

A
WOMAN
MISUNDERSTOOD



by
Melinda Clayton

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A false witness shall not be unpunished. He who utters lies shall perish.

Proverbs 19:9

Chapter 1: Rebecca

I ONCE READ that the stench of a decaying human body is similar to that of rotted fish, but that was not my experience. Perhaps it's because I've only witnessed the odor once, or perhaps it's because the one time I did, the number of bodies was multiplied by three and they'd been putrefying for days in the moist heat of a Tennessee summer. Whatever the reasons, it's not an experience I'm likely to forget, not only due to the smell, but also because the corpses were those of my family.

The bodies belonged to my parents and younger sister, the three people in the world for whom I'd been tasked with caring, which is what I'd been trying to do that scorching July morning. I'd pulled into their long, rocky, rutted driveway to perform my usual Saturday chores: mow the lawn, pay the bills, shop for groceries, take my sister out for a treat. It wasn't immediately clear, as I parked under the old pecan tree and stepped out into a wall of heat, that something was wrong. The place looked run down, true, but that had been the case for the past several years, since my father's most recent heart attack.

Forty acres had quickly become too much for him to handle, so he'd rented the farm portion out to another farming family. While the fields had been recently plowed and planted with cotton, the couple of acres surrounding the house were overgrown and neglected. Buttercups grew wild across a lawn filled with Johnson grass, a horrible weed that had killed off our beef cattle years before. Hydrangeas spread shapelessly along the driveway, and the unpruned crepe myrtles hadn't bloomed in years, their scraggly gray branches twisted and turned in a never-ending dance of death.

I did my best to keep the yard in check on the weekends, but given the four-hour drive and my odd work hours, it just wasn't always possible. On a good weekend I managed to get it all mown, which was more than would have happened without me. For years, I'd begged my father to hire someone to help me mow, but he refused, citing cost as the reason. But that wasn't it.

He was a cheap bastard, don't get me wrong. I could probably count on one hand the articles of new clothing I had growing up, and I was the oldest. I doubt my sisters ever saw clothes with store tags still attached. It wasn't for lack of money, either. We had money; we just weren't allowed to spend it. That man could squeeze a penny until it screamed, as my mother used to say.

But that's not why he refused to hire someone to mow his yard. My father grew up in a time in which family cared for family, sons built houses on adjacent acres, and daughters lived at home until they married and went to live in a house built by some other son on some other acre his father had given to him. So that's what he expected of me, even though I'd disappointed in nearly every category, beginning, of course, with my gender. In my father's eyes, son or no, coming home weekends to help was my job, plain and simple.

On that particular morning, it was a little unusual not to see my sister's face plastered against the front window, drool dripping down her chin as she rocked in her wheelchair, squealing with excitement. My visits were the highpoints of Callie's life, sad as that might seem. I suppose compared to every other day, endless days during which Callie sat for hours in front of the T.V., a visit to the local Dairy Queen was pretty exciting, after all.

I'd long ago stopped trying to persuade my parents to enroll Callie in some sort of workshop or day program. When she'd aged out of special education classes at the local high school twenty-eight years prior, that had been the end of Callie's socialization. Family cares for family, my parents would say whenever I brought it up, and so Callie remained at home, living a life that was no sort of life at all.

Of course, that was no longer the case that sweltering summer morning, but it wasn't until I'd climbed the porch steps and opened the front door to that horrible smell that I really began to understand death. When I stumbled over Callie's dead body, my foot slipping and sinking into the rotted flesh of her stomach, I had no choice but to understand.

After I finished screaming, my first thought was to call 911.

My second was to find Lena, my surviving sister.

My third was to wonder how much time we had before her arrest.

This is important, this third thought of mine. If you stick with my story, you'll understand why.