

Thorns of Truth



V I K I N G

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VIKING

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Thorns of Truth

Also by Eileen Goudge

Garden of Lies

Such Devoted Sisters

Blessing in Disguise

Trail of Secrets

For Sandy, who showed me what it was all about

Acknowledgments

Over the past decade or so, since the publication of my first novel, Garden of Lies, readers from all over the world, and from all walks of life, have uttered the magic words every author wants to hear: "Those characters were so real to me, I keep wondering what might have happened to them." I, too, couldn't stop wondering. And having written the following, in which that question is at last answered—for now, at least—I wish to acknowledge all those who cared enough to ask, as well as every bookseller who believed in and supported me from the start.

With particular thanks to the most dedicated and tireless of my supporters, Hermine Lieberman and the gang at Bronx Bookplace.

Truth and roses have thorns about them.
proverb

Thorns of Truth

 July 6, 1996

My dearest daughter,

Yes, my daughter. I know what you're thinking, that it isn't fair. How can I claim you as a daughter when no one but the three of us—you, me, Nikos—knows the truth? The reason is simple: I am your mother. In fact, and in my heart, if not in the eyes of the world.

I'm writing this, not as an apology, but in the hope of shedding some light on that dark place my secret has forced you to occupy. Only God knows how deeply I mourn the life that might have been yours, ours, had I made a different choice all those years ago. I've told you what happened . . . but do you know how often since that day you first came to me, demanding the truth, I've wanted to sit down with you, and simply talk? Hear your thoughts and feelings . . . and tell you mine. Once, I believed I had all the time in the world. Now, as I sit by my bedroom window overlooking the garden, I see, instead of the roses I spent all morning pruning, only the lengthening of shadows.

You see, my dear Rose, I am dying. Dr. Choudry tells me it may be only a matter of months; the heart that has been my faithful shepherd these seventy-four years is as worn-out, it appears, as I am. By the time you read this, I'll be gone. Along with, I pray, any bitterness you might still feel toward me.

That is why I'm writing this, the last of so many of letters addressed to you but never sent. I held back at first because they wouldn't have made sense—you wouldn't have known who I was—then, later, because I was afraid. I feared you would see them, not as expressions of love, but as pale substitutes for what I couldn't give you in person. This letter, too, will be put away with the others until after I'm gone. Perhaps then you will understand that I ask nothing of you other than for you to believe that you were dearly loved.

For regardless of what you might think, I would not have left you to be raised by another woman had I known how cruel she was. Truly it wasn't a decision I ever imagined I would have to make. Our lives, our future, everything would have turned out differently if not for what happened the night you were born. The fire. Oh, Rose, you can't imagine what it was like! Smoke, sirens, people running crazy in the corridors. I went a little crazy, too, I think. My only clear thought was that I had to find you. Rescue you.

But by the time I reached the hospital nursery, there was only one newborn left to be rescued . . . and it wasn't you. Afterwards, when everyone assumed the baby girl I'd carried to safety was mine, I felt I had no choice but to continue along the path on which fate had placed me. I was so desperate! With your dark eyes, and black hair, my husband, Gerald, would have known at once you weren't his. Any suspicions he'd had about Nikos, your true father, would have been confirmed.

In a moment of madness, I honestly believed the baby I held in my arms, with her fair skin and blue eyes, was the answer to my prayers. Who was I to question what was so clearly God's plan? It was as if I were being given one last chance to save myself. . . and save you. Yes, as crazy as I know it must seem to you, I truly believed you would be better off.

It didn't take long for me to realize how wrong I'd been. What a ghastly mistake I'd made. But by then, it was too late. Not only would it have cost me my marriage, but it would have meant giving up Rachel, whom I'd already grown to love dearly. I'm sorry if it hurts you to know this, my darling Rose, but otherwise, would any of it make sense? If not for Rachel, there would have been no need for secrecy after Gerald died. No need to protect anyone.

Don't think I'm unaware of what this has cost you. And how have I repaid you? Instead of acknowledging you openly, I made you promise to keep my secret. I've robbed you not only of a mother . . . but of a grandmother to your sons. And why? So that Rachel, the daughter

you must think of as unfairly favored, won't be robbed of her peace of mind?

I wish it were as simple as that. But the situation, as you know, is far more complicated. Who was it that said, where one lie is planted, a thousand more will grow? Now, after all these years, it's not only Rachel I must think of. . . but her daughter. What would it do to Iris to learn that everything she's come to believe in, to trust, is nothing more than an elaborate deception? If she were a stronger person, she might not need protecting. But you know as well as I do, perhaps even better, how fragile Iris is. How easily something like this could push her over the edge.

And so I must leave you as I left you once before: with regret. I'm sorry. Not only to have let you down . . . but for raking all this up at what must seem the worst possible time. I know what it's like to lose a beloved husband. With Max, you had the rarest kind of love—passion coupled with friendship. Though we never married, that is what I've found with Nikos. Look after him. It will be hard for him without me. And don't blame him. None of this was his fault. He kept quiet all those years out of loyalty to me . . . not from any lack of love for you, his only child.

