

CHAPTER ONE

ENOUGH

Rebecca wanted to get home and disappear into her room as quietly as possible. Rebecca was tired and sore. Brianna and her minions had pushed her into lockers and walls a few times today. So what else is new, she thought discouragedly. She trudged around to the back door since she wasn't allowed to use the front door. That was for family. She opened the door from the laundry room to the kitchen and stopped. Her father, stepmother and stepsister were all there, glaring at her.

"I told them," Brianna announced with a smirk.

"Told them what?" Rebecca asked quietly. Brianna lied all the time to get her into trouble.

"Don't you try and lie to us, you whore," Maggie accused. Her stepmother stepped towards her and slapped her across the face, hard enough to make her stumble.

"I'm very disappointed in you," her father said.

"What are you accusing me of now?" Rebecca asked tiredly. She'd learned that she'd never be believed and just accepted their punishment and moved on with her day.

"I told Mom you were pregnant," Brianna explained gleefully.

"Pregnant?" Rebecca was shocked.

Maggie narrowed her eyes. "Are you going to deny it?"

"Of course, I'm going to deny it. I'm not pregnant."

"Are you calling Brianna a liar?"

"No. No. Of course not."

"Well, then...."

"I'm saying I'm not pregnant. I don't know why she thinks I am, but I'm not,"

Rebecca continued.

"So you had an abortion," Maggie accused.

"What? No!."

"Then you are pregnant," Maggie concluded with a smirk.

Rebecca knew it was futile to argue, but she had to try. This was insane.

"I am not now, nor have I ever been pregnant. I've never been with a boy or a man," Rebecca added.

"You've had sex with a man. That's just sick," Brianna said.

"You're not listening," Rebecca said, trying to get them to understand.

"I've heard enough. I don't want a whore in my house. Get out," Maggie ordered.

"What?" Rebecca looked at her father. He looked sad for a moment before straightening his shoulders.

"You should have thought of possible repercussions before letting some man use your body. You heard Maggie. Get out."

"And don't come back," Brianna chimed in.

Rebecca understood there was no arguing with them. "Fine. I'll get my things."

"No. We bought those things, so technically, they belong to us. BE glad I'm letting you leave with the clothes you're wearing." Maggie looked pointedly at the door. "Well."

Rebecca sighed and picked up her backpack. "Leave it," Maggie ordered.

"No. My grandfather bought it for me. It's mine." She stared Maggie in the eye while slowly stepping towards the door.

"No. You'll leave it here."

"Maggie, let her have it. It doesn't matter," her father said.

Maggie turned her head to address her father. "No. Brianna wants it."

Rebecca took the opportunity while they were momentarily distracted. She stepped into the laundry room and knocked over the shelf with the cleaning supplies. She yanked open the outside door and ran through the yard to the back of the property. A cedar hedge backed by a tall wooden fence marked the boundary between their property and the neighbours. After the first time she'd been caught by Maggie, she'd planned her escape. Just in case.

Rebecca had loosened some boards enough that she could move them aside. The resulting opening was only large enough for a small girl. She quickly slipped through after pushing her backpack ahead. She knew that Maggie would be on her heels, so she wasted no time running through the neighbour's yard and out onto the street.

Rebecca knew all the neighbourhood cut-throughs and ran as fast as her aching body would let her. Daylight was on her side. Her family wouldn't dare her out in the open. She checked her watch and looked around to determine her location after her frantic dash. She smiled. It was a small smile. Lady Luck was finally gracing her with an opportunity.

Rebecca knew there was a bus shelter one street over. She'd memorized the schedule around her house, and a bus was due in two minutes. She pushed herself and

raced to the glass enclosure. The bus arrived at the same time she did. Rebecca boarded the bus, found a seat on the street side, and took a deep breath. She was safe for a while.

“What do I do now?” she murmured. It wasn’t that Rebecca didn’t have a plan. She just needed to organize the timeline for her subsequent actions. She’d known that she’d eventually have to leave. She’d just hope to have more time. Three months would have been enough.

Rebecca sat on the bus for the next thirty minutes, making a mental list. The bus had looped to her school, and she decided that emptying her locker would be the first step. She’d already explored her options for gaining entry after hours. The bathroom windows on the first floor were always left open, not a lot, but enough for a skinny girl to squeeze through.

