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MAISEY YATES

the
Lost
and
Found
Girl

A NOVEL

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The Lost and Found Girl

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The small Oregon town of Pear Blossom welcomes the return of its prodigal daughter Ruby McKee. Found abandoned as a baby by the McKee family, Ruby is the unofficial town mascot, but when she and her adoptive sisters start investigating the true circumstances around her discovery, it soon becomes clear that this small town is hiding the biggest, and darkest, of secrets.

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*the
Lost
and
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The Lost and Found Girl

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To Mom, wish you were here.

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The Miraculous Ruby McKee

BY DALE WAINWRIGHT

Pear Blossom Gazette, December 5, 2005

It was five years ago, on a cold December night, when three young girls made a miraculous discovery that changed the town of Pear Blossom forever. While walking home from choir practice on that night, Marianne, Lydia and Dahlia McKee discovered a small baby, bundled up and abandoned upon Sentinel Bridge. Sentinel Bridge is the largest covered bridge in the area, built in 1917 to join two halves of the town, restored in the early 1990s as part of an effort to reinvigorate the community of Pear Blossom. The bridge itself crosses Willow Creek, connecting the main thoroughfare of town with many of the community ranches and orchards.

On the night of December 23, 2000, however, the bridge served as something more than a simple connection of pieces of the community. It played host to a miracle. The infant that was found there could so easily have succumbed to the elements. The girls might not have noticed a tiny, quiet bundle in the darkness of the bridge. And yet, she was found.

Now a thriving, happy kindergartner, Ruby was adopted by the very family who found her that night. A McKee in name, but part of the entire town of Pear Blossom. It was Ruby's Miracle that reinvigorated interest in Pear Blossom. That revived the festivals, tourism, the historical society. The international headlines about the Miracle Christmas Child shone a spotlight on the picturesque town and landed Pear Blossom in tourism magazines and lists of the most desirable communities to visit, to buy a home in, or to start a small business in. This reinvigorated Main Street and brought new vigor to the town.

It is easy to look at this night as a miracle, for a child's life was saved. But it is said in the town of Pear Blossom that Ruby McKee herself is miraculous.

1

RUBY

Only two truly remarkable things had ever happened in the small town of Pear Blossom, Oregon. The first occurred in 1999, when Caitlin Groves disappeared one fall evening on her way home from her boyfriend's family orchard.

The second was in 2000, when newborn Ruby McKee was discovered on Sentinel Bridge, the day before Christmas Eve.

It wasn't as if Pear Blossom hadn't had excitement before then. There was the introduction of pear orchards—an event which ultimately determined the town's name—in the late 1800s. Outlaws who lay in wait to rob the mail coaches, and wolves and mountain lions who made meals of the farmers' animals. The introduction of the railroad, electricity and a particularly active society of suffragettes, when women were lobbying for the right to vote.

But all of that blended into the broader context of history, not entirely dissimilar to the goings-on of every town in every part of the world, as men fought to tame a wild land and the land rose up and fought back.

Caitlin's disappearance and Ruby's appearance felt both specific and personal, and had scarred and healed—if Ruby took

the proclamations of various citizens too literally, which she really tried not to do—the community.

Mostly, as Ruby got out of the car she'd hired at the airport and stood in front of Sentinel Bridge with a suitcase in one hand, she marveled at how idyllic and the same it all seemed.

The bridge itself was battered from the years. The wood dark and marred, but sturdy as ever. A white circle with a white 1917, denoting the year of its construction, was stenciled in the top center of the bridge, just above the tunnel that led to the other side, a pinhole of light visible in the darkness across the way.

It was only open to foot traffic now, with a road curving wide around it and carrying cars to the other side a different way. For years, Sentinel Bridge was closed, and it wasn't until a community outreach and education effort in the early nineties that it was reopened for people to walk on.

Ruby could have had the driver take her a different route.

But she wanted to cross the bridge.

“Are you sure you want me to leave you here?” her driver asked.

She'd told him when she'd gotten into his car that she was from here originally, and he'd still spent the drive explaining local landmarks to her, so she wasn't all that surprised he didn't trust her directive to leave her in the middle of nowhere.

He was the kind of man who just *knew best*.

They'd just driven through the town proper. All brick—red and white and yellow—the sidewalks lined with trees whose leaves matched as early fall took hold. It was early, and the town had still been sleepy, most of the shops closed. There had been a runner or two out, an older man—Tom Swenson—walking his dog. But otherwise it had been empty. Still, it bore more marks of civilization than where they stood now.

The bridge was nearly engulfed in trees, some of which were evergreen, others beginning to show rusted hints of autumn around the edges. A golden shaft of light cut over the treetops,

bathing the front of the bridge in a warm glow, illuminating the long wooden walk—where the road ended—that led to the covered portion, but shrouding the entrance in darkness.

She could see what the man in the car saw. Something abandoned and eerie and disquieting.

But Ruby only saw the road home.

“It’s fine,” she said.

She did not explain that her parents’ farm was just up the road, and she walked this way all the time.

That it was only a quarter of a mile from where she’d been found as a baby.

She had to cross the bridge nearly every day when she was in town, so she didn’t always think of it. But some days, days like this after she’d been away awhile, she had a strange, hushed feeling in her heart, like she was about to pay homage at a grave.

“If you’re sure.” His tone clearly said she shouldn’t be, but he still took her easy wave as his invitation to go.

Ruby turned away from the retreating car and smiled, wrapping both hands around the handle of her battered brown suitcase. It wasn’t weathered from her own use. She’d picked it up at a charity shop in York, England, because she’d thought it had a good aesthetic and it was just small enough to be a carry-on, but wasn’t like one of those black wheeled things that everyone else had.

She’d cursed while she’d lugged it through Heathrow and Newark and Denver, then finally Medford. Those wheely bags that were not unique at all had seemed more attractive each time her shoulders and arms throbbed from carrying the very lovely suitcase.

Ruby’s love of history was oftentimes not practical.

But it didn’t matter now. The ache in her arms had faded and she was nearly home.

Her parents would have come to pick her up from the airport but Ruby had swapped her flight in Denver to an earlier one

so she didn't have to hang around for half the day. It had just meant getting up and rushing out of the airport adjacent hotel she'd stayed in for only a couple of hours. Her Newark flight had gotten in at eleven thirty the night before and by the time she'd collected her bags, gotten to the hotel and stumbled into bed, it had been nearly one in the morning.

Then she'd been up again at three for the five o'clock flight into Medford, which had set her back on the ground around the time she'd taken off. Which had made her feel gritty and exhausted and wholly uncertain of the time. She'd passed through so many time zones nothing felt real.

She waved the driver off and took the first step forward. She paused at the entry to the bridge. She looked back over her shoulder at the bright sunshine around her and then took a step forward into the darkness. Light came up through the cracks between the wood on the ground and the walls. At the center of the bridge, there were two windows with no glass that looked out over the river below. It was by those windows that she'd been found.

She walked briskly through the bridge and then stopped. In spite of herself. She often walked on this bridge and never felt a thing. She rarely felt inclined to ponder the night that she was found. If she got ridiculous about that too often, then she would never get anything done. After all, she had to cross this bridge to get home.

But she was moving back to town, not just returning for a visit, and it felt right to mark the occasion with a stop at the place of her salvation. She paused for a moment, right at the spot between the two openings that looked out on the water.

She had been placed just there. Down on the ground. Wrapped in a blanket, but still so desperately tiny and alone.

She had always thought about the moment when her sisters had picked her up and brought her back to their parents. It was the moment that came before that she had a hard time with. The

one where someone—it had to have been her birth mother—had set her down there, leaving her to fate. To die if she died, or live if she was found. And thankfully she'd been found, but there had been no way for the person who had set her there to know that would happen.

It had gotten below freezing that night.

If Marianne, Lydia and Dahlia hadn't come walking through from the Christmas play rehearsal, then...

She didn't cry. But a strange sort of hollowness spread out in her chest.

But she ignored it and decided to press on toward home. She walked through the darkness of the bridge, watching as the light, the exit, loomed larger.

And once she was outside, she could breathe. Because it didn't matter what had happened there. What mattered was every step she had taken thereafter. What mattered was this road back home.

She walked up the gravel-covered road, kicking rocks out of her way as she went. It was delightfully cold, the crisp morning a reminder of exactly why she loved Pear Blossom. It was completely silent out here except for the odd braying of a donkey and chirping birds. She looked down at the view below, at the way the mist hung over the pear trees in the orchard. The way it created a ring around the mountain, the proud peak standing out above it. A blanket of green and gold, rimmed with misty rose.

She breathed in deep and kept on walking, relishing the silence, relishing the sense of home.

She had spent the last four years studying history. Mostly abroad. She had engaged in every exchange program she could, because what was the point of studying history if you limited yourself to a country that was as young as the United States and to a coast as new as the West Coast.

She could remember the awe that she'd experienced walking on streets that were more than just a couple of hundred years

old. The immense breadth of time that she had felt. And she had... Well, she had hoped that she would find answers somewhere. Because she had always believed that the answers to what ails you in the present could be found somewhere in the past.

And she'd explored the past. Thoroughly. Many different facets of it. And along the way, she'd done a bit of exploring of herself.

After all, that was half the reason she'd left. To try and figure out who she was outside of this place where everyone knew her, and her story.

Though, when she got close to people, it didn't take long for them to discover her story. It was, after all, in the news.

Of course, she always found it interesting who discovered it on their own. Because that was revealing.

Who googled their friends.

Ruby obviously googled her friends, but that was because of her own background and experience. If those same friends had an equally salacious background, then it was forgivable. But if they were boring, then she found it deeply suspicious that they engaged in such activities.

She came over a slight rise in the road and before her was the McKee family farm. It had been in the McKee family for generations. And Ruby felt a profound sense of connection to it. It might not be her legacy by blood, but that had never mattered to the McKees, and it didn't matter to her either. This town was part of who she was.

And maybe that was why no matter how she had searched elsewhere, she was drawn back here.

Dana Groves, her old mentor, had called her six months ago to tell her an archivist position was being created in the historical society with some newly allocated funds, and had offered the job to Ruby.

Ruby loved Pear Blossom, but she'd also felt like it was re-

ally important for her to go out in the world and see what else existed.

It was *easy* for her to be in Pear Blossom. People here loved her.

It had been a fascinating experience to go to a place where that wasn't automatically the case. Of course, she hadn't stayed in one place very long. After going to the University of Washington, she had gotten involved in different study abroad programs, and she had moved between them as often as she could. Studying in Italy, France, Spain, coming to the States briefly for her graduation ceremony in May, and then going back overseas to spend a few months in England, finishing up some elective study programs.

But then, she'd found that instructive too. Being in a constant state of meeting new people. And for a while, the sheer differentness of it all had fed her in a way that had quieted that restlessness. She had been learning. Learning and experiencing and...

Well, part of her had wondered if her first job needed to be away from home. To continue her education.

But then six months ago her sister's husband had died.

And Dana's offer of a job in Pear Blossom after she finished her degree had suddenly seemed like fate. Because Ruby had to come and try to make things better for Lydia.

Marianne and Dahlia were worried about Lydia, who had retreated into herself and had barely shed a single tear.

She's acting just like our parents. No fuss, no muss. No crying over spilled milk or dead husbands.

Clearly miserable, in other words.

And Ruby knew she was *needed*.

One thing about being saved, about being spared from death, was the *certainty* you were spared for a reason.

Ruby had been saved by her sisters. And if they ever needed her...

Well, she would be here.

Fixing Lydia, fixing all of this, maybe it was what she was meant to do.

And all of the melancholy that she had felt a moment before faded. Lifted like a weight taken off of her shoulders. And she started to walk a little bit faster, letting the momentum carry her down the hill toward the farm.

She branched off of the main road, moving down the narrow, bumpy drive that led up to the white farmhouse her father continually repainted to keep it in the best shape possible. One of the many things she had learned from her father.

That taking care of the things that took care of you, that held your family, that held history, was important, and a point of pride.

The McKees had never been a rich family, but her childhood had been stable. Wonderful. Her parents had helped her do the work to get scholarships to go to college. Because they wouldn't have been able to pay for the entirety of it on their own.

Ruby had gotten good grades. She'd volunteered at the historical society exhaustively, from the time she was thirteen years old all the way up until she graduated. Her relevant community service and the essays that she'd written about it were exemplary. And she could only credit the influence of her mother for that.

Andie McKee was meticulous, loving and strict all at once.

Ruby picked up the pace then, letting her suitcase sway as she ran, holding on to her dress and keeping her boots from getting tangled up in the long hem as she ran up the pitted driveway to the front porch.

