

Millie

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Gardiner, Montana--March 1933

At her mother's funeral, fourteen-year-old Millie Chase stood shivering in the snow-covered graveyard and watched as workmen lowered the casket into the hole they'd managed to carve out of the frozen earth. A furry frost had already formed on the dirt walls. The minister said some words about dust to dust, but Momma wasn't dust.

She was a woman who strangers turned around to stare wherever she went. Looking at her made other people smile, and she always smiled back. She might even stop and talk to the person—ask what kind of work they did or give them some compliment about how the outfit they were wearing was bringing out the color of their eyes. People always seemed to feel better after they'd been with Millie's mother--even for just a couple of minutes.

“Millie, just because our family has been blessed to enjoy the finer things in life,” Momma used to say, “that doesn't mean any person you meet is any less valuable. Never forget that.”

At the church service, Millie had seen her laid out on the white satin lining of the casket. She wore a lavender dress better suited for summer and somebody had put too much lipstick on her. Millie had resisted the urge to use the handkerchief she carried to blot it away. Nobody had asked

for her opinion on what her mother might want to wear, but Millie knew she never would have chosen that dress.

Now as the minister took a step closer to the open grave and bowed his head, an icy wind whipped strands of straight brown hair against her cheeks, which had turned raw with the cold. Others followed his lead, but Millie just stared at that hole in the ground and the polished wood box with gilded handles that held the mother she would never see again.

Her father had been killed in battle during the war right before she was born. “The Great War,” she’d heard it called, although she never understood what could possibly be great about any war. He was buried somewhere in Europe. Momma had always promised that one day the two of them would travel there and say a proper goodbye.

But then three years earlier—when Millie was eleven--Momma had married Roger Fitzgerald and pretty much seemed to forget about traveling to say goodbye to Millie’s father. At first, she was okay, figuring Momma seemed so happy. Of course, that didn’t last. She glanced up at Roger as he made a show of dabbing his eyes and then blowing his nose with a clean white handkerchief. She was not fooled, although it sure looked like others were. These last months while Momma got sicker and sicker, Roger had barely stopped by her room once a day. Now a woman Millie had seen at parties and suppers given by her mother and Roger touched his shoulder and then looped her hand through the crook of his elbow like she was staking her claim or something. Millie couldn’t resist smirking and hiding a smile when Roger pulled free of the woman’s grasp before stepping forward and dropping three red roses on Momma’s casket.

He nodded to Millie, indicating she should do the same, then stood next to her while the other mourners tossed in small sprigs of juniper and sage. How come Roger didn’t know Momma never liked red roses, she

wondered. Never really cared for roses at all. But he'd ordered them special.

The cemetery sat on a hill that overlooked the town. Beyond the small cluster of buildings that were the shops and other businesses of Gardiner, Millie could see the Roosevelt arch that marked the entrance to Yellowstone National Park. She could see the railroad station as well. She wondered if Roger would send her back to Chicago, where she and Momma had lived before they met him. But she had no relatives there any more—and as far as she knew, neither did he, so probably not.

They stayed until the cemetery workers started to fill the hole, the dirt pelting Momma's casket like last night's icy snowstorm had tapped at Millie's bedroom window. Afterwards, she had little choice but to go back to Roger's house. As far as she was concerned, he wasn't even her stepfather—just a man Momma had married, so what was she supposed to do now?

As they walked away from the grave, Roger placed his large hand on her back and steered her toward the shiny black car that reminded her of pictures of tanks she'd seen. Gus, his chauffeur, saw them coming and opened the rear door. After they entered, he closed it with a firm click. Nobody else in Gardiner had a chauffeur, but apparently Roger felt he needed somebody to drive him around because he was this bigshot businessman.

Millie wasn't sure what he did exactly, just that Momma had said he was going to get a government contract and make a lot of money. That's why they'd moved to Gardiner. He had an office where he went every day, and Momma had told Millie he bought businesses that were struggling, brought them back to life and then sold them for a lot of money. Back in Chicago after they were first married, Momma had been real proud of Roger, making him out to be some kind of hero. But Millie

realized she hadn't heard her talk much about that since they'd moved to Montana.