The second option was the gym door. Depending on the time of day, the door was left open so the athletes could get out to the field for practice and come back in and shower afterwards. Rebecca had noticed that other students would stick around after class and watch. This was a good option since she’d just be one of the crowd of onlookers.

The third option was the shop door. The school offered car repair as an elective, and students could stay until six to work on their projects.

Today, the best option was the gym door. Rebecca sauntered over the back of the school and casually walked into the gym. She continued up the art department on the third floor. Nobody stopped her. As usual, she was invisible unless her stepsister brought attention to her existence by tormenting her.

Rebecca wasn't taking any art classes, but she'd frequently heard the teacher being scolded for leaving the door unlocked. She hoped that today would be another 'forgetful' day. She had other contingency options, but this would be the easiest. The fourth floor was quiet, and Rebecca's shoes didn't make any noise on the terrazzo floors. She sighed in relief as the art room door opened. Rebecca closed and locked it from the inside. She found a corner where she couldn't be seen from the window in the door and lowered herself gingerly. She was safe for a while, and the adrenaline that had sustained her was done. Every ache, pain and bruise she'd experienced over the last few days came crashing down. The emotional turmoil was just the final straw. She started to cry. Quietly. Rebecca had learned over time that quiet was best, even when she thought she was alone. Brianna would mock her if she was caught crying. Maggie would punish her. I'll give you something to cry about, her stepmother would say before beating her.

Yes. Quiet was best. She hugged her knees and allowed herself the luxury of self-pity. It was dark when she finally lifted her head. She checked her watch. 4 AM.

"Okay. This is good," Rebecca mumbled. The sleep had helped her emotionally, but her body was stiff. "Time for part two." The cleaners would be gone, and the school didn't have roaming security, just alarmed doors and outside cameras. She stood and walked out into the dim hallways. The emergency exit lights were enough for her to see where she was going. She slowly walked up to the fourth floor, where her locker was. She didn't dare keep anything important at the house. Brianna and Maggie would find it and either confiscate it or destroy it.

Rebecca opened her locker for the last time and took out her go bag. She kept two clothing changes. Brianna and her friends would 'accidentally' spill things at lunch, find other ways to get her dirty or rip her clothes. Today, she was grateful that she had fresh clothes to change into. She planned on taking a shower before leaving the school.

Once the bag was out, Rebecca reached into the locker and felt around the bottom. She'd found, accidentally, that the bottom wasn't welded and could be lifted out. It was the perfect hiding place if you didn't mind dust and cobwebs. She pulled out the metal plate and then two large plastic zipper bags. The first one contained her important documents: her birth certificate, her social security card and the contact information for her grandfather's lawyer. The second bag had her mother's things, everything she'd been able to rescue before Maggie tried to erase Melissa Greaves-Colson's existence. There were pictures and a few pieces of jewellery. Nothing intrinsically valuable but of great sentimental value to Rebecca: earrings and a necklace she remembered her mom wearing. It was all she had left of the woman who had loved her.

Rebecca put the bags in her backpack, repositioned the locker's bottom plate, and closed the door. She stood and stared at the battered grey metal. It was the last time she would be in this school.

"Damn them," she cursed. "Another three months. Another three months, and I would've been gone." Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, but Rebecca wiped them away angrily.

"I won't let them win. No tears."

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She picked up her bags and headed down to the gym change room. After a hot shower and a change of clothes, Rebecca was more settled and ready for the next item on her list. She waited by the gym door for the alarm to be turned off. The vice principal always came in around 6:30 AM. She had a window of two minutes to get out of the school and cross the grounds before the man reached his office and turned everything back on.

Rebecca was down to one bag. She'd put everything into her backpack and tossed the go bag into the dumpster. There was a fast-food restaurant in walking distance to the school. She went in and bought breakfast. She lingered over her meal since the lawyer's office wouldn't open until 9. She thought she was safe, tucked away in one of the booths. The last place her family would look for her was near the school, and Brianna wouldn't be caught dead in a fast-food place.