She stopped at the bottom step, breathing hard. Then she walked up and knocked on the door. It was early, but she knew her parents were awake. Likely had been for a while. They might be in their sixties, but you didn't retire from farm life.

The front door opened, and her mom stopped, still wiping her hands on her apron. "Ruby," she said, throwing her arms out and pulling her in for a hug.

She pushed Ruby back, examining her, and Ruby did some examining of her own. The last time she'd been home had been six months ago, for Mac's funeral, and then she'd seen her parents, Dahlia and Marianne at her graduation five months ago. And of course, her mother looked much the same. But there was something about all the spaces between visits that made her start to picture her mom as she'd been when Ruby had been a kid.

She never pictured her with all these lines on her face, with her hair more gray than light brown. She seemed smaller somehow, as if each passing year had taken something from her.

But when she looked at her mother's eyes, she didn't get that sense. Because the joy in her eyes shone as brightly as it ever had.

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming so early?"

"I changed my flight last night," Ruby said, wandering into the small, well-worn kitchen. It was clean, meticulously so, and it was in almost unbelievably good working order. The appliances were not new, neither were the cabinets, neither was the floor or the counter. But her father kept everything in such a well-maintained state, that it was as if she had walked back in time, into the kitchen as it had been in the 1950s.

Her father had never liked modern appliances, preferring the original wood-burning stove and an old-fashioned furnace. Air-conditioning had been a foreign concept in Ruby's life until she had started going and visiting friends' houses. The one concession he'd made was getting a more modernized refrigerator.

Even he had to admit that there was a better way than an icebox.

"Well, we would've come to get you." Her mother opened the fridge and took out a bottle of orange juice, then retrieved a loaf from the bread box. Each movement decisive and economical as she put a slice of bread in the toaster.

"I know, Mom," Ruby said. "That's why I didn't tell you. Because I didn't want you getting up and driving to Medford. Anyway, it was easy to get a car."

Pear Blossom was almost an hour away from the larger town of Medford, the hub that many people used for hospitals and big box shopping. And for the airport. Ruby had never spent much time there.

Going mostly for special trips when some of her friends had convinced her mom that going shopping at the mall was an important rite of passage.

Andie preferred to get everything she could from Pear Blossom. It wasn't part of that local movement or anything like that. Her parents had a deep sense of community, and they always had. Along with a lot of practicality. Even if small, local businesses couldn't sell things for as cheap as a big box store, by the time they drove to go pick up an item, by the time they expended the time and the gas, and put money in the pockets of a stranger rather than a neighbor, it all truly didn't seem worth it. Ruby's meals had been farm-to-table far before it was cool.

"Did you just get in from England?"

"Yesterday."

"You must be dead on your feet. Put down your suitcase and go get some sleep." Then the toast popped up and her mom put it on a plate, slathered it in butter and set it on the table. In direct opposition to her words, she clearly thought Ruby needed food before sleep.

She took a juice cup down from the cabinet, and Ruby interrupted that. "I'll take some coffee. I can't go to sleep. I need to stay up. Otherwise I'm never going to get back on the right time zone."

"What's the rush?"

"I start at the historical society in a few days," Ruby said.

"In a few days."

"It doesn't make any sense to let the grass grow under my feet. To sleep when I could just as easily power through and acclimate."

"You sound like your father."

“Who sounds like me?” Jed McKee walked into the room then, putting a hat over his bald head. His face had the set look of a man who smiled sparingly, but when he saw Ruby, the change was immediate. “Well, as I live and breathe.”

“Good to see you, Dad,” she said.

She found herself swept nearly off her feet as she was pulled in for a big hug, a decisive kiss dropped on her cheek. “Good to see you, kiddo. And you’re back with us. For keeps now.”

“Yeah,” she said. She waited for a sense of claustrophobia or failure or something to settle over her. But it didn’t.

“So, are we moving you into your old bedroom?”

“No,” she said. “I don’t have a place yet, but I’m going to find one.”

“I’m sure that there will be a lot of people who can find space for you,” her mom said.

“I don’t want the Ruby discount.”

It was a joke in her family. Free coffee, free candy and free ice cream had been a hallmark of Ruby’s growing up years. Another thing that she’d had to get used to when she’d gone away to the real world. People did not shower her with free items or treat her like she was a special, magical creature in any way.

And no, that wasn’t the reason she’d come back home.

“Does that mean I can have it?” her dad asked.

“By all means,” Ruby said.

“You know, we finished renovating the shed for Dahlia. There are two bedrooms in there now. Not sure it’s hugely different than living in the house here, but you don’t have your parents breathing down your neck.”

The shed was misnamed, because of course nothing under her father’s watch was anything half so shabby as a shed. Ruby preferred to call it a cottage, which was infinitely more charming and romantic. It had started its life as a shed and become a very cute garden cottage.

“Dee is living in the cottage?” Ruby asked.

She hadn't seen her sister in the five months since graduation, but she would have thought she'd have mentioned that.

"She's working her way up to a full-time position at the *Gazette*, plus doing freelance writing, so she quit the job at the coffee shop."

She'd have thought she'd mention *that* too.

"Oh," Ruby said. "Well, good for her."

One point for the cottage was that it was on the opposite end of the property to the farmhouse, which would have her in proximity to her parents, but distant proximity. And she and Dahlia had shared a room as kids, so a two-room cottage would be spacious compared to that. It butted up against the neighboring pear orchard, and John Brewer was an utter recluse that she would never have to worry about encountering.

"If you'd like the other bedroom in there, Rubes, it's all yours."

"I should...probably talk to Dahlia about it?"

"She doesn't pay rent on it," her dad said. "My money renovated it."

It was a pragmatic take, for certain, but Ruby would be the one who had to live with a sister filled with resentment if she didn't want her there, not her dad.

"I'll talk to Dee," she said.

"You can stay in the house, for now, though, right?" her mom asked hopefully.

"Yes, of course," Ruby said.

In fact, she really wanted to do that. Because honestly, she was too exhausted to do any sort of taking care of herself. And that was the greatest and best thing about being back home. Her mother's cooking. And hopefully soon some of her mother's coffee.

She had coffee with both of her parents before her father went out to start work, and then her mother ushered her upstairs to her bedroom. Initially, she'd shared a room with Dahlia, but

once Marianne and Lydia had moved out, she and Dahlia'd had their own rooms, and they were still much the same as they'd been when she and her sister had moved out.

Ruby's room was sweet and girly with a floral, yellow bedspread and a gold daybed. She had a tatted rug that covered the newly refinished wood floor. Her father, of course, refinished the floors every time they started to look worn.

Her mother took her suitcase out of her hand and swept it over to the bed, popping it open.

Ruby blinked, giving belated thanks that she had not packed too many intimate things in that suitcase. She had been traveling with a carry-on, and she hadn't wanted airport security going through her personal items right in front of her.

The condoms she'd bought in Europe had stayed in Europe. And good thing too, since her mother was now pulling things out of the suitcase and beginning to put them away.

"Mom," Ruby said, "you don't have to do that."

"I want to." She frowned. "I don't know how you've been living with so few things for so long."

"I have perfected the art of not having much. And there wasn't a whole lot I couldn't leave behind, anyway. Moving between programs as often as I did, it's better to travel light. Though, I did send a few things home. So, don't be deceived. There is follow-up."

"Good," her mom said. "I would be a bit concerned if you came away from all of that with no souvenirs."

"The souvenir was the education," Ruby said. "Honestly. The museums. The historical sites. It wasn't like anything... I can't believe it's over."

"I'm a little surprised you didn't end up settling there. In Italy or England. They were your favorites, weren't they?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "And I thought about it. But... I don't know, there's this opportunity here, and I got to know this town

doing the work I did with the historical society. Doing the living history I did with the historical society...”

“Yes, I remember it well, since I sewed your dresses.”

“It just seemed like maybe it would be a waste to not try this. Plus, I miss you guys. I can’t imagine being away permanently.” She almost mentioned Mac. Almost mentioned Lydia’s loss. But the air of determined *all rightness* in the air was too firm and she didn’t want to disturb it.

“I can’t imagine it either,” her mom said, wrapping her arm around her and giving her a kiss on the head. “But I always knew that you were destined for big things, Ruby McKee.”

She didn’t say why, but Ruby knew it all the same. She’d been spared for some reason, after all. Everyone thought that. And so, she must be destined for some sort of greatness.

Ruby had never really felt all that great. Because as much as she valued the miracle that was her life, it was the other side of it that lingered. She’d been saved, it was true.

But first she’d been left to die.

She stood and went to the window, looked out over the familiar landscape, then squared her shoulders, as if to shake off the thought.

It didn’t do to dwell on the dark sides of the past, not when there was so much brightness all around.

Ruby wanted to bring brightness.

It was why she was here.

2

First Presbyterian Church of Pear Blossom
CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

MARY—Lydia McKee

JOSEPH—Benjamin Smith

BABY JESUS—Hattie Mayfield

ANGEL OF THE LORD—Ruby McKee

THREE WISE MEN—Elizabeth Albright, Shannon Smith, Heath Mayfield

SHEPHERDS—Analise Johnson, Corbin Johnson, Aiden Mayfield

SHEEP—Jade Springer, Callie Springer, Sarah Marsh

OLD DONKEY—Dahlia McKee

DAHLIA

Ruby was home. Her mother had texted her a few minutes earlier, as if Dahlia had forgotten her younger sister would be here today. She shut her laptop off promptly at three, stretching at her small desk and looking around her office—which was essentially a closet.

She took the brass watering can off the windowsill and poured some water on her fiddle-leaf fig, which was beginning to look poorly, much to her chagrin.

It had been an office warming gift from her sister Marianne at Dahlia's request. She'd thought that greenery might enliven the space more than a painting. Maybe she should have just gotten some abstract art for the wall. Something that she didn't have to keep alive.

But the changes she'd made in the last five months—and the office itself—felt like an important step in her new, adult life, and she had thought that maybe a plant was a good way to commemorate that. Of course, she hadn't anticipated failing at the plan, and she really hoped that it wasn't a harbinger of doom for the rest of the endeavor.

She had been working at Spruce Coffee on Main Street for years while she wrote various pieces for websites and magazines. That was before she had gotten up the nerve to approach Dale Wainwright about being the first employee of the *Pear Blossom Gazette* in more than a decade. The newspaper was coming up on its one hundredth year and Dahlia felt a keen connection to the publication. After all, when they had first discovered her sister Ruby on the bridge, reporters had become a constant in her life. And most specifically, reporters working at the *Gazette*. Back then, the building had been filled with different staff. And that was before everything had moved on to the internet, damaging physical circulation, especially for a publication in a small town like this one. There had been an economic decline in the early 2000s, a dip in businesses on Main Street and in circulation of the newspaper.

But there was a change in town in the last ten years. Younger people had moved here looking for a simpler life, and more tourists chose to spend time in the small town, with businesses on Main Street finding their footing again now that local restaurants, banks and boutique stores were at the center of a revolution.

What Dahlia wanted to see was a return to print media as

well. And to local news. News that really focused on the community.

She and Ruby had always been history nerds. They'd volunteered together at the historical society. Dahlia loved the mysteries of history. She loved old newspapers and piecing together information about the day through the lens of reporting and interviews. Ruby, though, seemed to like the quiet, bookish aspect of it. A much more fantasy-driven idea of what it meant to make that a career. Ruby had always imagined being impoverished—in a romanticized sense, naturally. And unemployable.

But that was the kind of thing they'd laughed about in their shared room as kids, while Ruby brooded about misters Darcy and Rochester.

I would love to be a poor, starving archivist warming myself by a pitiful fire surrounded by stacks of books.

Ruby, you missed lunch yesterday and almost chewed my arm off.

I mean it in the sense that I will have a small garret, my research and all the baguettes and cheese I want. A glamorous starvation.

So...not starvation.

And anyway, I wouldn't stay poor if a duke found me.

Dukes are not likely to find starving archivists in Pear Blossom.

Then I'll have to go somewhere else.

And now she was back.

Dahlia stood up, put her laptop in her leather bag and walked to the door of the office, flicking the lights off and shutting the door behind her. Dale hadn't even come in today. He was pretty solidly half work-at-home and half at the office. But he maintained that as a man well over the age of retirement, that was fair. Dahlia didn't mind having the place to herself, but she went to the office every day, even if she didn't have to.

Much like her preference for newsprint over websites, she liked being in the office. It made her feel more like she was living her dream.

Sitting in the shed on her computer made her feel like a blog-

ger. She wanted to feel like a journalist. It was what she'd gone to school for, after all.

She walked down the narrow hall, lined with awards spanning the years that proclaimed the *Gazette* a town favorite—it was the only paper in town—and photos of the town's most notable events.