Try not to blame Rachel, either. Believe it or not, in some ways she envies you. Your wisdom. Your courage. You see, where adversity has made you strong, Rachel, I fear, tends to be headstrong. She rushes in where angels fear to tread, and is often so determined to save the world she doesn't notice when she herself needs saving.

But your greatest gift, my dear Rose, is also your greatest burden: compassion. If not for the goodness of your heart, you would have turned your back on me years ago. And who knows? Perhaps your life would have been the better for it.

All I can say for certain is that mine has been far richer for you being in it. The miracle is that we survived, somehow, you and I. And, I hope, grew closer along the way. For love, once planted, can thrive in the harshest soil. Given half a chance, it can even flower.

Trust in the power of love, Rose. Don't be afraid to open your heart to its possibilities when they come your way, which I promise they will. It won't mean you didn't cherish your husband. Quite the opposite. It will be a tribute to all that you and Max shared.

I must go now. If I don't hurry and get dressed, I'll be late for the party in Brian's honor. No one but Nikos knows how ill I am, so I must put on my best face. You will be there, too. I will smile, and make small talk. And hope that one day you'll see it as I do—that, in life, certain choices are like dying. Final, with no hope of ever turning back. You simply have to get through it with as much grace as you can muster.

Love always,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Sylvia". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.



July

The old woman lived peacefully and happily with her children for many years. She took the two rose trees with her, and they stood before her window, and every year bore the most beautiful roses, white and red.

Grimm's Fairy Tales

Chapter 1

❧ “Mom, what would you think about Drew and me getting married?”

Rachel Rosenthal McClanahan didn't so much hear as *feel* her daughter's question: like a sharp tap between her shoulder blades. She'd been struggling with the clasp on the pearl choker Brian had given her last Hanukkah, and now stood frozen before the round mirror above her Art Deco vanity, arms upraised like wings, her reflection stark as an exclamation point in her fitted black dress.

Letting one end of the necklace slip from her fingers, cool as running water, she lowered her arms as slowly and carefully as if she'd been a patient at her clinic submitting to an exam. She'd been looking forward to this evening, to the party in her husband's honor . . . but what she now felt was something closer to dread, as if probing fingers had found a lump that might turn out to be malignant. The kind of low-grade dread she used to feel with Iris years ago, before—

Her mind slammed shut on that thought as effectively as a film director's clapper on a scene that wasn't going quite right. *Before she started seeing Dr. Eisenger*, Rachel finished on a safer note.

She turned slowly. Her lovely daughter, wearing only a slip, stood in front of Rachel's open closet, rooting for a jacket she'd asked to borrow. In her bare feet, Iris was just over five feet, her hair—the dark gold of alfalfa honey—falling in loose, slippery waves to the small of her back. Her delicate cameo of a face, with its rounded chin and forehead that somehow gave her a sweetly old-fashioned appearance, was flushed pink, and her brown eyes sparkled.

Rachel remained perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe, her arms and legs heavy with a cold, spreading numbness. The only thing

stirring was her heart—as it dropped into the pit of her stomach with the swiftness of a precariously balanced stone.

I must have misunderstood, she thought.

Yesterday. What Rose had confided to her over lunch—about Drew wanting to break things off with Iris. Rose had said he loved her as much as ever, couldn't imagine life without her. But it was slowly killing him . . . never knowing, from one minute to the next, what Iris might do. What kind of mood she'd be in. What she might accuse him of.

Rachel had been too stunned to reply.

Drew without Iris? That would be like the moon without the stars. When she tried to picture one apart from the other, all she could see in her mind was the two of them, like snapshots in a family album: Drew pulling Iris about in her red wagon while she shrieked with delight. Drew and Iris blowing out the candles on the cake they insisted on sharing, though their birthdays were a week apart and, technically, though bigger, Drew—who'd skipped a grade—was a year younger. At the cabin on Lake George that Rose and Max had rented every summer, Iris trotting after Drew like a puppy everywhere he went, even far out into the lake, where, on previous visits, she'd screamed and flailed when Rachel tried to teach her how to swim.

Then, in high school, after Iris . . . when she was so *sick* . . . there was Drew, stopping by every afternoon to sit with her in her room, careful to leave the door open so Rachel wouldn't wonder what they were up to. Telling her what had happened in school, or which of their friends had asked after her. Reminding Iris with every smile, the lightness of his voice, his touch, that she wasn't crazy, that she would get better. Drew had given her what neither Rachel nor Brian—both too shaken by the episode—were able to provide back then: reassurance that she was normal.

Going to separate colleges had only left them more fused at the hip, their combined phone bills alone amounting to a third-world dowry. Drew at Yale. Iris at Bryn Mawr. Weekends, they were like