and gardens and a bedroom of my own with pale pink walls. Mother sent me to theater camps at Prairie College starting at an early age. Like any girl I believed my mother was powerful and beautiful. She was only eighteen when she had me, in 1961. My father, so I'd been told, was a football player from Lincoln Park High who died in a car accident on I-94 in 1964. He had never seen me, as my mother never told him I was his. They never married. Whenever I asked

where my dad was, she always said, "In heaven," which I pictured in the usual way: clouds, harps, happiness.

As I was growing up, the house seemed more significant than my father's identity. My great-grandfather built it in the 1890s. He grew corn and soybeans, kept chickens and cows. At the turn of the century, an industrialist offered him a huge sum of money for the farmland, which he returned to prairie. He gave our family "strolling rights" into perpetuity. He built a large Arts and Crafts summer residence for his family. My great-grandfather kept the farmhouse as a summer home, and moved his family south to the city—Chicago—where he invested in residential real estate, snapping up apartment complexes and three flats on the south and west sides of the city. Eventually he bought back the Arts and Crafts summerhouse, which had fallen into disrepair after the industrialist died, as his family had no interest in the property. My great-grandmother soon restored it to its original grandeur.

As a girl, my mother, Anne-Marie, spent her summers in Prairie Bluff. Before she started to "show," Grandfather Entwhistle shipped her here from Lincoln Park to have the baby in seclusion. That was a year before the full thrust of black migration and white flight bottomed out the Chicago real estate market, rendering Grandfather nearly broke. My grandparents pressured Mother to give me up and had found a couple to adopt me, but once Mother held me she said she couldn't let me go. This was her first act of defiance against her own mother, who, I later learned, actually tried to forge her daughter's signature on the adoption papers. My grandfather caught Grandmother red-handed, paying off a secretary in the obstetrician's office.

When my grandfather finally accepted that his baby girl had chosen to raise her own, he let her stay in Prairie Bluff with me. With the Chicago housing market tanking, they couldn't afford the house's upkeep without additional income, so they decided to convert it into a bed-and-breakfast. They installed a front desk in the foyer complete with a bell and register. Mother liked the idea of run-

ning a B&B and she named it Prairie Homestead, which always had the ring of a lunatic asylum to me. And in some ways, it was. Though plenty of ordinary women lodged at our place while I was growing up, the Homestead seemed to have a special attraction for Heroines who needed a break from their story lines. Madame Bovary had dozed in the hammock for three weeks after Rodolphe abandoned her. Penelope had sipped our curried lentil soup while she waited for Odysseus. Daisy Buchanan took endless baths after running over Myrtle Wilson. My mother had always been a reader, hooked on *The Secret Garden* and *The Princess and the Pea* at the age of seven. She knew exactly how these women's stories would end, but she behaved as if she hadn't any idea. In the padlocked attic she'd hidden all her books on shelves with locked pine doors. One never knew who might show up and in what state. The last thing Mother wanted was for Anna Karenina to discover accidentally that she was bound to take her life on the railroad tracks.

When I was little I didn't always know who was or wasn't a Heroine. Sometimes a guest's lethargy, or constant weeping, or voracious appetite gave her away. My mother recognized the names of the Heroines immediately, but she never enlightened me until they had left. She was afraid I'd bungle and interfere with their destinies. But that summer after I turned thirteen, I wanted her to trust me. I wanted to stay up late with the Heroines, listening and nodding as my mother did, offering popcorn, never advice. I couldn't say that as a rule I preferred the Heroines to the regular visitors, but Mother did. She had a high threshold for their moods and self-absorption, and it seemed to me at thirteen that I was never granted such sway. Once again, with Deirdre, Mother had put a Heroine's needs before my own (though Mother didn't even realize at that point that Deirdre was a Heroine). I thought Mother and the Heroines knew some womanly secret, and I'd started stealing into the hot attic to paw through Mother's musty books. Up in the eaves, the dust motes swirling through the dollhouse replica of our house, I'd been getting an education.

"Why do so many of them wind up dead?" I once asked.

"We all wind up dead, honey," Mother said.

"I know. But couldn't their authors come up with better endings than having them poison themselves or throw themselves in front of trains?"

"It's just a way to create a dramatic ending," she said. "Some of these women were part of enormously long novels. There's got to be a payoff if you drag your reader through five, six hundred pages."

"But these women aren't real!"

"Penny—just go get my migraine medicine from my vanity. I feel one coming on."