Right at the very end of the hall was a grainy, black-and-white newsprint shot of a baby.

Ruby.

It always made Dahlia pause. It was impossible for her to not get completely lost in her memories, and with them a profound sense of sadness, which no one seemed to share but her.

Someone had abandoned Ruby.

Left her on a bridge to die.

And Dahlia had always felt that no one wanted to dig too deeply into that.

All Dahlia ever wanted to do was dig.

She sighed and turned away from the picture, then walked out the front door, jamming her key in the lock and turning it till it clicked.

She stepped away from the door and ran almost smack into Ruby. "Dee!"

"Rubes?" She shook her head and stared, her sister's presence completely out of context.

Ruby laughed and jingled along with it. Dahlia always made it a game to try and quickly identify which piece of Ruby's jewelry was making her sound like a human wind chime, because there was always something. Earrings today.

"Or her doppelgänger," Ruby said cheerfully. "I could have a doppelgänger, you know. Or a twin. Maybe only one of us was abandoned."

Dahlia rolled her eyes. "We've been through this. You don't have half an amulet."

"I *was* found with a necklace."

“Not one with a missing half.”

Ruby pretended to look crestfallen. “Right. Well. In that case, I guess that rules out a twin. In *this* dimension.”

“You better hope there’s no interdimensional twin. Because that would be an evil one.”

“How do you know I’m not the evil twin?”

Dahlia laughed and pulled her sister in for a hug. “You are most definitely an evil twin, Rubes.”

“Can I see the office?”

“I just locked up,” Dahlia said.

“Please?” She treated her to a wide smile.

“Oh, all right, but there’s nothing much to see.”

“I still want to see.” Ruby cleared her throat and her gold earrings moved too, punctuating the sound with their own. “Why didn’t you tell me about the new job?”

There were too many answers to that question, and each one was complicated. Mostly, though, it came down to Dahlia’s nature, which was always in opposition to itself. If she failed, she didn’t want anyone to know—least of all Ruby, who never failed at anything. But she was also proud and had been desperate to tell Ruby.

“It was new,” she said, which was honest. “And I kind of bulldozed Dale into creating the position, so I guess I just kept being afraid I’d blow it and he’d fire me.”

“But he hasn’t,” Ruby pointed out.

Dahlia smiled. “No.”

Dahlia unlocked the door and pushed it open. Ruby floated in past her. Ruby always seemed to float.

“How was England?” Dahlia asked. She’d been once when she was in college, and she’d suddenly understood Ruby’s obsession with all things Austen and high tea related.

“Amazing.” She shifted and her blond hair slipped over her shoulder, catching the light. “Everything I could have ever hoped that it would be.”

“And you’re sure you want to trade in your fabulous life abroad for a life back here?”

“Yeah,” she said. “For now.”

They walked down the hall and Dahlia waited to see if Ruby would notice the picture of herself. She didn’t. It said a lot about how... Ubiquitous the Legend of Ruby was here. That a picture of herself on the wall as a baby was visual white noise.

“I haven’t been in here since I was a kid selling candy bars for school,” Ruby said. “It looks the same.”

Dahlia looked down at the orange carpet, and the fake wood paneled walls.

“Yeah,” Dahlia said, “except pretty much no one works here now.” She pushed her office door open again. “Here it is. It’s... tiny.”

“A potted plant. You’re such a hipster,” Ruby said.

“As if you’re not?”

“Absolutely not,” Ruby said, tugging at the ruffled collar of her dress.

“How long has it been since you’ve been in a secondhand store?”

Her sister looked around shiftily. “I am conscious of my environmental impact, Dee. And, broke.”

“Somehow,” Dahlia said, “I don’t think that was your primary motivation for going to this supposed thrift store.”

“You don’t know me.”

“But I do,” she said, feeling a small bubble of excitement in her chest. Ruby was going to lose her mind over this, and Dahlia had been dying to show her.

You could have told her before she came back...

She could have. She hadn’t.

She wasn’t floaty like Ruby. She didn’t light up the room or jingle when she moved. But she knew what sparked Ruby’s interest. And being able to channel Ruby’s brightness made her feel like some of it belonged to her too.

She and Ruby were different. Oil and water different. Night and day different. Optimist and realist-thank-you-very-much different. But they both loved this town, and they loved the history of it, and no matter what changed in their lives, whether they were close or distant, like shifting tides in the ocean, that truth remained.

“I know you *well*,” Dahlia continued. “Come here, and I’ll show you something more interesting than my office.”

She walked Ruby the rest of the way past the hall, down the offices that no longer housed anyone, and Dale’s office, to a room at the very end of the hall.

“What is it?” Ruby asked.

“The archive.” She swung the door open to reveal walls of newspaper. “Every paper the *Gazette* has ever published, in hard form.”

“Noooo,” Ruby said, her eyes getting wide. “Aren’t they all digitized somewhere?”

“Not all of them.”

“Well, I want to do that. As part of my work with the historical society.”

“That would be great, Rubes. Just let me know. Anytime you want to come down and dig around.”

“Always,” Ruby said. “Forever.”

“We better go,” Dahlia said. “I have some freelance stuff to fiddle with before dinner. Though, Marianne is still at The Apothecary,” Dahlia said. “Do you want to go say hi?”

They made their way back down the hall and stepped outside again.

“Yes,” Ruby said. “It’s why I’m here. I couldn’t wait to see you. I figured I would come wander around until dinner. Also, I was falling asleep on my feet.”

“You could’ve just...slept,” Dahlia pointed out.

“You sound like Mom,” Ruby grouched.

“Gee, thanks,” Dahlia said.

“No problem.”

Dahlia was about to launch into a monologue on all the ways she was not their mother when Ruby stopped abruptly on the sidewalk and turned, waving. “Hi, Mr. Davis!”

Dahlia followed Ruby’s gaze to the bank across the street. The little bank was housed in red brick like all the other buildings on that block. Quaint on the outside, and on the inside, bearing most of the markers of the original Rochelle Bank, which had been founded by the Rochelle family back in the 1800s. And right out front was Mr. Davis, the owner of the only supermarket in town.

“Hi, Ruby,” he said. “I hope you’re back for good this time!”

People asked Ruby that every time they came to visit, though Dahlia was absolutely certain the news that Ruby was indeed back for good had made its way onto the prayer chain.

A great way to share town news without technically engaging in gossip.

“I am,” Ruby called, then shrugged her shoulders and turned, continuing to walk down the redbrick sidewalk. Her sister tilted her face up toward the sun, and smiled dreamily. And Dahlia could only marvel at the entire interaction. Everyone always seemed delighted to have their day interrupted by Ruby. And really, *everyone* wasn’t an exaggeration. Everyone remembered her. Everyone... They all liked her.

Not that Dahlia was unliked. But she was just more serious than Ruby, who was quirky dipped in brightness and glitter. An eternally sunny woman-child, who existed in a state of constant delight. Whereas Dahlia had been concerning the church choir director since she was twelve and had shown up at rehearsal for the Christmas pageant with black fingernails.

That had been the last year she had participated in that.

She just didn’t bring out joy or generosity in people the way Ruby did.

She'd been told she was intense. By more than one man she'd dated.

Obviously not a compliment.

It wasn't a problem limited to Pear Blossom. She'd found she had the same issues when she'd been at college. The thing was, Dahlia believed in the truth. Finding it, telling it.

It was what made her a good journalist.

And no, she didn't have a fantasy about traveling the world and uncovering hard-hitting stories. Her interests lay much closer to home, in the people and places around her. But she'd always been interested in the small, unusual things. In the quiet people.

She wanted to dig in, go deep, get to the bottom of the ordinary. She believed that was where the truly extraordinary lived.

Of course, casual interviews would be easier if she had Ruby's people skills. People had called Dahlia's gaze both "intimidating" and "laser like," and sometimes her eagerness to go right for the deep waters didn't benefit her.

But then again she imagined that grilling Ron Davis over the buying habits of the local populace in the internet age had come across as a tad bit... Well...

Intense.

And they went on like that, moving down the sidewalk, pausing for Ruby to greet Molly Hudson, the church secretary, and Pastor Lawrence. After greeting the latter, Dahlia's boot caught on one of the raised edges of the sidewalk bricks, and she nearly pitched forward, but Ruby grabbed hold of her arm. The two of them stumbled about three steps together, and Ruby snickered, still holding her arm. "What exactly do you do without me?"

Dahlia brushed her hands down over her skirt. "Walk down the street without stopping every two seconds to have a chat."

Ruby grinned. "How boring."

Their arms still linked, they stopped in front of their sister's boutique. The Apothecary was one of the most successful shops on Main Street. It was small, carrying a highly curated selection

of bath and beauty products, plus a small selection of cotton and linen clothing, all made in small batches, with all-natural ingredients. Marianne did brisk business both in town and online.

Ruby pushed the white door open, and they were immediately swallowed up by the scent of lavender and soap. Marianne let out a short scream, and stood up quickly behind the white counter. She flew around to their side in a flurry of caramel-colored highlights and floral chiffon. “You’re home!”

She flung herself at Ruby, who laughed and embraced her back.

“You knew she was coming,” Dahlia said.

“But not here. Not this early. I’m so happy to see you.” Marianne waved a manicured hand in the air, her bracelets jingling. “Tell me everything. Tell us about London. And now that you’re home, and I don’t have to worry about you, tell me about all the crazy things you did. *Please* tell me you did some crazy things.”

Ruby ducked her head, her cheeks turning pink.

“Oh, yay,” Marianne said. “Please tell all that I might live through you.”

She went back behind the counter and grabbed a few bottles of lotion, putting them on the edge, a clear indicator that she wanted them to sample something. Dahlia was never one to turn down a free sample. And Ruby was never one to disappoint, so they both chose different bottles and squirted some onto their hands.

“I did a lot of wine tasting in Italy. And many a pub crawl occurred in England.”

Marianne rolled her eyes. “Is that it? What I want to know is, did Italian men occur?”

“At least one,” Ruby said.

“And how was it?” Marianne fixed Ruby with a keen look.

“You do not want to hear about that,” Ruby said.

“I do. Please indulge me.” Marianne clasped her hands in an

over-the-top begging posture. “I have a business and a husband and children. And I am not a world traveler.”

“It’s not like you couldn’t travel if you wanted to,” Dahlia pointed out.

“Did you not hear the euphemism under my words? I am not a *world traveler*. I have not slept with European men. I have not slept with anyone but my husband, in point of fact, so I am owed stories.”

Marianne was nothing if not dramatic. Always.

And had been so since she was a teenager.

“Gosh,” Dahlia said. “If you wanted to hear stories of disappointing extramarital sex, you could’ve always asked me.”

“The Italian guy was not disappointing,” Ruby said. “Cannot say the same for the French guy.”

“Shame. Details on the French Disappointment,” Marianne said.

“Well. I think I was supposed to feel exceptionally grateful. But honestly I was bored. He wanted to watch a black-and-white movie after? I really wanted to leave.”

“And... Did you?” Dahlia asked, interested in spite of herself.

“Yes. Because, I feel that as it was my sexual exploration, I was free to do as I wished.”

“Good for you,” Marianne said. “I support you in theory.”

“Do you wish that you...are you—” Ruby looked at Marianne keenly “—sad that you’re not a world traveler?”

Another thing Dahlia was curious about, in spite of herself.

“No,” Marianne said. “I love Jackson. I love him entirely and completely, with my heart and my body. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear stories of people who are more adventurous than I.”

“Well, I had some adventures.” Ruby shrugged. “That was the point.”

“It was why you broke up with *Darling Heath*,” Dahlia said.

Ruby tilted her head back as if she could not contain the force of her eye roll. “Don’t call him that. We are not thirteen.”

“I’m sorry,” Marianne said. “I can’t take a real live man named Heath seriously.”

Ruby sniffed. “That’s because you never read the classics. It’s close enough to Heathcliff to appeal to me greatly.”

“But not when there were European adventures to see to.”

“I didn’t think it was fair to either of us. Anyway, he went away to school too.”

“And he is also back,” Marianne said.

Ruby shrugged. “Good for Heath.”

“Are you too busy for Heath?” Dahlia asked.

“Well, I report to Dana starting next Monday. So yes. I’m going to be pretty busy. There hasn’t been an actual archivist at the Pear Blossom historical society for years. And I think most of...everything has just been kind of left in boxes.”

Marianne grimaced. “I’m not sure why you’re subjecting yourself to working with Dana Groves.”

“I *like* Dana,” Ruby said. “Anyway. She’s sad. People shouldn’t be so mean.”

