

**HATING
HEIDI FOSTER**

A Novel

JEFFREY BLOUNT

ONE

I HAVE NEVER BEEN VERY GOOD with faces. It often took many meetings and surreptitious glances before I was able to rightfully place those freckles, that wide grin, the plucked brows or to place a face to a name. Even after someone had been in my life for years, I could easily fail to conjure up that person's face if they dropped out of my world for any significant amount of time. This flaw of mine has always been a part of me, but before this moment it had never seemed insurmountable. There had always been time for some facial reconnections, but the stakes had never been this high before. What to do with this chink in my armor now that there was a truly important face that needed remembering? What to do?

That's what I found myself thinking as I looked past my grandfather at the water's edge to Mummy, who was standing waist deep in the slow-moving river. Her arms were wrapped around her body tightly, her shoulders rising and falling with her sobs. Just seconds before, she'd completed the ceremonial task that would mark the

end of my father's life. With her friend Lil standing on the riverbank singing "Amazing Grace", she'd waded in and stopped with her back to all of us. I tried to imagine what she was thinking, feeling, or whispering to him. But that hurt too much, so I tried to concentrate only on Lil's singing. And when that didn't work, I closed my eyes and tried to lose myself in my grandmother's arms, which were wrapped tightly around me. But I could feel her against my back, her body quivering with a mother's grief for her son. There could be no peace for me there. So, I opened my eyes and returned my gaze to Mummy just as her arms began to rise. She'd opened the urn and I could see rose petals spreading out on the water on either side of her. With Lil still in full song and the petals floating away along with Daddy's ashes, I felt something go very wrong inside. I hated.

Mummy blew a kiss to the sky. Lil finished and we all stood still in the tender quiet and waited until Mummy finished crying and came to my grandfather who wrapped her in his arms. I heard her soft sigh and call for help as he pulled her close. "Oh, Daddy," was all she said, but I knew that she was really asking him, "What do I do? And how will I live?"

It's an unspoken language between father and daughter. I could never complete a thoughtful or needy question before the smile turned up on my father's face telling me that he already understood.

Mummy was still a daddy's girl. The way Grandpa rocked her told me that after all the years of living apart,

HATING HEIDI FOSTER

he still understood. But my relationship with my father was now ashes on the river and I felt myself becoming jealous of Mummy, because as of that day, I would never be a daddy's girl again.

TWO

IT'S HEIDI FOSTER THAT I HATED. She had become the absolute bane of my existence. Because she was too stupid to think straight, I no longer had a father. Because she was so mentally challenged, I would never again hear him whisper "Daddy loves you" in my ear while I pretended to be asleep. Because of Heidi Foster, Mummy cried every morning and every night and zombied her way through the days. Because of Heidi Foster, I felt lost in the darkest room in the darkest house in the world.

It was the summer of 2003. It was supposed to be my time in the sun. I'd turned fourteen that past spring and graduated from middle school. I spent the summer wondering and dreaming about high school. It was such a big deal. A different campus, forty new kids, new academic challenges, and volleyball. Daddy always laughed whenever anyone mentioned my name in relation to volleyball. Whenever anyone wondered out loud what was so funny about me playing a sport, Mummy would laugh as well

and then feel compelled to retell what was by now her favorite family tale.

As she tells the story, Mummy was not at all surprised. When I was a newborn, she walked into my bedroom with me for the first time, preparing to place me in the bassinet; lying on the little mattress was a tennis racquet. She says she just started to laugh.

She wasn't surprised because back in high school, Daddy had lettered in football and baseball. He was so good at those that he didn't even mind telling the story of how he was cut while trying out for the basketball team. The basketball coach had said to him, "Son, you play football well. Play football, son." Not one to sit still, Daddy picked up karate during basketball season in middle school and by the time he graduated from high school, he'd competed up and down the East Coast and was very proud of the fact that he never came home from a tournament without a trophy. Not all of them were for first place, but he never came home empty handed. He walked off a football field for the last time after his senior season in college.

She wasn't surprised because throughout her pregnancy, he talked to her tummy about sports. He read the box scores and discussed player trades and coach firings. He called me — at this point unnamed — Sport.

She wasn't surprised, but she still laughed to see the racquet where I was supposed to sleep.

"Baby," she asked him, "don't you think you're pushing a little bit too early?"

JEFFREY BLOUNT

She says he stood there a little embarrassed, his hands locked behind him, his feet shuffling, and his head down like a little boy who knows he did wrong but couldn't help himself.

"Well, why not a football?" she asked him. "You don't play tennis."

"There's no opportunity for her to play pro football."

"Oh, Baby. You're just gone."

She says he just stood there.

"She's going to have a mind of her own, you know."

She says he just stood there.

She handed him the racquet and laid me down to sleep.