I knew, as only a teenage girl does, how to rile my mother, so I harped on this point. She never could brook the argument that these characters weren't real. They nibbled chicken legs to the bone; they left strands of hair in the bathtub. When they breathed on the windows in wintertime, they left a fog on the glass. And then one day, they were gone.

Don't ask me to explain how these Heroines found their way to us (and God knows how they got their contemporary clothes). They never commented about our technology, and remained immersed in their narrative problems, living completely in their heads. The Heroines began to appear when Mother was a small girl, and they came only to the Homestead, never to her house in Lincoln Park. Though she has vague memories of beautiful women peeking over the bars of her crib, the one she remembers in detail (the first one she told me about) arrived when she was five.

She woke in the middle of the night; something had stirred in her room. As she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, she saw at the foot of her bed a young woman with hair that hung beyond the bedrail. Mother propped herself on her elbows and blinked. The girl was beautiful, her hair thick and flaxen. Mother's mouth fell open, and as her eyes adjusted, she saw something shimmering on the floor beneath her night-light. It was a river of hair, falling from the girl's shoulders to the floor, twisting and folding all around

Mother's bed, up the side of her nightstand, into her tiny baby-doll cradle. Worried that her doll was smothered, Mother jumped from the bed and dug beneath the silky hair to retrieve her hard-limbed DyDee Doll.

"She's okay." Mother patted the doll's back, and water trickled from the hole in her mouth. Mother licked the vinyl lips and extended her hand. "I'm Anne-Marie."

Rapunzel smiled and took Mother's hand, but tears welled in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Mother asked.

"The weight of this hair, how it makes my head ache!"

"Lie down here and rest." Mother patted her pillow. As she rubbed Rapunzel's temples, she listened to the story of how a witch had locked the girl in a tower that had neither doors nor staircases, only a tiny window at the top. The phallic implications escaped Mother, of course, but she was astounded by such a fate. "And you can't go outside at all?"

Rapunzel shook her head. "But a handsome prince climbs the rope of my hair every day, after Mother Gothel has visited. He brings me some silken rope, and one day I'll weave a ladder and escape!"

"Is he a handsome prince?"

They stayed up whispering for another hour, but once Rapunzel drifted off to sleep, so did Mother. When she woke, Rapunzel was gone.

The next day at breakfast, Anne-Marie told her parents, Edith and Henry, about the nighttime visitor.

"That sounds like Rapunzel," her mother said.

"You met her?" Anne-Marie asked.

"She's a fairy-tale character from Germany. You must have dreamt it. Certainly we read the story together."

"I don't remember it."

"Sure," her father said. He folded the *Wall Street Journal* in two, and laid it beside his egg-streaked plate. "The witch finds out

about the prince's visits, and she cuts off Rapunzel's hair and banishes her to the desert." He tipped his coffee mug and finished the last drops.

The housekeeper, Gretta, was from the Black Forest. She was young then, trim, with muscular calves and a high bosom. Hearing the tales of her native land, she wiped her hands on her apron and chimed in, "Then the witch gets the prince to climb up to the tower and scares the devil out of him."

Mother burst into tears. "Poor Rapunzel!"

"Now, Henry, Gretta, you've got her all worked up!" Grandmother pulled a handkerchief from her apron pocket and held it under Anne-Marie's nose. "Blow, please."

"Anne-Marie, dolly, don't cry." Henry pulled her onto his lap. "Didn't you read the whole story? The prince wanders the desert until he finds her. And then, you know what's really neat?"

Mother heaved a staggering sigh. "What?"

"They have twins! A boy and a girl! And then they live happily ever after."

"Are you sure?" she sniffed.

"We'll read it together after you help Gretta clear the table."

"We've obviously read it before!" Edith said. "How else could she have dreamt about her?"

"It was real!" Anne-Marie said, slamming her spoon in her oatmeal.

"Don't be fresh," her father said.

"One more word!" her mother said. "And I'll—"

Even at five, Anne-Marie knew not to cross her mother. So she piped down and kept quiet about Rapunzel. Later when Gretta found a twenty-foot strand of hair on the hardwood floor, they looped it around a spool and hid it in an attic chest. From then on, Gretta became Mother's confidante. Over the years, other Heroines visited her, and she cherished the easy conversation, the honesty, and always their timeless beauty, but she never told anyone but Gretta about them. She was afraid that if her mother found out,