“She’s mean,” Marianne said.

“People are mean to her,” Dahlia said.

She was not one to see the best in people, but she and Ruby had worked with Dana at the museum, where she coordinated living history programs around town.

Dahlia was notorious for her defense of Dana, and that wasn’t even an exaggeration.

Every town, she supposed, had that madwoman who was accused of witchcraft by gangs of young children and ostracized by the sort of people who had neatly kept lawns and kept all their personal business carefully concealed—the better to make their neighbors envy them.

In Pear Blossom, that woman was Dana Groves.

Dahlia couldn’t explain how Dana had gone from object of

pity to one of scorn and distrust. At least, she couldn't identify the stages of it. Except that the town had moved on from her tragedy, and she had not.

Coupled with the fact that if something happened to a woman or girl, and it might involve sex, then she was seen as to blame in some way.

And by extension, the mother was absolutely to blame.

Dana had been a single mother, and the fact her daughter had disappeared—and her daughter's boyfriend was most certainly responsible—had eventually been laid at her feet.

The problem was, by the time Dahlia was in high school, Caitlin's disappearance wasn't what people thought of when they thought of Dana, not specifically.

She was the hag that lived on the corner, the museum troll.

Dahlia had never seen her that way. Dahlia hadn't forgotten her sadness.

But it was like Pear Blossom had been determined to blot out Dana's sadness with the joy of finding Ruby, and Dahlia had never seen how that canceled out a tragedy.

But then, she was the one who had always seen something quite tragic in Ruby.

Dahlia's reputation was firmly linked to Dana. Since Dahlia had once screamed down the entire football team for throwing rocks at Dana's windows, and had, in fact, thrown a rock that had hit the star fullback in the shoulder and told the "pack of pricks" where they could shove their rocks.

That had done nothing to boost Dahlia's popularity, oddly.

"I don't see how everyone can be so mean about her," Ruby said. "How can you not look at her and think about everything she's lost?"

Dahlia felt kinship with Ruby just then. While Dahlia didn't feel like her compassion for Dana came from kindness, she knew Ruby's did.

“You went to school with Caitlin,” Ruby said to Marianne. “Wasn’t she only like a year ahead of you?”

Marianne looked ashamed. “I know. It’s hard to remember from before. I don’t usually... Consciously connect the two things. I know I should. Caitlin was... I mean, I didn’t really know her. She was always busy with her boyfriend.”

The boyfriend.

Everyone knew it had been the boyfriend.

He’d been vilified in town, in the *Gazette*. He’d even been arrested, but he’d never been convicted because there hadn’t been sufficient evidence.

There had never been a body. There had never been anything.

Dana had never even seen justice done for her daughter. She’d never had closure. And once the initial impact of the tragedy had passed, the town had moved on, and eventually Dana had become nothing but a reminder of bad things.

Which had ultimately put her in the category of bad things.

The idea sat heavy in Dahlia’s stomach.

“Dana is always nice to me,” Ruby said.

“Well, that’s just that patented Ruby magic,” Marianne said, wiggling her fingers and twisting one of her rings back into place. “Which lotion is best?”

Ruby grabbed hold of Dahlia’s hand and lifted it to her nose. Then she sniffed her own hand. She tapped on Dahlia’s hand. “I like that one better. What is it?”

“Yours is lavender and salt, Dahlia’s is cedar.”

“Salt?” Dahlia asked. “Salt, Marianne. Really.”

“As in like sea salt,” Marianne said. “It has a scent.”

“Next thing you know you’re going to sell air.”

“Pear Blossom Air,” Marianne said, grinning. “I really could.”

She could. Everything about Marianne appeared effortless. Easy. Like air. Flawless skin and just a hint of makeup. Loose-fitting clothing and hair that just seemed to fall in waves as if

by accident, when Dahlia suspected her sister did nothing by accident at all.

She wore six hundred dollars of *shrug, this old thing* most of the time, but was too filled with grace to say *this old thing* out loud. She said it with a smile and a wave of her hand when faced with compliments.

“Do it,” Dahlia said.

“If you promise to give me a feature in the paper.”

“Sure. Front page. Local Con Artist Sells Air to Unsuspecting Public.”

“I demand a retraction,” Marianne said, eyes narrowed.

“Okay, but while it’s the three of us,” Ruby said, her eyes going very bright and alert, “tell me what’s going on with Lydia.”

“Uh...” Marianne looked at Dahlia.

Dahlia frowned. “She’s Lydia.”

“Exactly,” said Marianne.

“Meaning?” Ruby asked.

“She’s working to avoid having a feeling, but she’s obviously devastated,” Marianne said.

Ruby’s eyes were now large and glassy with unshed tears. “I feel so guilty I didn’t come right back home.”

“Hey,” Dahlia said. “Like I told you at the time, we were all here with her.”

“Jackson and I help with the kids,” Marianne said. “So do Mom and Dad. Chase helps with the farm.”

“But I could have...comforted her.”

Dahlia sighed. “Honey, her husband died. You can’t just... smile and make it better.”

Ruby frowned. “I’m not saying that I can, but I want to be there for her.”

“You know how she is,” Marianne said. “She doesn’t like to share her feelings, and she’s really not sharing them now.”

And Dahlia could see that Ruby was taking none of this on board. Ruby was determined to fix their sister’s very real, deep

grief, as if she could do it with her mere presence. To Ruby's credit, she didn't like people to be unhappy.

That was also a deeply annoying thing about Ruby.

They all loved Mac like a brother. Lydia had been with Mac since she was thirteen. He was enmeshed in who they were, and it was just... Hard.

His ALS diagnosis had been devastating. His decline gutting. His death still sudden and unexpected in a terrible way.

They'd known it was coming, but when it had, it had still felt like...it had to be a dream. A joke. It hadn't felt real.

And as to how Lydia was coping? It was impossible to say.

Dahlia had never been the closest to Lydia growing up, but the older she got she thought it was maybe because they were too much the same. Marianne and Ruby showed their emotions easily. Screaming and throwing their hands around and demanding people smell lotion. Waving at people from across the street with broad gestures and loud greetings.

Dahlia and Lydia were just much more reserved. And Dahlia knew that her fashion sense—with her blunt bangs and extreme bob, her hair dyed black and her short skirts and thigh-high socks—horrified Lydia. And that Lydia herself would never admit that they were alike at all. But they both felt things deeply. And while Dahlia was a staunch advocate of the truth...

That didn't often extend to speaking of the deeper feelings inside her.

"Her whole life is different," Marianne said. "And you know Mom and Dad try but they're...they're terrible at dealing with things like this."

Ruby frowned. "What?"

"Ruby, come on. They want everyone to just soldier on when things are hard, and that's what Lydia always tries to do, but it can't be healthy."

"I don't think Mom and Dad are like that," Ruby said.

Marianne's mouth went firm for a moment. "Well, maybe they aren't with you."

Ruby seemed to shed that comment with ease. "I'm just really worried about her, and I want to help however I can."

Mac and Lydia had been such a perfect fit. The kind of couple that had made Dahlia believe someday she could find a person that would fit her that way.

They'd both dreamed of a simple, homesteading life. Both of them committed to working their farm and raising their children. And since Mac had died, there had been a hole in the family. Ever since his diagnosis, really. They'd known that he would die. But given that he had an early onset version of the disease, his prognosis had been better than someone who showed signs of the disease in their later years.

But it hadn't happened that way, and it was the black hole of numbness that Lydia had fallen into that terrified Dahlia the most. Because her sister hadn't wailed or thrown herself on the ground and screamed at an endless, unfeeling sky. She had gotten up, smoothed her hands down the front of her apron and said: *I have to feed the livestock.*

And while Dahlia could understand the stoicism, she was also increasingly bothered by all of it.

It was that part of her that was always out for the truth that felt the dishonesty of it and feared it would eat her sister alive. She felt like a coward not charging in and saying it, but she'd learned a long time ago that her brand of honesty was often seen as abrasive and perhaps charging in and asking if Lydia had a moment to talk about her deep, unending grief would not be well received.

Ruby, on the other hand, was always well received.

"Shall we go?" Marianne asked.

"It's not time for you to close, is it?" Dahlia asked.

"Not really. But it's fine. Town is dead today anyway."

Of course, Marianne thought nothing about closing the shop for Ruby.

And when she looked at Ruby, who was smiling effortlessly, her blue eyes sparkling that particular way they did, she could see why people thought of her as something miraculous.

Marianne turned the sign, picked up her phone and used it to turn all the lights in the room off, along with locking the place up tight.

“Dahlia finds my modernization of this classic building appalling,” Marianne said as they stepped out onto the street.

“I’m not your ally for that,” Ruby said. “I’m even more analog than Dahlia.”

“It makes no sense,” Marianne said. “You know you can appreciate all the charm of this small historic town without living in the Dark Ages.”

“I love the Dark Ages,” Ruby said, practically skipping down the street. And of course not tripping.

“You do not love the Dark Ages,” Marianne said, maddeningly sage, as she was wont to be. “You love the idea of a desperately handsome and brooding man wiping your fevered brow while you *nearly* perish from an illness. Only nearly.”

“True,” Ruby said. “And I do like my men to have all their teeth, so it’s more a vague fantasy than any real yearning.”

“Hmm,” Marianne agreed.

They paused at the end of the sidewalk. “Where are you parked?” Marianne asked.

“Oh, I parked down at the supermarket.”

“I’m parked at the newspaper office,” Dahlia said.

“I’m parked behind The Apothecary. So I have gone in the wrong direction.”

“See you at Mom and Dad’s?”

“Yep,” Ruby said.

But as Dahlia turned to go along with Marianne, Ruby grabbed her arm.

“So,” Ruby said, turning those wide blue eyes on in such a manner that Dahlia knew the following sentence was certain to irritate. “Dad said I could stay in the cottage.”

Dahlia laughed. She couldn’t help herself.

Because hadn’t it always been this way?

She’d had her own room, and then Ruby had appeared. And the town had sent cribs and bassinets and diapers and toys that had overflowed into Dahlia’s space. Not a bit of it for her, and leaving very little space for her on top of it.

“I told him he had to ask you,” Ruby said. “But you know how Dad is. He said you don’t pay rent and blah blah his land. But I don’t want to stay there if it bothers you.”

Dahlia wondered for a full five seconds what would happen if she told Ruby no. If she just said: *Nope, not going to work. Find somewhere else to bunk.*

But Ruby, for all that she was asking, knew Dahlia wouldn’t do that. And Dahlia, for all that she was annoyed, knew that she wouldn’t either.

“There are two bedrooms in *the shed*, Rubes.” She persisted in saying *shed* because Ruby wouldn’t call it that. “There’s no reason you can’t stay there.”

“Oh, thank you!” Ruby lurched forward and wrapped her arms around Dahlia’s neck, and Dahlia responded with a light pat on her sister’s back. “We can carpool!” she said when they separated.

“We’ll see, Rubes.”

“Okay, that’s good enough. I can’t wait to see what you’ve done with the cottage.”

“Mostly stacked books in there. You’ll need your own desk.”

“I can do that.”

“Okay, see you tonight.”

As Dahlia watched Ruby walk away, her blond hair bouncing behind her, she reflected on the earlier strangeness of walking with her younger sister. It was the kind of thing she was used

to, but it hit her harder because it had been months since Ruby had been in town.

Ruby had come back all sun and smiles, and as usual, everyone responded to that. But what kept sticking for Dahlia was the way no one ever seemed... Curious about Ruby.

Oh, they liked her. Loved her, even.

But Dahlia saw her and always remembered baby Ruby. Small, vulnerable and left to die on the coldest night of the year.

No one had ever wanted to know how she'd come to be there, not to the extent Dahlia had, even as a child.

But why, Mom? Why would someone leave her? Doesn't it mean her mom didn't want her?

She could still remember her mom's expression getting fierce.

No, Dahlia. She was sent to me. I'm her mom. And I want her very much.

But Dahlia had burned for the whole story. Like she always did.

And everyone around her seemed to just want a fairy tale while she was desperate to *know*.

But then, that was the McKee family way. Dahlia's grandmother had died of cancer when Dahlia was ten, and no one had even told the girls she was sick.

No point dwelling, Andie had said. You can deal with crisis when it hits, but why spend time worrying while it's waving in the distance?

Dahlia had disagreed. Then and now.

And wanted to know. What would always amaze her was that Ruby didn't seem to want to know the truth of her origins for herself, that Ruby had adopted that McKee mindset so very deeply.

She seemed as committed to her myth as everyone else.

