

A preview of

RAPUNZEL



LET

DOWN

a

fairy tale

retold

by regina

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Excerpt from Chapter 23:



Raphaela got out of the car woodenly, and followed her mother into the hospital with Gina right behind her. No one had noticed them going in this back entrance, and she could tell her mother was relieved.

Raphaela was wearing a blue sweater-dress and white sweater, mostly to disguise the fact that she was wearing the red woolen scarf around her neck, although the chill of fall hadn't yet appeared. No one had asked her yet why she had taken to wearing it, and she wasn't going to tell anyone. Right now she was moving in a pool of ambivalence. Hermes . . . the baby . . . her mother . . . three loves. She was about to sacrifice the new loves for the older one, the primal one, because she couldn't ask her mother to go through the pain.

If my mother did it, I can do it, she kept telling herself. That phrase worked occasionally to stop her internal dying.

It's only one, she told herself as she sat in the waiting room, wrapping the red wool tassels around her fingers. *Only once. I'll never do this again.*

Had her mother thought that once, too?

As she was prepped by the nurse and introduced to the doctor, her internal dialogue collapsed, and she found herself praying, *please forgive me, baby. Please try to understand . . .*

But she knew that the ghosts of babies were not silent.

Her angels were gone. She kept turning her head from side to side in the hospital room as she changed into a paper hospital gown, hoping to find some trace of them, but they were absent. She felt abandoned.

This must be wrong, she thought, stretching herself out on the table and accepting the sheet to cover her legs. Not that she really believed in right and wrong, but there must be a reason why she felt so cold inside.

But her mother—she couldn't hurt her mother—

Please, baby, please understand—

The technician was lifting up her gown and gently massaging her belly with a gel.

"What are you doing?" Raphaela whispered.

"Preparing the ultrasound for the doctor," the technician said.

"Can I see it?" Raphaela asked.

The technician glanced at her mother and shook her head. "I wouldn't advise it."

"It's best to think of something else," Gina said, pressing her hand. "For instance, about college. We're on the campus of Dartmouth now. Have you ever considered coming to school here?"

"Aren't we at the medical school?"

"Yes, that's right. Would you like to go to school here?"

"My mother doesn't want me to go to medical school," Raphaela said flatly, aware of the technician moving the probe over her barely-rounded abdomen. She was frowning at the screen, which made Raphaela want to see the image even more.

"Oh." Gina's voice was strangely tense. "What are you interested in studying?"

"Medicine," Raphaela said, watching the technician adjust the machine, bite her lip, and then turn to the nurse. They spoke in low voices and Raphaela tried to hear what they said.

But Gina went on relentlessly, "I actually came here for my undergraduate work. It's a lovely campus. Have you ever seen some of the historic buildings?"

Her mother was following the nurse out into the hallway, and Raphaela could hear them talking to the doctor. As Gina prattled on about the school, both she and Raphaela could overhear the conversation outside growing more intense. Finally, Gina said, "Excuse me," and abruptly got up.

Raphaela moved restlessly on the table, alone. Her eyes traveled again to the screen, and tentatively she put out a hand. The screen moved, and she turned it slowly. The video was a blur of black and white and gray, but she could make out the form of something—but it didn't look like a child. She stared, chilled.

The nurse came back into the room and noticed her expression. "Are you okay?"

"What's wrong?" Raphaela forced her voice to remain normal. She pointed to the screen. "What's wrong with it?"

"There's nothing wrong," the nurse hastened to say, getting out a towel to wipe up the gel on Raphaela's abdomen. "It's just a double embryo."

"A double?"

"Yes. There's two of them. Your mother and the doctor are just trying to figure out if they should bring you in for a surgical procedure instead. Sometimes it's safer in these cases."

It took Raphaela a moment to realize what that meant. Two of them. *Two babies. Twins.*

Now that she realized what they were, she could make out the outline of two babies, nestled against each other, half-hidden by a dark mass she supposed was the placenta—

There were two babies—

And she moved to her feet, her hospital gown rustling, pushing the sheet off of her before she quite realized what she was doing.

"Where are you going?" her mother asked as she slipped out the doorway.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said, as an excuse.

"No, you can't just leave—" the nurse objected, but Raphaela pelted down the hallway and around the corner. She remembered the room where she had changed and put a hand inside to grab her clothes, the scarf, and her purse. She kept running, dodging down the corridors and around corners until she had a substantial lead.

This couldn't go on—they would find her— She pushed open a door that said STAFF and found herself in a changing room with stacks of surgical scrubs. She grabbed a green smock and jumped into a stall.

Quickly she tore off the paper gown and dressed, shaking, wrapping the scarf around her shoulders. Then she pulled the scrubs over her street clothes, and searching around in the room, found a green hair covering and face mask and

gloves. All she had to do was hide her purse. Grabbing a sheet from a laundry cart, she wrapped up her purse and pushed her way out into the hallway, keeping her head down and moving purposefully back the way she had come.

She glanced up as she passed a corridor, and saw her mother and the nurse hurrying down the hall, looking for her. Breathing deeply, she kept walking, looking for a way out.

At last, she found the back entrance they had used to come in. Raphaela tossed the sheet into a laundry cart, took out her purse, removed the face mask, and mechanically started to cross the parking lot. No one accosted her. Looking across the busy street, she saw a sign that said, MEDICAL LIBRARY.

Swiftly she ran across the street and hurried up the steps to its glass doors, and vanished inside. Surely some medical students occasionally went to the library right after their shifts in the hospital?

She was guessing, but she must have guessed right. Looking around, she saw other students in scrubs, but none of them were wearing hair coverings. Not wanting to attract attention, she pulled it off.

For a while she searched for a place to hide, and finally found a niche overlooking the hospital which was partially secluded by several potted plants and a cubicle, and sat down, her legs shaking.

Her mother wasn't going to allow her to change her mind again, she knew it. If she went back, she knew it would only be a matter of time before the counselor, the attorneys, and her mother started pressuring her to abort both babies. There was no way she could go back.

Breathing deeply, she clutched her purse and felt inside it. She had no money, no driver's license, no ID of any kind—nothing. Just her hairbrush, a few personal belongings, a red scarf, and a baby. No, two babies.

Her fingers touched a small wooden box, a box she had forgotten she'd put in there, and remembered. She closed her eyes, and felt herself trembling as colored lights rushed around the inside of her lids. Her angels. She had her angels again.

Somehow, she would figure out what to do.



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