Daddy so loved everything about being an athlete and he said he'd always dreamed of having a little jock — girl or boy. But after all the tennis racquets and tennis balls hung from the ceiling in my playroom, he ended up with his worst nightmare: me, the ultimate girly-girl. I despised sports and he would just laugh and shake his head, not understanding how he could have fathered a child like me. Usually, he blamed it all on Mummy and she accepted with pride. But he was my daddy, which meant he put all of that aside and sat on the floor and played girly-girl games with me, everything from dressing up dolls to playing house. One board game called Pretty, Pretty Princess required each player to acquire earrings, a necklace, and rings. Daddy wore his with pride and never backed down from the picture Mummy took of him and then placed on the fridge where every visitor could see it. He did all of that stuff with me because he loved me more than sports. But then I hit middle school where you

HATING HEIDI FOSTER

were required to play sports because athletics supposedly made for a more well-rounded student. He soon found that he hadn't failed after all. I fell in love with volleyball and he made it to almost every game. He looked so proud in the stands and I loved being able to bring that "I just can't believe it" smile to his face. I made JV this year in try-outs before the beginning of school. Daddy and Mummy were planning on being at the first game. But now that can't be and because of Heidi Foster, I knew there would always be an empty spot in the bleachers for me.

Everything had been set for me to blow into the high school at Washington, DC's prestigious Hawthorne Day School and set the world on fire. Now on the first day of classes, I struggled to find a reason to even show up. Mummy sat beside me in the car and we looked up at Heidi, who was standing at the top of the stairs by the school's entrance. She was getting a hug from the principal. Why was he hugging her? She was crying. What was she so upset about? She had her damned life, didn't she? She had her father, didn't she? I turned and looked at Mummy. Her face reflected what I thought and I knew she understood. But I had to go to school, didn't I?

It took everything I had to get out of that car and walk towards the school's entrance. By the time I was halfway to the stairs, the vice-principal and a teacher had joined in the Heidi support group. And then my heart stopped when I saw Ellie come out of the building and swallow Heidi in the biggest hug imaginable. What could she possibly have left for me, I wondered?

That's when the tears started and I couldn't control them at all. I turned and looked at Mummy who was also crying. This was so hard. As I started up the staircase, I saw Ellie walk Heidi into the school. Mr. Barr, the principal, was waiting at the top. He began to move towards me, but I moved away without even really planning to. I just couldn't go near him.

"Mae," he called to me.

But I just cried and continued to move away. "You stay away from me!" I heard myself yell. "She took my father and you hug her for it!"

"But, Mae, surely you understand why she needs comforting too."

"I don't understand anything anymore," I shouted and ran away through the front doors.

When I came through the doors into the lobby, it was as if I had done so without any pants. Everyone stared. I had been a part of this school community since kindergarten, but all of a sudden it was as if I was the new kid. Everyone acted as if they didn't know me anymore. I was too upset to think about it clearly because the truth was I didn't know me anymore either. I had been fundamentally changed inside and maybe it showed all over my face.

By now, they were all there with her — Ellie, Zoe, Charlotte, Paige, Maria, and Carol. They were taking turns hugging her, brushing her hair, wiping her tears, and trying to cheer her up. I stood there in the middle of the lobby with everyone staring at me except the people I cared about the most.

Finally, Ellie saw me and she came running toward me, but I found myself shaking my head and backing away. As she got closer, I just turned and ran back through the doors and down the stairs. I don't know where I was planning on going. I just couldn't stay there anymore. But as I got down the stairs, I realized that Mummy was still there. The car door was open already and I fell in. We didn't speak. There was no need to. I closed the door and we cried all the way home.

When we got home, we climbed into my parents' bed. I laid my head on Mummy's chest and quickly gave into my exhaustion and fell asleep.

When I awoke, our backs were turned toward one another. I listened to Mummy's labored breathing. I knew she was dreaming bad dreams because I was having them too. For a while, I lay there sighing, twisting, turning, pulling my knees up to my chest, stretching out my legs, rolling over, and sighing some more. I was just uncomfortable and out of sorts. I felt weakened by some kind of invisible weight. Sometimes I felt as if I could barely get out of bed and put one foot in front of the other. I was totally out of balance. I had expected the psychological struggle, because you always hear about people having emotional trouble dealing with their grief. But the physical side effects were big news to me.

When it got to the point that I was afraid of waking Mummy, I forced myself to get out of bed and go to my own room. I just walked around in circles looking at the posters on my wall like they were museum pieces I was seeing for the first time. There were Star Wars posters and Lord of the Rings posters: Frodo and Sam with the big evil

eye hovering above them. Daddy was crazy about Lord of the Rings. We stood in long lines together for hours in the cold just to get the perfect seat in the perfect theatre. We had so much fun.

Thinking of Daddy like that made me feel a little better, but then just as quickly I felt anxious and intensely fearful about my future. Where did that come from? It kept happening right out of the blue. Peace destroyed by terrible hurt and fear, which was just how it had been the moment I answered the door three weeks before and the soft-spoken officer asked if my mother was home.

She was in the kitchen on the telephone trying to reach Daddy's cell. He was late and she'd finished cooking dinner because he'd called to tell her he was on the way home. Just before the officer arrived, she had been dialing and dialing and muttering about why he didn't call to say something had changed.

When the officer walked into the kitchen behind me, I was already crying and he didn't waste any time. Maybe he'd had to do this before and he knew that drawing things out only made it more painful. So he just said, "Mrs. McBride?"

Mummy nodded and her eyes began to fill.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Your husband has died."

Mummy began to cry and I fell into her arms.

I knew for sure then that he had done this before. He was gentle but very businesslike. Maybe he knew that he could never really console either of us. In the end, I appreciated his manner. He needed to let us know and we needed