3

WEDDINGS—Lydia G. McKee and MacKenzie J. Spencer were married at the First Presbyterian Church of Pear Blossom on Saturday, 15 August, 2012. The Reverend Lawrence Michaels acted as officiant. The Bride is the daughter of Jedidiah and Andrea McKee, of Pear Blossom, OR. The Groom is the son of John and Martha Spencer, also of Pear Blossom. The bride's officiants were her three sisters, Marianne Martin and Dahlia and Ruby McKee, all of Pear Blossom, the groom had one attendant, a best man, Chase Andrews.

LYDIA

As Lydia pulled up to her parents' farmhouse, she felt like a rusted-out old sailing vessel. Hollow and desperately tired. And on top of that, Chase Andrews was playing the part of resolute barnacle that she couldn't seem to scrape off.

Why couldn't he be like everyone else?

The hordes that had rushed in to offer support right after Mac had died had taken more coordination than her doing it herself would have. The people she hadn't spoken to since high school who *wanted to be there for her and do lunch*, as if she needed to add lunch to her laundry list of necessities in the wake of her husband's death.

They'd all vanished after a month.

Not Chase.

But then he'd always been there, hadn't he? Since they were thirteen. A boy with skinny legs and dirt on his face, who had taught her and Mac every swear word in existence with a cocky expression he still wore half the time, even though his legs were no longer skinny.

He was still often covered in dirt.

But he was a farmer, in fairness.

Well, she'd managed to get away from him, at least. Though he was still at the farm doing chores she hadn't asked him to do. He had his own land, after all, and she was not his responsibility. But he didn't seem to want to hear it. No matter how many times she said it to him. He'd said that Mac wanted him there.

Mac was dead. Mac couldn't want *anything*. Not anymore.

She stared ahead for a minute, gripping the steering wheel, pushing her mind into a blank, shallow space. She didn't need to think about Mac. She didn't need to think about Chase, or his tendency to overstep and make her feel homicidal. Ruby was back in town. The kids were thrilled that their favorite aunt was home. She was their favorite aunt because she was the most scarce, obviously. Which made her mysterious and fascinating, and... Well, who was Lydia kidding? Ruby had that effect on everyone. Whether she was around all the time or not.

Ruby was a lot. A kind of a lot Lydia wasn't sure she was prepared for, but...

Her kids really could use the distraction. So she was glad she was back, for that reason if for no other reason right at the moment.

Her daughter let out a shriek and burst out of the car, flinging herself toward the farmhouse, where Lydia suddenly realized Ruby was standing in the doorway.

"Aren't you going?" she asked her son.

"I was waiting for you," he said.

She could see Riley's eyes looking at her in the rearview mirror, big and far too serious for an eight-year-old.

Riley was the image of his father. Except Mac had never looked like that. Never so serious or grave. Not even when he knew he was dying.

Riley felt the death of his father particularly deep. Felt the burden of becoming the man of the house, and she could talk about gender roles and how that was outdated and all kinds of things, but it wouldn't change the weight that little boy had taken onto his shoulders. That was another thing she put at Chase's door. Because it was the kind of thing Chase acted like mattered. This man of the house stuff. And he'd stepped in like he... Like he practically owned the place.

Lydia hadn't asked for another man around the house. Frankly, she'd been ready to...

She'd been ready to try life without one.

"Let's go," she said to Riley.

They got out of the car, and she did her best to smile. She'd never been effusive, even back before. So it wasn't like she had to perform overmuch now. It was sort of a relief. Ruby waited for her, didn't go parading down the steps at a breakneck pace or anything like that. She just sort of stood there.

So *subdued* for her younger sister.

Lord.

When Mac had first died, there had been a lot to do. Life involved a lot of paperwork, death even more. During that time her parents had talked about it, had helped with the practicalities.

But those were long since managed, and now they didn't talk about it, because they didn't have to.

But Ruby... Ruby was giving her big, sad eyes that made Lydia want to yell at her.

Because Ruby hadn't been here for the last six months. She'd come for the funeral and gone back to school and then on to

England, and now she was standing there expectantly when Lydia just wanted to have dinner after a long day.

“How are you?”

“Not fragile,” Lydia said, harder than she’d intended.

Ruby’s eyes widened a fraction. “Okay. That’s good to know.”

Ruby bent down and scooped Hazel up, kissing her dark hair. Hazel looked so joyous and carefree, and for a moment, Lydia was frozen by a deep sense of jealousy. Jealousy that her daughter could feel happiness like that.

Jealousy that for a moment Hazel didn’t have to feel burdened by reality.

Great. You’re a wonderful mother, Lydia. You resent your daughter’s happiness. Your six-year-old child’s happiness.

She walked into her parents’ house, and she did her best to leave some of her angst behind. She just needed to get her head on straight and to be in the moment, because all of her problems would still be waiting for her when she got back.

When she walked in, the scent of pot roast enveloped her, and her sisters were already seated at the table. And in that moment she felt alone in this room full of people because no one really knew her. Not anymore. No one understood this.

She didn’t even understand.

She took a breath and fixed a small smile to her face. “Is there something I can help with, Mom?”

“We have it all ready,” her mom said, waving a hand, which, as far as Lydia knew, meant that her mother wasn’t allowing anyone to pitch in.

So Lydia ignored her and elbowed her way into the tiny kitchen area, going ahead and stirring the pot of gravy on the stove. Then she transferred the rolls to a basket, and set them at the center of the table, pouring the gravy into her mother’s cream-colored gravy boat imprinted with geese wearing heart charms and blue ribbons.

She helped put a matching set of plates on the table, and by the time she was finished with that, dinner was served.

“Did you kill the fatted calf?” Dahlia asked from her position down at the end of the table, and Lydia’s lips twitched.

Ruby might not exactly be the prodigal, but it was a close enough approximation.

“Yes,” her dad said. “Afterward we will be gifting your sister a coat of many colors.”

“Wrong Bible story, Dad,” Dahlia said.

“Oh, so you do remember the Scriptures?” He shot a wink at Dahlia, who was giving him a mock glare.

And on that note, her father took hold of Lydia’s hand, and Marianne’s, which was the cue for everyone else at the table to join hands and bow their heads. He said a brief grace, and Lydia realized that she hadn’t been paying attention to it at all, and when he said amen, it didn’t echo inside her at all.

She wasn’t exactly on speaking terms with God at the moment.

She shoved that thought aside and busied herself fixing plates for her children, cutting up the meat and potatoes into small pieces, which earned her an indignant look from Riley.

Her niece and nephew, Marianne’s children, had dished out their own plates, and she could see the future right in front of her. When her kids would be a little bit more self-sufficient, and she felt guilty for wanting to speed up time.

You weren’t supposed to want that. You were supposed to enjoy these years. But these had just been some of the worst years. And it wasn’t her kids’ fault, but she was tired and she needed help.

You have help.

Well, it wasn’t the help she’d asked for. Or the help she wanted. Her husband had gotten sick and it had ruined everything.

Thankfully, with her entire family around the table, conversation flowed easily, and she didn’t have to contribute much to it.

“Do you kids want to get into the board games?”

There was an enthusiastic squeal from the children, and her mom got up from the table and walked into the small living room. Lydia could hear her fussing around with the game closet, and acting on muscle memory, she and her sisters got up and began to clear the table. Mama cooked, and it was their job to clean up.

It wasn't an instinct that ever went away.

Marianne took an apron down from the peg and wrapped it around her waist, and she somehow managed to look like the pages of an ad, with her floral dress and that piece of linen tied just so, her hair swept partway up, and a twinkling light in her eyes. Dahlia didn't bother with an apron, likely because the only colors available were pastel or floral.

Ruby chose the white, pinafore-style apron that went over her head and tied around her waist, ruffles around the bottom and the top. It almost looked like it belonged with the pale blue dress she was wearing.

And it reminded her again of childhood.

Lydia went and grabbed an apron without looking at it, then paused for a second, looking down at her own worn jeans, and her hands, one of which had a blister right on the palm, cracked and bleeding. She pushed all that to the side and gathered the plates from the table, putting the stack of them by the sink.

I don't need a dishwasher. And anyway, they don't sing while they work.

Her father's cheerful words came back and echoed in her head just then. And as if she'd read her thoughts, Ruby started to sing.

None of them were overly gifted musically, except for Ruby. Her voice likely inherited from an ancestor the rest of them didn't share.

They weren't tone-deaf, by any stretch, but Ruby had a sweet, clear voice that reminded Lydia of a songbird. Marianne joined

in singing, filling the sink with water and twirling the dishrag. Lydia exchanged a glance with Dahlia.

“Do you think they’ll notice if we duck out on the chores?” Dahlia asked.

“Yes,” Lydia said. “And they’ll tattle.”

Dahlia smiled.

Lydia grabbed a dishrag and started to wipe down the counter, while Marianne and Ruby filled up all the space at the sink. Many hands make light work.

One of her mother’s favorite things to say, and she thought of it now as they quickly tidied up the kitchen.

When they finished, Marianne put the kettle on. And once it had boiled, she poured four mugs of hot water. Ruby began hunting around for the tea bags. “Let me just check in on Jackson,” Marianne said. She returned a minute later, flashing a thumbs-up. “Jackson and Dad are talking about hunting spots, so I can guarantee you that that can go on for as long as I want it to.”

They took their cups of tea and filed out the front door, sitting on the wooden chairs that were positioned there on the porch. It was dark out, only the porch light casting a golden glow directly around them, shrouding the view of the farm in darkness.

“How was England?” Lydia asked Ruby.

“Great,” she said. “Really great. But I’m happy to be home.”

“If I ran away to England, I might not come back,” Lydia said. And then tried to force a smile so she didn’t sound quite so grim. She hadn’t meant it to sound that way.

“Well, this is home,” Ruby said, her smile overly cheery. “I couldn’t imagine not coming back.”

Ruby lowered her face over her mug of tea, the steam rising up around her. Lydia didn’t often catalog the differences between the rest of them and Ruby.

Ruby was Ruby, so she didn’t stop to think particularly about her differences.

But she'd been gone awhile, and there were just some things she noticed. The way her sister's nose sloped, where the rest of them had a slight bump on the bridge.

Her pale blond hair where the rest of them were darker. Her top lip was thinner than the bottom, a sharp vee cut down into the top. Where Lydia and her sisters had a rounder, fuller top lip. Ruby was part of them. As much part of them as any other member of the family.

But there were distinct little mysteries about her.

"I wanted to be near you," Ruby said, her eyes so full of sympathy that they made Lydia freeze. Made her feel pinned to the spot by all of Ruby's earnestness.

It felt like Ruby had just dropped a heap of obligation onto her chest.

"Ruby, please tell me you didn't make a decision about your whole future because you thought I needed you here."

What did she expect her to say? Or do? Lydia had been managing on her own for six months. She didn't have the energy for help. She didn't want to make a... A chore list for Ruby so that Ruby could feel helpful.

It had been a relief when people had stopped doing that. She'd been inundated in the first weeks after Mac died. Phone calls and messages and offers of food. It had been nice, but it had been...

A lot.

"I got a job also," Ruby said, looking down into her tea. "But shouldn't I want to be here for you? You were all...you were all there for me. You found me."

And onto the obligation was heaped guilt.

Lydia sighed. "Ruby, I am glad to have you back."

How the hell had she ended up managing Ruby's feelings?

"If you need help with the kids or with...with farm chores."

Lydia laughed. "I do not want your help with farm chores. That's like asking a cow for help with knitting."

Ruby wrinkled her nose. "Are cows helpful with knitting?"

“No, Ruby, they don’t have thumbs. And you don’t know how to do manual labor.”

“I just...don’t want you to be sad.”

“Well. I’m sad,” Lydia said. “And I’m going to be for...” Maybe forever. This terrible sadness she had no name for. “A while. So don’t make it your mission, please. You will end up thwarted.”

“God knows none of us needs to have a thwarted Ruby roaming around,” Marianne said.

“What would that even look like?” Dahlia asked.

“Hey!” Now Ruby was looking wounded.

“Tell us more about your wild adventures,” Marianne said, lifting her teacup to her lips, smiling.

“Wild adventures?” Lydia asked.

“I have it on Ruby’s authority that there were Italian men,” Marianne said.

That broke something in Lydia’s vision. Cracked the glass she looked at her sister through. Because of course Ruby wasn’t a baby, any more than Dahlia was, but she had a difficult time seeing either of them as fully grown women. And the thought of Ruby fooling around with European men was a strange one indeed.

Still she was very happy for the subject change, and if putting Ruby in the hot seat eased the gravity of the moment...

She supposed that made Ruby helpful. Just in unexpected ways.

“Just two,” Ruby said, sounding defensive.

“And a Frenchman.”

“Just *the one*,” Ruby said dryly.

