One Week in December

by Holly Chamberlin



About the Book

Thirty-two year old Becca Rowan has come north from Boston with one thought in mind: to reclaim the daughter she gave up at birth. Sixteen long years earlier, Becca was a pregnant teen, and terribly frightened?until her family arranged a secret --- and not legal --- ?adoption? of her child by Becca?s brother David and his wife Naomi. Ever since then, Rain has considered her aunt and uncle her birth parents, and her birth mother, her beloved aunt. Since then, Becca?s been trying to prove to herself and to her family that she?s no longer the careless, irresponsible teen she once was. For sixteen long years she?s worked hard to achieve financial stability and career status, but at the cost of personal relationships.

Becca?s never been in a long-term romance and has pretty much given up on dating. In fact, the thought of one day marrying and having another child never even crosses her mind. But one thing has crossed her mind --- the idea of reclaiming her daughter. True, the family agreed that not until Rain was twenty-one would they discuss the possibility of revealing their long-held secret to the girl. But Becca is desperately lonely --- and tired of waiting. To her mind, life with her daughter is the solution to her own emptiness.

Needless to say, the other members of the Rowan family are not pleased.

Becca?s grandmother, Nora; her parents Steve and Julie; her brother David and his wife Naomi; her sister Olivia and her husband James; and her youngest sister, twenty-one year old Lily --- each reacts to Becca?s announcement in his or her own way, which, of course, reflects his or her own current situation in life. For example, Lily, fresh from a romantic betrayal, is dismayed to realize that life is so full of deceit, while Nora, in an effort to put to rest her own troubled past and doubts about her role in the ?adoption?, shares with Lily a secret she?s never told anyone.

While the Rowans grapple with what most see as a looming disaster, Becca finds herself attracted to their neighbor, an artist and teacher. Simply by being himself, and not even knowing Becca?s secret, Alex Mason challenges her to think carefully about her life --- and to re-evaluate the prejudices she?s formed about her family. Becca can hardly admit to the

feelings she?s beginning to feel when she?s with Alex... and to the changes being wrought within her regarding the family she?s come to view as the enemy.

On Christmas Eve, when the rest of the family is off at church, Becca shares an important conversation with Nora and then, late into the night, watching the bright stars twinkling in a black sky, she comes to a momentous decision about her future --- and the future of her daughter.

Traditions are questioned; loyalties are tested; familial bonds are tried --- and sometimes strengthened; and romance makes an unexpected but timely appearance in this novel of one life-changing week in December.

Discussion Guide

1. Thinking about her husband?s affair and about the human appetite for gossip and rumor, Nora posits that ?No relationship was entirely private.? Do you agree with her assessment?

2. From her vantage point of almost ninety years, Nora believes that ?The young thought they were noble, but nobody untested can be noble.... To forgive in the wake of betrayal, that was nobility.? Do you agree that nobility --- wisdom, wise action, and selfless behavior --- comes only (though not necessarily) with age?

3. In a similar vein, listening to her granddaughter Lily?s condemnation of her grandfather?s affair, Nora reflects on ?the rigidity of the young.? She believes that ?the concept of compromise was one that came to a person only with the accumulation of experience.? Do you agree?

4. Olivia argues that ?objects have meaning beyond their physical presence or their usefulness or their monetary value.? Her mother, Julie, argues against this notion and claims that too often objects seem to own people. Are both women right, to some extent? Discuss.

5. Becca states that you can?t hold someone to her word if it was given under pressure. Discuss this in general (what does ?pressure? mean in various contexts?) and in terms of Becca?s own situation as a pregnant sixteen-year- old. (For example, she claims to have been coerced into giving her baby to David and Naomi; David argues that she was counseled.)

6. Discuss Becca?s shame and guilt over not having bonded immediately with her baby. How do societal expectations act unfairly on women at various stages of their lives?

7. Lily wonders if it?s possible to live a perfectly honest and open life. ?If guilt was possible, then why couldn?t innocence be possible, too?? Later, she wonders: ?Was everybody doomed to dissemble?? Is Lily simply naïve, or does her belief in the possibility of a life of honesty hold some merit?

8. Lily thinks about secrets and the various motives behind them. Do you believe that some secrets --- perhaps of the sort found in this novel --- should be kept and others broken? Why? In what circumstances?

9. Olivia declares: ?Without our memories we?re nothing.? What does she mean by this? What might a person less obsessed with history understand by this statement?

10. Early on in the novel, Becca reminds herself: ?Sentimentality was as dangerous as its troublemaking cohort, nostalgia.? Do you agree with her wariness regarding these two emotional states?

11. Late in the novel, Lily tells her grandmother that she believes the Rowan family has been ?defined by deception.? Nora argues that the family has been ?defined by love.? With whom do you most agree? Can deception and love coexist?

12. Nora tells Lily that she must not ?underestimate the appeal of domestic habit.? What do you think of the value of domestic habit in a marriage or other long- term relationship? Do you think it is generally of more importance to a woman than a man, or do you think both sexes equally need and find comfort in domestic habit? Do you think the value of domestic habit increases or decreases over time?

13. When Olivia tells her husband that she was too busy to write his Christmas letter, he claims to be more hurt that she chose to ignore a cherished ritual than if she had simply forgotten to write the letter. Do you understand and agree with James?s position?

14. In Alex?s opinion, a person who allows a past sadness to continue to color his present displays a lack of imagination. Discuss what Alex means when he talks about emotional creativity and its relation to happiness.

15. Becca repeatedly says that she wants to ?claim? or ?reclaim? her daughter. At one point, Naomi argues against the choice of those terms. She finds them in some way demeaning of Rain?s full status as an individual. Do you agree with Naomi?s interpretation of Becca?s word choice?

16. In your opinion, what is the most important stimulus behind Becca?s seemingly abrupt decision to finally talk with her father and begin the healing process between them?

Author Bio

Holly Chamberlin lives in Portland, Maine, with her husband Stephen, an architect and photographer, and their amazingly cute cats Jack and Betty. When not writing, Holly enjoys reading, hosting friends and family at their restored Victorian home, going out to hear friends play jazz and blues, working on scrapbooks, and making beaded jewelry.

Critical Praise

"An honest, forceful novel about love, family, and sacrifice."

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