

Chapter One

Rosemary's Baby

She picked up a large silver bucket and emptied it into an old copper tub. The tub was six feet in length and held some of the iciest well water that you'll ever find in Savannah at that time of the year. It was drawn from one of the deepest wells in Chatham County. The well had been dug out in the backyard, nearly twenty yards from the back porch. She walked over to the corner and set the bucket down with the little dent facing outward, always facing outward.

"I guess it would help if you added the hot water, Rosemary," she muttered to herself.

Rosemary went back to the corner and took the silver bucket over to the fireplace. She had a black, cast-iron cauldron of water boiling over a wooden fire. She could never fill it to the brim because of an inch long crack at the top that had been there since she was a child. Rosemary repeatedly dipped the bucket into the scalding hot water, emptying it into the copper tub until it was nearly full. The steam glazed over the lone window until no one could see in or out. She walked the bucket back over to its natural habitat, dent facing outward. Rosemary grabbed a brown jug of iodine and poured a quart of it into the tub. Then, she took a little swig in her mouth, swooshed it around, and spat into the tub.

"Now, it's ready. Richard! Bath time!"

He hated those words. It was like the sound a buck hears, slightly before the bullet enters his flesh. He opened the door and slowly peeped inside.

"Come in, Richard. It's time to get clean."

Once a week, Richard had to participate in the dreaded bath time. He walked slowly toward the tub and stood there, gazing into the water.

"Can't I do it myself, mother?" He asked, knowing what her answer would be.

"Nonsense!" She always replied. "You're merely a baby. Now, strip off those clothes and get in."

He completely undressed and put his left foot into the water, letting out a yelp.

"It's too hot, mother."

"Nonsense, it's always the same every week. Now, get in."

Lady of the Manor

He stood in the water for a long minute, and then slowly settled into the copper tub.

“It’s burning, mother. Why is it stinging?”

“I saw where you scraped your elbow and got that cut on your leg. So, I added iodine into the water.”

“I have to get out. It hurts.”

“Nonsense; it will pass. Sit back and soak your body real good while I get the soap.”

She had a large chunk of homemade lye soap on a shelf. Rosemary grabbed a handful of it; the door flung open.

“Did you have enough water, Rosemary?” A smooth, gangly man stood in the doorway.

“Yes,” she responded without looking around.

“Father, how was work today?”

“Terrible,” he replied. “This economy is destroying people’s lives. It may take years for this country to recover.”

“Nonsense, Eugene,” Rosemary turned around. “This stock market will rebound within another month.”

“I don’t think so, Rosey. They say it completely crashed. Lots of folks lost everything. People are out there killing themselves.”

“People with no faith. As great as the twenties have been, you people panic over one day in the stock market. Nonsense!”

“If you say so. Why don’t you give Richard that soap and come sit with me in the den? I set on a bit of tea.”

“I can’t leave this child alone in a tub of water. He might drown. Do you think me an unfit mother?”

“I assure you; he won’t drown, Rosemary. Don’t you think you’re being a bit dramatic?”

“Of course not, E.H. I mustn’t risk it. I insist on being here. The Lady of the Manor has spoken.”

“Sorry, Richard; I tried. When the lady has spoken; she has spoken.”

Lady of the Manor

“Keep the tea hot, dear.”

“Of course, Rosey,” he shook his head in disgust, wishing he would do more but knowing he wouldn’t. He was frustrated with his wife, but even more disappointed in himself.

“Close the door, darling.”

He slammed it shut.

“Why can’t I wash myself, mother dearest?”

“You are a little child, Richard. Children don’t know how to wash themselves. You just sit back and let mother scrub the dirt and filth from your body.”

“But all the other boys my age bathe themselves.”

“Nonsense. Now, hand me that cloth rag and relax.”

She took the rag from his hand and squeezed the water down his back and shoulders. Richard stared at the little dent on the silver bucket and clinched his fists. She rubbed the rag on the lye soap and began to scrub the back of his neck and behind his ears.

“Such a dirty little boy. How do young boys attract such filth?”

Richard closed his eyes. He could still see that silver bucket in his mind, dent always outward. Rosemary began to cleanse his chest, stomach, and back. His eyes remained shut.

“I met a girl today, mother. She was quite lovely.” He tried anything to take his mind off this bath.

“Nonsense. You’re much too young for courting.”

“Mother, I’m fourteen years old. I’m quite old enough for a relationship. The other boys in my grade have girlfriends. It’s 1929; times are different.”

“Nonsense. Remember this and remember it well. All girls are evil. They’ll use you for your money, cheat on you, and lie on you and to you. Never trust a female, Richard.”

“You’re a female.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m your mother. Now, lift up your feet.”

She took the rag and rubbed the bottom of his feet, then between his toes. She washed his legs up toward the thighs. Richard’s eyes had remained closed.

Lady of the Manor

“Please, mother; let me wash the rest.”

“Never. Only I can clean you correctly. Otherwise, you will miss spots. Now, open your legs.”