“Any Englishmen?” Lydia asked. “You were always a big one for Mr. Darcy.”

“I am not a sex tourist,” Ruby said crisply. “Though, yes.”

“And again, you came back home why?” Marianne asked.

“Because they weren’t *my* Mr. Darcy. None of them were more than a paragraph of my story.”

It was a strange choice of words. They weren’t more than a paragraph of her story. And it pushed Lydia off-kilter even more.

She’d thought she knew her story. Every line.

“But you know it is strange,” Ruby said. “I thought that... I thought maybe that’s where the answers were. Traveling. Seeing the world. Having experiences beyond my high school boyfriend. But I didn’t find anything there. I mean, I found some things. But it just wasn’t... It wasn’t this.”

Lydia had thought Mac was her whole book, and he’d been a few chapters, and then...

What was left?

What came next?

She didn’t know.

But for a moment, Lydia chose to let go of the dread. She chose to release her hold on her sense of uncertainty.

Because Ruby filled her mind with images of a book, and when she thought of it like that, it seemed so easy to flip back a few pages. This moment felt like it could be placed at any point in time. Maybe she would go back inside, go upstairs and find her old bed there, go to sleep in her room.

Maybe she would go home, and Mac would be there. All those things seemed about possible right now. Thanks to that cocoon of darkness outside, the familiarity of the porch light and the tea, and the presence of her sisters.

So she chose to take a breath and just live in this moment of suspended time. Because all too soon *now* would be crushing, clear and unavoidable. But it wasn’t at the moment.

Right now, she’d stay on this page and not think at all of the pages up ahead.

4

BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENTS—To Marianne and Jackson Martin, of Pear Blossom, OR, a baby girl, Ava Helene Martin, born at Rogue Valley Medical Center September 5, 2007

MARIANNE

“Do you think Dahlia is going to dye her hair pink and start going through another rebellious phase?”

Marianne walked out of the bathroom, rubbing at her face in a circular motion, making sure every last bit of her luxurious (expensive) moisturizer sank into her skin. She looked over at her husband, who was grinning at her, the lines around his mouth deeper than they’d been seventeen years ago, but she could still see the boy there who had first stolen her heart. She could see him with the years and without them and loved both. Just as she still loved him.

“Why exactly?” she asked.

He shrugged his shirt off, chucking it in the hamper by the dresser—God bless the man, it had only taken ten years to train him to do that—and walked over to their bed, sinking down onto the pale blue bedspread.

“Because she always gets weird when Ruby is in town, and now she’s going to be here for... For good?”

“As I understand it,” Marianne said, “Dee and Ruby are really close.”

“Sure,” Jackson said. “But that doesn’t mean you don’t have... sibling stuff there.”

“Sibling stuff,” she repeated, turning to the mirror above the dresser and adjusting her bun.

“I’m just going to take it down,” he said.

She shot him a flat look.

“They’re close in age,” he continued. “It makes it a thing. That’s why Asher drives me nuts,” he said, talking about his brother who was only a year and a half older than him. “I was always so close to everything he did, but not quite as good. Until I outgrew him. And Ruby is...well, she’s Ruby.”

“We’re all close,” Marianne said. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“All right, but I’m going to place bets. Pink hair by Christmas.”

“All right, I’ll take that bet.”

He lay back on the bed, and she cataloged the movements of his muscles as he did. They’d been married for seventeen years. His body was a familiar enough sight, but she still enjoyed it.

It might not be with that same sort of recklessness that had overtaken her when they’d met in their early twenties, but it was definitely there.

She could both check him out and have a conversation with him at the same time.

Necessary, all things considered. They had lives. She couldn’t get lost in lust every time she looked at him.

And there was so much life. Marianne felt buried in it sometimes. Helping Lydia with Riley and Hazel, trying to help shoulder her grief.

“We should have Christmas with your family again this year.”

“Jackson...”

They had a deal that they were supposed to split the holidays between his family and hers, and they’d done Christmas with the McKees last year.

“It’s the first year with Mac gone,” he said, his voice getting heavy at the mention of his brother-in-law. “I don’t think we should miss Christmas Day too.”

Marianne couldn’t disagree with that, but of course if her mother-in-law did, it would be Marianne who heard about it later, not Jackson.

And if her parents weren’t so... So damned terrible when things were dark, then maybe they could just go on as they’d originally planned. But as much as Lydia was distant, and that was her choice, Marianne knew some of it was just the learned coping mechanisms of a McKee.

Her teenage years had been... Grim.

She didn’t even like to think about them. She’d just been so dark and depressed all the time and her parents had left her to it. Ignore it, and it’ll go away.

And Marianne was the oldest, so she was the one they’d made all their major mistakes on. While Ruby, of course, was the fairy princess everyone found a constant delight and who benefited from all their previous years of...

Oh. There were those sibling dynamics Jackson had mentioned.

“Let me deal with my mom,” he said, as if he had read part of her mind.

“Thanks,” she said, flinging her arms around him and bringing them both down onto the bed.

He grinned, moving his hand down to her lower back. “You’re very welcome.”

There were things, and she knew it. Things they needed to talk about. They hadn’t gone on a vacation in years. Getting the

store going, getting the online storefront established, kids and school and her family...

And Ava. Lord, Ava. Who was fifteen, volatile and reminded Marianne way too much of herself at that age.

They needed to talk about it. They needed to figure out how to take care of them, and not just everyone else. Mac's death had shaken the foundation of the family. Mac was one of Jackson's best friends, not just a brother-in-law. He had been family to Marianne. Ava and Hunter had adored him. And in the months since, they'd tried so hard to keep up normalcy for Riley and Hazel while also trying to *be there*. Not just pretend it hadn't happened. Not just pretend it was all fine.

There was so much stuff out there, beyond their bedroom door. So much life. So much worry. But in Jackson she'd always found... Peace. Calm.

There were years of her life that were just... A blur. But she remembered the day she first met him. The day she first saw his face. It had all come into focus.

And here, in this room, it was just the two of them, and it was like that first day.

Like everything made sense.

"I love you, you know," she said. "I think I forgot to say it today. The store gets really busy and we get really busy and..."

"I know," he said, kissing her. "I don't forget you love me."

"Thank you."

His smile turned wicked, and she really did love it when he was wicked. That he still could be, even after all this time. "You could keep thanking me verbally or..."

She gave him her own wicked smile right back. "My pleasure."

5

1917—The new bridge will connect the orchards with the town and bear more weight than the previous bridges. After a vote at the town hall meeting, Sentinel Bridge is the agreed upon name.

RUBY

Courtesy of her jet lag, Ruby was up and ready to investigate the cottage by six o'clock the next morning. But she had to wait until she was reasonably sure that Dahlia was up.

She peered out the window and looked across the field, and it didn't seem like her sister's car was parked in front of the little cottage. Dahlia had always been an early riser.

The keys were hung up on the peg by the door, and she put on a pair of hunter green rubber boots beneath her dress, ready to cross the great, murky fields that stood between her and the dwelling.

She slipped a long woolen cardigan on over the dress and wrapped it tightly around her body as she walked out of the house and down the front steps, across the driveway to the first, weed-filled field that stood between her and the dwelling. The sky was washed in pink, the edges of the clouds rimmed with

bright gold from the rising sun. The trees, which were beginning to turn on autumn's red tide, looked like they were on fire now, as the morning took hold of the scenery with not a blooming gentleness, but a gong, declaring sunlight over the sleeping world, demanding wakefulness.

She picked through the weeds, grimacing as the taller shoots went up beneath her dress and scraped the sides of her thighs. The air was sharp, and if she took it in too deep, it sliced at her throat. And all the same, she found it deeply comforting to be here on a morning like this. A morning that reminded her of walking to school as a child.

A morning that reminded her of home.

Of seasons past and all things familiar. Of those foundational years that had built her into who she was. And it made the back of her neck as prickly as her eyes, that thought.

The field gave way to a forest, and the cottage was settled beneath the trees there. It was like walking back into the night. The sun couldn't penetrate the immensity of the pines. The soft, rich soil was carpeted with moss and ferns.

At the back, her father had added an A-frame. There were windows all over, and she noticed that a velvet green moss had grown thick on the roof, just as it had everywhere else around. She stuck the key into the door and turned the lock, making her way inside.

It was desperately cute and quaint, and she had always loved it, from the moment her father fixed it up, and was entranced by the idea of staying in it. And with Dahlia, just like when they were kids. And they'd stayed up late talking about their desperate romantic fantasies and their plans for the future.

Dahlia wanted to write articles. For all her sister sometimes seemed stoic and hard to reach when they talked, when she wrote she poured her soul out. When they were kids, Dahlia had written breathless romances—in the vein of Jane Austen,

of course, but always with a suggestive scene of the hero and heroine disappearing behind closed doors.

Ruby had loved them.

Ruby had loved that time in their lives. The idea of living in it again made her feel... Just so very good.

There was a little bookshelf in the entry, built-in, stacked with Dahlia's books, and Ruby had a feeling there was going to be a tussle over shelf space. That was predominantly what she had shipped back to the States, in a flat rate box, because it was cheaper than paying the exorbitant airline fees for anything that heavy.

And Ruby was nothing if not a book pack rat.

There were two very small bedrooms, and one had the door firmly shut, the other opened. Ruby pushed the door open. The room was sparse and clearly not Dahlia's. There was a small twin bed pressed against a wall of windows that backed the woods.

Not just the woods.

The Brewer orchard.

She stood there at the window and stared out for a long time. There was something... Unsettling about the orchard. About the Brewers themselves.

They were placed firmly on Pear Blossom's list of pariahs.

Her mother had cautioned them to stay away from the property, though when no other incidences occurred, Ruby had always found it a little bit sad. But Nathan Brewer's parents had been ostracized along with him.

She didn't remember his mother at all. She'd died when Ruby was maybe four or five. But while Nathan had left, his father had stayed, regardless of the fact that people in town have their opinions. He still went out drinking at the bar; he still had his stalwart friends, as far as Ruby knew.

But that was how Pear Blossom was. When an opinion was set, it was set.

Nathan Brewer had been tried and found guilty of murder

by the citizens, and that was all that mattered. Whether or not a court could convict him was irrelevant.

She turned away from the window. She didn't need to be thinking about murder while contemplating moving into her new room. Much less in the context of the orchard that was just on the other side of where she would rest her head at night.

Of course, the orchard had been searched. When Caitlin Groves had gone missing, search and rescue had brought dogs out, and members of the community had formed a line, both on foot and on horseback, and combed the whole property and the surrounding woods.

At least, that was what her father had said when he had relayed the story years later. It was impossible to live in town and not know about it, even though it had happened before she was born. Because posters of Caitlin remained up in town. Pear Blossom's only missing person's case.

For a moment, a strange sensation settled over Ruby's skin. A missing person. She could be a missing person, really. Kidnapped, taken away from her mother. Brought out to Pear Blossom, left on Sentinel Bridge. Maybe she was on a poster somewhere. How would she ever know?

It was unlikely, but that was one of her more simplistic fantasies. Of course, it led to the possibility that she was a kidnapped princess. Not that she really believed that, but in her opinion, it would have been a failure of imagination to never entertain the more fantastical options.

Secret princess or an heiress of some kind.

Yes, of course she had thought of that.

And there were enough books on the subject that it seemed like it had happened sometimes. She had thought—really—that it might be true when she was maybe thirteen. She had thought that perhaps her love of soft pillows and England related to her potential status as monarchy. But in the end she had been forced to admit that a missing princess would have likely been headline

news enough that she would at least be able to find out which one she was and coordinate dates.

No such luck.

Come to that, if she were anyone who had been reported missing, it was likely that the news stories from when she was found would have alerted people.

It wasn't like she needed those kinds of childish, easy fantasies. She didn't. But the alternative brought back that hollow feeling.

And so she pushed it off to the side, and imagined it flying away on the wind, because she did not need to wallow in sadness of any kind.

She wandered into the living room and looked out the windows there, wrapping her arms around herself, and then she caught sight of some movement in the trees. She took a step back and kept on staring. Wondering if it was a deer or maybe a bear. She sort of hoped so. She was in the market for a little bit of adventure.

But the movement continued, and when the figure moved into a clearing, it was not a bear.

There was a man standing here.

But it wasn't an old man. He was young, tall with dark hair and a dark beard. She couldn't make out his facial features from that distance, but she saw the moment that he saw her. Watching him through the window. He didn't move, and neither did she. And then, with a trickling sort of dread, she realized exactly who she was looking at.