As Gus drove away, Millie twisted around and craned her neck to see the grave and the few mourners still gathered there, talking to each other like they would if they were in a shop downtown. Nobody was watching as the cemetery workers continued shoveling dirt to fill the grave. *Couldn't anybody even wait to see her fully buried?*

"Sit still," Roger snapped. He lit a cigar and blew out a stream of foul smoke before picking up the folded afternoon edition of the newspaper left for him on the seat. Millie scooted as close as possible to the door, making herself small so he might forget she was even there.

It didn't take long to make the trip from the cemetery to the three-story house on the hill, the largest house in Gardiner. It was the kind of house Millie had seen pictured in books about fairy tales—the house where the evil witch resided—the house to avoid passing by crossing to the other side of the street. It was late in the afternoon and every window glowed with light, the way Roger liked it. He'd bought the place right after moving the family to Gardiner from Chicago. Millie remembered asking Momma how come just about everything was changing. How come Roger's business was all of a sudden in Montana instead of in Chicago? Had he run out of failing businesses to buy back there? It sure seemed to her like, with all the closed and boarded up shops all over the city, there were still places that could use some help.

But they moved to Gardiner, and Millie remembered him telling Momma how he hated coming home to a dark house. She'd gotten the message and always made sure every lamp in every room on every floor was on as the sun set.

Of course, now Momma wasn't there, so it must have been the housekeeper, Clara, who had made sure the lamps were all lit. The people who had been at Momma's

funeral were supposed to come back to the house after. Millie had seen Clara and a couple of other women hired to help her preparing a lot of food, setting up chairs and polishing glasses and silver serving dishes before she and Roger left for the church. Clara didn't even get to come to the service to say a proper goodbye.

“What’s that?” Roger rattled his newspaper and leaned toward Millie as he stared out the window on her side. He spoke in that voice he used when he was about to explode. It had fooled Millie and Momma early on—that voice. It wasn’t loud or even mad. No, it sounded like he was just asking. But now Millie knew, so she sat as still as possible. She followed his gaze and saw a single candle burning in the upstairs tower window that had been Momma’s room. No other light in that room—just a flickering flame.

Gus pulled the car to the curb and got out. He glanced up at the window before coming around to open the door for Roger and followed him up the walk, leaving the car door open. “I guess Clara thought maybe...”

“Clara is fired,” Roger said. “Now get somebody up there to get rid of that damned candle and turn on a proper light.”

They both seemed to have forgotten all about Millie, so she stayed where she was, trying to figure out her next move. She hadn’t lived in Gardiner long enough to make many friends, and once Momma started getting sick, she always rushed home from school to see if she was any better and keep her company. For her whole life up to now, it was just Momma and her—even after Roger came along, and truth be told, Millie liked that fine. She just wished they could go back to how things used to be.

Before Momma married Roger, they had lived in Chicago where they had a nice house, plenty of money, and lots of friends. Momma’s parents owned a bunch of hotels and when they died, the hotels were sold, and Millie heard

Momma's friend and lawyer tell Momma that she'd never have to worry about money ever again. But then right around the time she met Roger, stuff started to happen. Millie didn't really understand it but knew there was something to do with banks and the stock markets and such. She also knew that Momma was worried. Then one night while they were still in Chicago, Momma went to a party. Roger was there. Millie sometimes thought theirs was what the movie magazines called a whirlwind romance because not six weeks later, Momma and Roger were married.

At first Roger moved into the house with them. Then one day, Momma told Millie the house was going to be sold and they would be moving to their "new life" in Montana. She seemed happier than she'd been in some time, so Millie was okay with it—at first. She wasn't crazy about Roger, but then he didn't seem all that fond of her either. Momma assured them both that in time they would be "head over heels" for each other.

Well, that sure never happened.

Things went along all right for a while, but then just a couple of months after they moved, Momma and Roger started arguing--shouting at each other. Best Millie could figure out, Roger had taken some of the money left by her grandparents and lost it.