She left the restaurant before the 8 o'clock bell and headed toward the suburban streets nearby. She didn't want kids to see she wasn't walking to the school, not that anyone usually noticed her but this wasn't the day to take a chance. She caught a bus going downtown and found the lawyer's address. Rebecca looked around worriedly. Her father's office was one street over. She quickly entered the lobby and checked the directory for the offices of Walker, Craig and Black. They were on the third floor. She went up the stairs and waited until 9 before entering the law firm offices. The receptionist glanced up when Rebecca walked in but went back to her work.

"I'd like to see Mr. Walker," Rebecca said, undeterred.

"He's not in," the receptionist replied without lifting her head.

"I need to see him today. My grandfather recommended him."

"Do you have an appointment? No? Well, call and make an appointment."

"Okay. I'd like to make an appointment with Mr. Walker for today."

The receptionist narrowed her eyes. "He might not be in today."

"I understand. I'll wait," Rebecca said, sitting in one of the waiting room chairs.

It quickly became apparent that there was another entrance for staff. Several clients came and went over the next four hours. The receptionist occasionally glanced at her but didn't announce her presence to Mr. Walker.

"You aren't going away, are you?" the woman finally commented.

"No, ma'am. I'm in trouble, and my grandfather told me to come here if I need help," Rebecca replied, looking up from the tablet on her lap.

The receptionist drummed her fingers, debating with herself.

"Fine. Mr. Walker has an opening after lunch."

"Thank you," Rebecca replied politely, bending her head back to book.

"I said...after lunch."

"Thank you," Rebecca repeated.

"Aren't you going to out?"

"Why?"

"To get lunch?" the receptionist replied, clearly exasperated.

"No, ma'am. Thank you for your concern."

The receptionist shook her head and turned her attention back to the work on her desk.

"Miss Colson? I'm Mr. Walker's intern. If you'll come with me."

Rebecca stored her tablet and followed the intern down the hallway. She sat after she was introduced and waited for the lawyer to speak.

"You're quite young."

Rebecca blinked. Mr. Walker waited for her to say something. What could she say? The lawyer was stating the obvious. After a few moments, the lawyer put his elbows on the desk, leaned forward and cleared his throat.

"What can I do for you today?"

"My grandfather, Robert Greaves, told me that if I ever needed help, I should contact you," Rebecca replied.

Walker nodded and pulled a legal pad closer. "Tell me everything."

Rebecca recounted the events of the previous day. She detailed the abuse, both mental and physical. She finished by telling the lawyer that she'd been accepted to MIT and only needed to finish her exams.

"MIT? How old are you?"

"I'm fourteen. I thought this through, and I need to be emancipated. The trust fund my mother left me is for my education and assorted expenses. My father does NOT have access."

"Rebecca, even if you are emancipated, you're still a minor."

"I know that," Rebecca interrupted. "I'm not the first or only child prodigy MIT has ever seen. There are protocols in place for minors. You can call them if you want. I just want to make sure that no one can send me back to my father and his family."

"I see. Anything else?"

"I'd like you to contact my grandfather."

"Why can't you call him?" Walker asked curiously.

"HE doesn't want my father to reach out, so I don't have his number or address because Dad would take my phone and get the info," Rebecca explained slowly, as though it were obvious.

"Of course. That makes sense." Walker's lips twitched as this typical teenage condescension. This young girl might have been knocked down, but she wouldn't let anything get in her way. He called his intern and asked for the R. Walker file.

Inside the manilla folder was a note in large, bold capital letters reminding Walker that the contact information was NOT to be shared with anyone, especially not his son or family. He smiled at the terminology. HE could call but not share the number. He picked up the phone and dialled the number. After identifying himself, he quickly summarised the events relating to the call. He listened to the reply and hung up.

"Your grandfather will be here in two days. He asked me to secure hotel accommodations for the two of you. He also suggested we petition the court to change guardianship to him instead of emancipation, which would be more difficult to obtain."

"Okay," Rebecca said, relieved. "If that's what Granddad thinks is best. Can I also change my name?"

"Oh?"

"I don't want to be a Colson. If my grandfather is going to be my guardian, I want the same name. I want to be Rebecca Greaves."

"We can do that. First, let's get the guardianship request done then the name change. I think your grandfather will be pleased."