She turned sharply, slamming her back against the wall, making it so she couldn't be seen from where he stood. She huffed out a breath that turned into a laugh, her heart hammering against her chest. Because of course he would have seen her. That she had scrambled and hid. And the front door was unlocked, so if he wanted to come and investigate, if he wanted to get to her... There was no barrier.

But she stayed like that, frozen for two whole minutes. And

when she turned back to look out the window, she didn't see him at all.

She texted Dahlia, who was at the local coffee shop working on an article, and Ruby met her there and relayed the story over caffeine.

"Do you think you hallucinated it?" she asked.

"No, I'm sure that he was there. Ninety percent. I'm not usually given to hallucinating the existence of men."

"Do you think it was *him*?" Dahlia asked.

"I don't know," Ruby said. "I mean, it would make most sense. Unless his dad hired someone to..."

"John Brewer died," Dahlia said. "A month ago."

"Oh," Ruby said.

"So I mean, it could be a new owner, it could be... I don't know what they ended up doing with the property. I didn't see it go up for sale, but that doesn't mean it wasn't sold." Dahlia pulled a face. "I'm not really up for living next to a murderer."

"I mean, we don't know if he's a murderer."

Dahlia scoffed. "Rubes, he was her boyfriend. He was the last person to see her alive. He's...well, it's almost always the intimate partner, that's just a fact."

Ruby looked down into her coffee. "Or he isn't."

She didn't know why she felt the need to defend him. She never had before.

"This isn't *Jane Eyre*. If a man locks his mad wife in the attic, he's a monster, not a hero."

"Speaking in metaphor, obviously," Ruby said.

"Obviously."

Ruby looked around the café. "I'm headed over to the museum today."

"I didn't think you started until Monday."

"I don't," Ruby said. "But I'm eager to get started and I don't have anything else to do."

"Aren't you recovering from jet lag?"

“Sort of. But I don’t like being bored. Lydia’s kids are in school so I can’t do anything to help with them.” Ruby felt... Lost then, and she searched Dahlia’s face for answers, which she didn’t find.

“What exactly did you think you were going to do to help Lydia?”

Ruby shrugged. “Just be here. It seems wrong for us all to be separated right now. And anyway, I can help if she needs something.”

“Most people would take the vacation.” Dahlia pointed one chipped nail on the table.

She shrugged. “I love being back here, but what happens when I spend a leisurely morning doing nothing? I start thinking that I see scary men standing outside my window.”

“Well, in fairness you might have.”

“It’s *unnerving*,” she said again.

The door to the coffeehouse opened, and Ruby fought the urge to slide under the table.

Because it was someone she knew. Very well.

“Well, look who it is,” Dahlia said, following Ruby’s line of sight to the door. “Darling Heath.”

“Please don’t call him that,” Ruby said out of the side of her mouth.

And she hoped, she really did, that he would walk on to the counter and just not see them.

But alas.

“Ruby?” He smiled, which surprised Ruby because there had been no smiling when they had broken up four years ago. Of course, that was four years ago, and undoubtedly as many things had changed in his life as had changed in hers since then. “I heard you were moving back.”

“You heard correctly,” she said.

“Working at the museum?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m going to be an archivist. I’m also going

to help with displays in duration and things like that. You know how it is here. Many hats.”

“Of course.”

“Hi, Heath,” Dahlia said, smiling broadly, and Ruby wanted to dump her coffee on her sister.

“Hi, Dahlia,” he said, backing up slightly. He was intimidated by Dahlia. A lot of men were.

Ruby admired that about her sister. That she was indefinably terrifying to the male species. Ruby herself could not claim to unsettle anyone. Not that she wanted to intimidate Heath. She didn’t know if she really wanted to talk to him either.

He was the same. A comforting sort of handsomeness that felt good to look at. Smooth around the edges and just pleasing, without creating any reckless heat in her.

“Are you still working at your dad’s?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s good work. And I don’t mind it.”

Living the cabinetmaking dream, apparently. Not that there was anything wrong with that. It just wasn’t what he had wanted to do when they’d been together. And certainly not what he’d gone away to college for. But Heath’s unrealized dreams were not her responsibility.

You are also back, Ruby.

That was *different*. She was working at the museum, with Dana. It was what she’d gone to school for.

“I’d like to have coffee sometime,” he said.

She shifted. “Sure. I’m... Not now. I’m headed out to...the museum.”

“Are you walking?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I’ll walk you.”

“Dahlia, are you...walking over to the newspaper office now?” Ruby asked, somewhat hopefully.

“No,” Dahlia said, grinning.

And Ruby didn’t really know how to politely decline his offer,

and Ruby could tell that her sister wasn't about to bail her out. And fair enough, really. She was an adult. If she really didn't want to walk with him she should say. It wasn't that she didn't want to. It was just that... Well, she didn't want to.

But instead, she found herself waiting as he ordered coffee, then meandered back to her table, and then she picked up her own coffee and began to walk out the door with him.

"It is nice to see you," he said, once they were out on the street.

Ruby surveyed the main street, the neat little square that sat in the center, where the road forked and the two lanes went around a patch of grass with trees whose leaves were beginning to change. Many of the businesses had American flags waving with overpronounced patriotism in the breeze, the redbrick facades bright, the trim a sharp white. She wondered how many coats of paint had gone over that trim in the years since the buildings had gone up. Probably hundreds. That was maybe not even an exaggeration. One layer of paint going straight over the other, drying crisp and white and new.

And if you are thinking about drying paint while walking next to a man, you really are not interested.

She looked at him and his boyish features and thought maybe she really ought to feel more for the man she had thought was her first true love. She knew now that she had never loved him. She had been enraptured by the idea of being in love. She'd been such a fierce romantic.

Maybe she still was.

But distance had well and truly broken any bond she had initially felt with Heath. "I think it's good that you're back," he said, sort of abruptly.

"You do?" She hoped this wasn't leading to any kind of declaration.

"The town doesn't feel right without you, Ruby. You're like the mascot."

She laughed. She couldn't help herself. "A mascot?" She im-

mediately imagined herself doing a jig at the center of the town square.

“Yeah, you know. You made the town famous.”

The sentiment was seriously disconcerting. “I don’t know that I did that.”

“Well, certainly more famous than it was.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Bridge baby? Is that the name of my mascot?”

“That’s sort of grim, Ruby,” he said.

“It is sort of grim,” she said, her scalp prickling. “I mean if you think about it. And, now I am.”

“Sorry. That must be weird.” He looked at her, like he was seeing her for the first time. “To have people bring it up. I’m sorry.”

She was unsure of what to call the emotion that was turning over in her chest. “You know, Heath, don’t worry about it. I don’t even really think about it. Well, I did when I left. I noticed how different it was. You know, when people didn’t know. But I chose to come back, and I knew what I was coming back to.”

“I won’t bring it up again.”

“I’m not really...” The museum was in sight. An impressive building that stood apart from the others in town, with a low stone wall all around the expansive green lawn at the front. It was red brick, two stories tall, with the same white trim as many of the other buildings in town. There was a flagpole at the edge of the lawn with the Oregon state flag flying beneath an American flag. And next to that was a statue of a cowboy riding a horse with a lasso frozen above his head. She cleared her throat.

“Right now I’m creating space around myself to explore my new role at the museum and support my sister, so...”

He stopped walking abruptly. “That’s not why... I swear, Ruby, I just... I want to be friends.”

Heat suffused her face and she...stumbled slightly while walking. Which she did not do. He wanted to be friends.

Friends.

He wasn't hitting on her.

Friends.

Her lips twitched. She wasn't entirely sure what she thought about that. And honestly, she wouldn't have believed it was possible when she left. When breaking up with him had felt fraught, but the right thing to do. And standing next to him now, four years later, it didn't feel fraught at all. "All right," she said cautiously. "I'm not opposed to that."

He laughed, and he smiled, and he really was very handsome when he smiled. "Well, glad you're not opposed to me."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know." He nudged her elbow with his. "Hey, I'll see you around."

"Yeah," she said. "See you around."

He branched off in another direction, and she watched him, feeling for a moment like she was standing sideways.

Mascot.

Friends.

And for some reason she saw the image of that man again, burned into her mind.

This was not the triumphant morning she'd envisioned. It wasn't even 9:00 a.m., and she felt frightened, challenged and embarrassed.

And slightly scraped raw.

Mascot.

That's grim.

She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders.

She was not *grim*.

She was a *miracle*.

She walked down the pathway that carried her to the broad steps that led up to the grand entryway of the museum, and with each step she tried to picture pieces of the morning falling away.

With each step, she turned her focus to what was real. Right in front of her.

This building had originally been a common area for the town. A place where the citizens could hold meetings, weddings. Parties. So much of the foundational town history had occurred within those walls. And now it stood as a testament to educating people about how the town had been created.

She stood in front of the tall black doors to the museum for a moment. She hadn't been back here for a couple of years, and she was suddenly awash in nostalgia. She could remember getting a special release from school to do presentations at the museum during Heritage Days. When fourth graders from schools in the surrounding area would come and do state education for days. Pear Blossom was one of their sites because of its strong historic programs, living history and intact historic buildings.

They guided the kids through presentations on the Oregon Trail, on the origins of the state's symbols—birds, flags, animals—and gave demonstrations on churning butter, washing clothes and baking. She had worked in nearly every station throughout the years, and for some reason, standing there, she wanted a bottled coffee and a can of Pringles. Because it was the snack she had brought with her every day when she'd been sixteen. And the memory was inexorably tied to the location.

She had always found that funny. When she went on a road trip she always wanted a bag of Ritz Chips, which were hard to find in grocery stores now. When she went back to the Rochelle house—where she had done living history during the summer at fourteen and fifteen—she wanted a chocolate muffin and a bottle of tropical juice, which was a terrible combination, but for some reason it was what she had had as her snack then.

England had been scones and cream tea. France crepes with honey and croque monsieur.

Vastly superior to muffins and juice.

But still, this memory, this moment, was so visceral she could

hardly breathe past it. It was strange, the things that became part of your personal history. Perhaps Sentinel Bridge was understandable. Muffins and juice was a little bit odd. But it was all those things that made up a person, she supposed.

And what about the things that came before? The things that she didn't know about.

One thing she knew for certain, as a student of history, was that you couldn't know everything of the past. It was impossible. You could do your best to piece together clues, but you could never really know what people had been thinking. Who they were.

She had accepted that about her own life.

She was fine with it.

The museum was shockingly cool and lit darkly in the entryway. The walnut floors were scarred and shiny, the chandelier that hung overhead worked—wavy glass, likely original. Ruby loved old glass. Imperfect, full of bubbles and wobbles. She heard footsteps coming from one of the back rooms, easy because the place was hushed like a church, and a moment later a woman with short, steel gray hair and loose-fitting clothing befitting a historian, in Ruby's opinion, smiled as she approached her. "You're early."

"Hi, Dana," Ruby said. "I couldn't stay away, now that everything is set."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me."

Dana didn't hug her. But Dana wasn't... Huggy. Of course, Ruby also didn't find her to be terrifying the way the rest of the town did.

Her eyes were pale and sharp, and her voice was clipped. She was obsessed with history, things in the past, and not at all as interested in things in the present. But, given her life, Ruby couldn't blame her. Ruby didn't pity her—Dana was far too sturdy for that. But she was... Aware.

Because along with her gauzy shawls, Dana had a grief that

wrapped itself around her like a garment. It was just there. It didn't matter if you knew her story or not. You could feel it. A part of her as much as her blue eyes or the lines around her mouth.

Ruby could remember feeling drawn to her from the first time she'd ever seen her. It had been at Pear Blossom Elementary when Ruby was in kindergarten, and a couple of kids from the high school had come in pioneer clothing to do a demonstration on what it was like in the Wild West days of the town. Ruby had been riveted. Gold panning, laundry, butter churning, tin punching. She'd wanted to learn more about all of it.

Dana had been the one overseeing the activities, and so Ruby had known she was the one she had to talk to.

She hadn't even noticed other people avoided the unsmiling woman. She hadn't even noticed she was unsmiling.

And she had come away from the meeting with a stack of brochures, which to young Ruby had meant the entire world.

Whether she had wanted one, Dana had earned a friend for life that day.

"We just finished a new display. But the whole back wing needs to be reset. I don't know if you had any ideas."

"Well," Ruby said, thrown off-balance for a second, but realizing that she shouldn't be that surprised that Dana had gotten right down to it. She wasn't really one for small talk or chitchat. She certainly wasn't going to ask Ruby anything about her time overseas. Unless it was to find out about which historical sites she had visited.

But she wasn't going to want to know about Italian men.

Which was fine.

Ruby didn't really want to share about that with her anyway.

Dana had long been like a family member to Ruby. But like a sort of distant, grumpy aunt.