"That's not your money," she heard Momma tell him one night. She had taken to sitting at the top of the curved stairway that wound itself up from the fancy first floor to the second, where their bedrooms were, and on to the third, where her room was.

"We're married, in case you've forgotten," she heard Roger respond.

"That money belongs to Millie," Momma shouted. Millie had never heard her so upset. "It's for her education—her future. We've already lost so much, Roger,

and who knows how long this recession will last? You had no right...”

And then Millie heard something that sounded like a crack, followed by a silence so scary, she was all the way down to the second-floor landing when she saw her mother leave the front room, holding her cheek. She didn't make it three steps before Roger grabbed her arm, twisted it hard behind her back and pulled her close, so his face was right next to hers. “Don't ever walk out on me,” he said.

That was the first time Millie had heard that voice. And although it was not the last time she saw bruises on Momma's arm or neck, she never saw or heard Momma stand up to Roger again. Of course, it was just a few months after that night that she started to get sick. And once she did, at least Roger didn't hurt her any more.

Now Millie watched from the back seat of the car as Roger and Gus entered the house, leaving the front door wide open in spite of the cold. She heard Roger giving out orders and saw people rushing around. A few seconds later, the candle went dark and lights came on in Momma's room.

With Momma gone, along with both sets of grandparents and her Dad, it would be just her and Roger and the servants. But he'd fired Clara and she was the one Momma had told Millie she could lean on. She was just about to get out of the car and go around to the back door to go inside so she could avoid Roger when she saw Clara hurry down the driveway, clutching her purse and a paper shopping bag.

Millie scrambled from the car and chased after her, the patent leather shoes Roger had insisted Clara buy as part of her outfit for the funeral slipping and sliding on the skim of ice that had formed on the recently shoveled sidewalk. “Clara!”

Clara looked back at Millie, then up at the house and hurried on. “Wait!” Millie tried to catch up, but Clara

waved her off and quickened her step. Her boots gave her traction and she was able to put distance between them before Millie could catch up to her.

Millie stood there watching the housekeeper hurry away. She had no idea where Clara lived.

“Millie, he wants you inside.” She hadn’t heard Gus come after her, but now he put his arm around her shoulders and guided her back toward the house. “People will be coming soon,” he added, and the way he said it, Millie thought he meant it to make her feel better.

It didn’t.

An hour later, the house was full of Roger’s friends—people Millie didn’t really know. Since they’d moved to Montana, Momma had lost touch with pretty much everybody they used to know back in Chicago. They never came to visit, and Millie and her mother had only gone back once, the Christmas just after they had moved away. Now with Momma’s dying a few days ago, everything was happening so fast Millie wasn’t even sure if anybody had told her Chicago friends.

Once inside, she stood with Roger while a line of strangers touched her face or stroked her hair and told her how beautiful Momma was—as if she didn’t know that. After a while, nobody was paying her any mind, so she climbed the stairs. The door to Momma’s room was half-open, and she went in, closing it behind her. The first thing she did was turn off the overhead light, leaving only the small bedside lamp lit. Momma hated that ceiling light—said it hurt her eyes. She sat down at the dressing table and lined up the bottles of perfume, lotions and rouge pots. In the mirror, she saw the closet door ajar, Momma’s clothes hanging in perfect alignment—the way Roger liked. Roger had his own room down the hall, but Millie knew he came to Momma’s room several nights a week before she got sick to have what Clara had told her were “relations.”

Clara had blushed beet red and drawn her lips into a tight line as if she had just eaten a sour pickle, before adding, “And that, young lady is all you need to know.”

Millie walked to the closet and sat on the floor, scooting back until she was surrounded by the scent of Momma that clung to her clothes. She unbuckled the patent leather shoes and kicked them off, then pulled Momma’s favorite fur coat from its satin hanger and made a sort of nest for herself. Downstairs, she could hear her stepfather laughing, and someone was playing Momma’s grand piano—the only thing Roger had agreed to let her bring from the house in Chicago. Whoever was playing it wasn’t nearly as good as Momma was.