Richard stared at the bucket’s dent one last time before clenching his eyes again. He opened his legs, slowly and reluctantly. She reached down into the water with the ragged, soapy piece of cloth and began to clean his genitalia. They both knew that ‘cleaning’ was the least of her concerns at this point. As tightly as he clenched his eyelids, he couldn’t keep the tears from seeping through and gliding down his cheeks into the milky water. She eventually dropped the rag and continued with her hand. He cried even harder, trying to focus his mind on the dent in the silver bucket. She broke his concentration with a light voice.

“Who’s Rosemary’s baby?” She whispered in his ear.

He refused to answer, pretending not to hear.

“Who’s Rosemary’s baby?” She slowed her strokes and softened her whisper. His slow tears turned into a speedy sob.

“Please stop, mother.”

“Nonsense,” Rosemary continued to whisper. “Mother must finish cleaning her special, special boy. Now, tell me who is Rosemary’s baby and we’ll be done.”

“I am,” the sobbing turned into full-blown crying. “I am Rosemary’s baby.”

“Stand up,” she stopped rubbing him. He stood in the tub, still erect from being molested. “My, how you grow with each week. You have surpassed your father; I do believe.”

His eyes never opened as ‘mommy dearest’ went for the towel. She began to dry him off, beginning with the upper body. Rosemary worked her way down to the buttocks, then around to her target area. She began to stroke him with the towel as she had with the tattered rag. He withstood as much as he could before he snatched the towel from her hands.

“No more!” Richard covered his nakedness with the towel. He kept his eyes shut. “This is the last time you will put your filthy hands on me, mother!”

“Nonsense. However will you get clean?”

“I’ll bathe myself. I am perfectly capable.”

Lady of the Manor

“You’ll do no such thing.”

“Either that or I shall run away. I want a tub in my room and a lock on the inside of my door.”

“That’s...”

“Nonsense?” He interrupted her. “Is it, mother? Is it, really? Does it really seem like nonsense that I desire my privacy?”

“I suppose not,” she stood up from her knees. “But...”

“Either that or I leave.”

“Okay, Richard. I don’t want you to leave me, ever. As long as you are here, I shall never touch you again.”

“I need to dry off and get dressed...alone.”

“Okay,” Rosemary opened the door. “I only did what I did because I love you, Richard. When you’re ready for me again, I’ll meet you here. Empty the tub when you’re done.” She closed the door behind her. “I may not touch you again, Richard, but I will make your life a miserable hell until you let me,” she muttered to herself as she walked down the hall.

Downstairs, Eugene was pouring hot tea into two porcelain cups. He squeezed the juice of a half a lemon into each cup, along with two teaspoons of sugar. He set the cups, pitcher, and Rosemary’s oatmeal raisin cookies on a silver platter and brought them into the den. They were sitting on a mahogany coffee table when Rosemary entered the room. She grabbed a cup and sat in silence. Eugene nibbled on a cookie, trying to figure out how to start the conversation.

“It isn’t right, Rosemary. It’s got to stop.”

“I can’t help myself, E.H. It’s all I know.”

“Doesn’t matter. A son’s worth can go no further than a mother’s trust will guide him. It can’t happen anymore.”

“It won’t. I promised him that I wouldn’t touch him again.”

“Do you mean that, Rosey?”

“I have no choice. He threatened to run away from me. I can’t lose my baby.”

Lady of the Manor

She sipped her tea in silence for a while, staring into the fireplace. Eugene picked up his cup and followed suit. She knew that the urge would come up sooner or later. If she couldn't touch Richard, she'd have to find someone else until she could.

She finally broke the calm, "You know I don't care much for this tea. Have Caruthers put on a pot of coffee."

"He's already left for the night."

"Oh bother," she continued to sip her tea, saying nothing else till they went to sleep.

Upstairs, Richard finally managed to pry his eyes open. He was still standing naked in the water, holding the towel. He vomited into the tub as he had done after every other episode with his mother. The thought of her hands on him always made him puke. He slowly dried himself, shaking all the while. Then, he grabbed the silver bucket. He began filling the bucket with tub water, pouring it down a chute that led to a water trough outside of the house.

Richard couldn't help but notice the little dent on the bucket. He had only noticed it the first time she had molested him two years prior. It was the roaring twenties, but for him it hadn't been that much fun. He knew that he would have never run away, but it was the only viable threat he could think of, other than murder. But, he knew he could never kill his mother.

Richard poured the last bit of water out and set the bucket on the floor. He hung the towel and rag up on nails and slipped into his long johns. He sat on the oak wood floor, back to the tub, eyes red from crying. He decided to leave the ring of vomit and dirt around the tub. If she wanted it clean, she could do it herself. He planned to never use it or the room again.

Richard caught sight of the silver bucket out of the corner of his eye. He punched it over and over until his knuckles bled. He picked it up and walked over to the window, intending to toss it outside. He hesitated for a moment, and then walked it back over to its proper place. Richard spun it in his hands over and over as if the dent might somehow change. Then, he set it down in that same corner that it had always resided, dent facing outward, always outward.