"I thought that I would look and see what we have," she said.

"I want to see what kind of state the archives are in."

“We haven’t had an archivist in official capacity, so I imagine you will find it...”

“Anarchist archival?”

“I think that’s slightly too exciting a word to use here.” Dana’s lips twitched with just the slightest bit of humor, and Ruby felt accomplished.

She did make people happy.

She was here for a reason.

“Well, I’m looking forward to gathering and reorganizing all of the resources. Looking at the catalog of artifacts and seeing what we can feature. Especially for the holidays. I think when tourists start to come in for Victorian Christmas we should have some kind of coinciding theme.”

“You do have ideas,” Dana said, and if Ruby hadn’t known better, she would’ve thought that her tone was approving.

“Yeah, I guess I have a few. Or rather, I have a direction.”

There was a staircase toward the back of the building, dark walnut steps and more of that bright white on the banister. The museum was large and cavernous. And very empty. But on a weekday that wasn’t unusual. Especially in the fall. Over summer, people came to stay, and again over Christmas, but otherwise there was a lot of weekend traffic. Very much the usual tourism cycle.

She followed Dana up the stairs and down the hall. And toward a part of the museum she had never been in before. The ceilings were high, the moldings ornate, and Ruby felt like she could easily compose poetry about them. Dana pushed the door open, and a rush of satisfaction washed over Ruby. It was a library. A proper library. With big, weighty bookshelves built into the walls. Each one of them absolutely filled to the bursting point. With folios filled with documents, books and artifacts that were on display.

“This is your office,” Dana said.

“Really?” Ruby asked, turning a circle, aware that she looked a little bit like an overeager golden retriever.

“Yes,” Dana said. “There’s a microfiche, for records that haven’t been fully digitized. There are some that are digitized.”

“Do you have the *Pear Blossom Gazette*?”

“Some,” she said. “Notable events. Announcements about World Wars I and II, the paper from 9/11. But the majority of the archive is housed in their offices.”

“Mmm. Dahlia showed me yesterday. I might want to use some. I love old newspapers,” Ruby said. “I like to find the smallest local paper wherever I go and go back through different articles. It gives you such a picture of the place.”

“Well, better you than me,” said Dana. “I don’t have the patience to read newsprint.”

“I have infinite patience for it,” Ruby said.

“There are clothes,” Dana said. “They’re in a wardrobe over there in the corner.”

“Clothes?” Ruby asked. “Well, we have to do a clothing display.”

“I thought you might like that. I remember you were very into the costuming when you did living history.”

“The costumes, in my opinion, are sort of the point.”

“The education is the point,” Dana said.

Ruby smiled.

“Either way,” Ruby said. “I’m... I’m glad to be back.”

“It’s yours,” Dana said. “We still do a manual time card. Make sure you fill it out with your hours for the day before you leave.”

“I don’t start till Monday,” Ruby said.

“You can fill out hours for today, Ruby,” Dana said.

And then she turned around and walked out of the room, leaving Ruby alone in her dusty sanctuary. She was feeling... Well, like she had made a very good decision. She had just been left alone in a room filled with records. Archives. Journals. Records. Historical clothing. And it was her job. She was getting

paid to spend the day going through all these things. Meticulously combing through and putting them in order. Building stories from them that would make them accessible to the public. Giving other people the insight into history that Ruby had.

She walked over to the bookshelves, and she didn't know where to begin.

December 23, 2000.

The date seemed to hit her brain and stick.

Her day.

Not her birthday. Her Found Day.

She never celebrated her birthday in December. They didn't know the exact date and they'd arbitrarily assigned her December 21, but it was too close to Christmas, and since it was an estimated birthdate anyway, she'd always preferred to take a half birthday. So she could have a whole week of celebrations and free birthday coffee and cookies at the store that did it, when she was not already stuffed full of Christmas cookies.

But the day she was found...

That always resonated. No matter what.

No. She did not need to look at her day. Anyway, she'd read that newspaper article. A hundred times. Her mother had saved all of them.

Maybe. But what about other records? Other information?

What if there was more? She might have saved the article, but she didn't have the entire newspaper. What else had happened that day?

No. She really couldn't start her job doing something self-serving. Anyway, she didn't want to.

The Legend of Ruby McKee was well-worn and overtold in the town of Pear Blossom. And Ruby knew it best of all.

She got up and made her way over to the wardrobe. And opened it. The garments were stored in bags, and she unzipped the first one, pulling out a beautiful muslin dress with pin tucks around the dropped waist. There was another in a beautiful cal-

ico. And a rich green-and-purple plaid. She found a fur and a matching muff.

She went over to the computer and sat down, tapping on it and waiting for it to wake up. And once it did, she started searching different shops. That would be an interesting display. The history of fashion in Pear Blossom. In the whole of the West. How it was shaped by where people came from. She felt that she had her first solid idea.

She found ads for different fabrics and trims. And that led her on a rabbit trail, down to digitized Sears and Roebuck catalogs from the late 1800s.

She got up and began to peruse the shelves. And found some hard copies of the catalogs. She opened the first one and began to flip through the pages. It was remarkably well preserved. From March 1901. The catalog had everything. It boasted the latest in home conveniences, ads for electric lights and indoor plumbing apparatus. Victrolas. Stereoscopes. Clothing, fabric. Even houses. It made her smile. This sort of remote shopping that was so popular now was nothing new.

Her stomach didn't growl until five o'clock. She hadn't realized that she'd been sitting here that long. Hadn't realized that she'd gotten so lost in looking at everything. But she'd always been like that.

She went over to the files. There were police records. Stretching back to the 1860s. And newer...

She found the bundle that was labeled December 2000.

She grabbed hold of that file, and then the one for January 2001.

She'd never had a look at actual police reports from either Caitlin's disappearance or her appearance. And it made her feel... Like she was being slightly nosy when it came to digging into Caitlin, because of Dana, but...

She was curious.

Emerging from the room and out into the hallway startled

her. Because she hadn't realized how dim it was in there. But there was only one window for the whole large room, and as a result the large windows that lined the hall made her feel like a bemused bat emerging from a cave before its time. She nearly ran into Dana, who was halfway up the stairs when she was going down. "I was just coming to get you. I'm ready to leave and lock up. I won't have a copy of keys for you until Monday."

"That's okay," she said, feeling slightly edgy and a bit like she'd been caught, even though she was allowed to look at whatever she wanted. "I'll walk you to your car."

"You don't have to do that."

Dana always pushed off overly friendly gestures, but Ruby had always wondered if she secretly liked them.

"I know. You're always telling me what I don't *have* to do, Dana. I don't listen—you know that."

"Your sister listens," Dana said.

"Dahlia is a fake rebel."

"I like her."

That was exceedingly high praise coming from Dana.

Ruby and Dana walked out the front door, and Ruby paused for a moment to take in the golden evening. The sun was beginning to lower, but the air still had that rich cast to it. There was something about October. It was particularly beautiful here. She'd always thought so.

A crisp breeze blew up, and she held the strap of her bag more tightly, lowering her head, her hair blowing in the wind.

As they made their way down the street, no one stopped to chat. A few people waved at Ruby, but several people looked away quickly and acted like they didn't see them. Ruby had never been quite so conscious of how different it was than when she walked alone—or with one of her sisters or a friend.

"I saw Heath earlier," Ruby said, determined to push past the odd sensation inside her. "You remember Heath? He was my... I dated him in high school."

“Yes,” Dana said. “Floppy-haired boy. He used to hang around waiting for you to be finished with your shift.”

“Yes. That is him. Floppy hair and all.” She cleared her throat. “He called me the town mascot.”

Dana did something totally unexpected then. She laughed. Rusty and in the back of her throat, like it wasn’t a sound she was accustomed to making. “Well, he isn’t wrong.”

“He isn’t?” Ruby asked, feeling betrayed by this.

Dana should have said it was ridiculous and validated her earlier feelings, identified it as stupidity. Silliness.

“It says nothing about you, Ruby McKee, and everything about them. You were...a miracle.” But she didn’t say the word the way most people did. “And now you’re...well, the mascot of how great we all are. Not all of us, of course.” That was accompanied by a wry smile, stretched thin on Dana’s narrow face.

Ruby paused and stared at Dana, at the grooves in her forehead and between her brows, by her mouth, etched into her skin. And she saw the ghosts of laugh lines by her blue eyes. Evidence of joy that had passed away before those lines had become deep and decisive. The grooves worn the deepest were anger, sorrow.

“You don’t think I’m a miracle, Dana?” She tried to ask it in a light tone. Self-deprecating, even, but it came out...*seeking*, and Ruby was left embarrassed by it.

“You’re a smart, capable young woman with a good head on your shoulders, when it isn’t in the clouds. That’s a kind of miraculous, I suppose.” They carried on walking. “But... You know when they found you it was...it was like you were supposed to replace what we lost. And I suppose for them you did.”

Ruby’s stomach turned sour.

Caitlin.

Dana had never, ever talked to her about this before. And Ruby didn’t know why she was doing it now. Ruby wanted her to stop, in fact. Which she realized with a certain amount of horror and shame. Because she considered Dana a friend, and

she should want to hear her hard truths, and here she was, wanting to cover her ears while the older woman spoke.

“Miraculous,” Dana said. “That’s what they thought and I... Ruby, it was a tragedy. I... I couldn’t believe some woman would leave her child, her baby, like that. Not after my own baby was taken from me. I...” Dana stopped walking and Ruby looked at her, expecting to see tears.

But she didn’t.

All she saw was anger.

“I couldn’t fathom who would do that. Who would...she left you to die.”

The words punctured Ruby’s stomach, made her feel deflated and hurt and *tragic*. And she wished she had covered her ears.

But she didn’t.

And Dana didn’t stop talking.

“Of course, my first thought was to blame her. But that’s what we do. It’s what we do.”

“What is?”

Dana looked her square in the face. “We blame the mother.”

Ruby hadn’t. Ruby hadn’t blamed anyone. She was...she had been rescued, and that was what counted, not the rest of it.

“I... I’m not angry about it,” Ruby said. “I’m just happy. I’m happy that I’m here. You know, not everyone gets to be so confident their life has a purpose. My life was saved and I... I’m meant to do something with it, I suppose.”

“My daughter’s life meant something too. And she’s still gone.”

Dana started to walk faster and Ruby had to trot to keep up, her each step making pain radiate in her chest. “I... I didn’t mean...”

“Settle down, I know you didn’t.” Dana sighed. “Everyone wants easy answers, easy fixes. You can’t fix tragedy.”

Then they were standing by Dana’s car, and Ruby didn’t

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know if she was relieved or sorry. “I guess I’ll see you Monday,” Ruby said.

“That is one thing I like about you,” Dana said. “I don’t scare you.”

Then she got into her car and left Ruby standing there feeling... Like Dana did in fact scare her.

But not half as much as the things she had said.

We hope you enjoyed this extended excerpt of
The Lost and Found Girl
by Maisey Yates

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Author Note

The idea of an abandoned baby, found and adopted by her town and struggling to piece together the truth of her past, has been with me for a few years. One of those ideas that just sits there waiting to become something more than just a seed.

I live in a small town, and I have lived in the same small town for my entire life. It is often more quirky than could ever be believably depicted in fiction. A restaurant in town was once baffled by the fact their lettuce kept going missing, and they ended up discovering the restaurant down the street was stealing their lettuce. I really need to put a lettuce heist in a book.

The other thing about small towns, though, is that people form very strong narratives about places, and about the people who live around them. Often we are reluctant to challenge these narratives, or simply have no reason to.

The Lost and Found Girl is all about those kinds of narratives. Legends that we accept as truths because they make us comfortable.

We might see someone as a Good Man simply because that's how people around us continually describe him, even though we have never seen him do anything good.

That was what I started thinking about when I wrote Ruby's story. These stories we tell ourselves are comforting. They

help us understand the world. They help us feel safe. But what happens when those stories, those narratives, become shields for monsters to hide behind? We tell ourselves stories about where we live and about the people who share our homes with us.

And we don't only tell stories about other people, but about ourselves. And what happens when those stories become the cages that keep us trapped?

I'm a storyteller, it's what I do. But in many ways, we all are. We want to tell ourselves stories about the world around us because it helps us make sense of it—it makes it neater. And in writing Ruby's story, I wanted to remind myself that it's okay to be complicated, and it's important to have the bravery to disrupt the stories around us when we must, even if it stirs up uncomfortable truths.

Ruby McKee's story is about having the strength to uncover the darkness, so the light can get in. About unpacking the lies, so the truth can begin to heal. Sometimes what's right isn't what's easy.

And while the truth doesn't always offer protection, it is always what will set us free.