

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

FEELINGS ARE COMPLICATED.

Ruthie is finally getting used to the new normal: her parents' divorce, having a stepdad and (annoying) stepbrothers and trying not to think too much about *before*. Three years ago Ruthie's baby brother was stillborn. And now, her mom is pregnant again. Ruthie can't help but worry it will ruin everything.

At least Ruthie has her best friend, her dog and her favorite book series, *The Unicorns of Faravelle Forest*, to cheer her up. When Ruthie unexpectedly meets the series author, Ally, she learns Ally is grieving a loss too, and the two develop an unlikely friendship. Though the journey is never smooth, Ruthie eventually realizes there's comfort to be found in expressing your feelings and cherishing the memory of those you've loved.

This is an advance reading copy of the uncorrected proofs and is not for sale. Changes may be made to the text before publication, so **all quotes for review must be checked against the final bound book.**

MIDDLE READER FICTION • AGES 9–12

Publication: September 16, 2025

9781459839533 PAPERBACK • \$14.95

9781459839540 PDF • 9781459839557 EPUB



ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

orcabook.com • 1-800-210-5277

For more information, contact 1-800-210-5277 • media@orcabook.com



@orcabook

Orca Book Publishers is proud of the hard work our authors do and of the important stories they create. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it or did not check it out from a library provider, then the author has not received royalties for this book. The ebook you are reading is licensed for single use only and may not be copied, printed, resold or given away. If you are interested in using this book in a classroom setting, we have digital subscriptions with multi user, simultaneous access to our books, or classroom licenses available for purchase. For more information, please contact digital@orcabook.com.

IVALUECANADIANSTORIES.CA



ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND



AUTHOR: JOANNE LEVY

September 16, 2025

In this middle-grade novel, Ruthie's mother announces she's pregnant again—but Ruthie is still mourning the death of her baby brother, who was stillborn. With help from her dog and a surprising new friend, Ruthie finds that while you can't avoid grief, you can find comfort in honoring those you've lost.

FORMAT

5 x 7.5"

248 pages

PAPERBACK

9781459839533

\$14.95

PDF

9781459839540

EPUB

9781459839557

KEY SELLING POINTS

- In this story, the author takes on the difficult topics of grief and stillbirth, and examines how it feels as a kid. Readers who have dealt with any sort of grief will see themselves in Ruthie, and feel the catharsis of her finally letting her feelings out.
- *All the Things We Found* takes on other relatable topics, such as divorce and blended families, showing them realistically but also in an overall positive light, as Ruthie's aloof stepbrothers become sympathetic and supportive when she really needs them.
- The intergenerational relationship between Ruthie and Ally shows how kids and adults can learn from one another; and on a lighter note, her getting to meet the (co)author of her favorite series is a fun element that brings some levity to the narrative.
- Joanne Levy is the author of several books for young people, including *Bird Brain*, the Governor General award-nominated *Sorry For Your Loss*, and *The Book of Elsie*.

★ **“A heartfelt and expertly written tale of loss, family, and friendship that will have readers blinking back their tears...Beautiful and sincere.”**

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review for *Sorry For Your Loss*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JOANNE LEVY is the bestselling author of a number of books for young people, including *The Sun Will Come Out*, *Bird Brain*, *Let It Glow* (co-written with Marissa Meyer) and the award-winning *Sorry For Your Loss*, which was nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award and won the Canadian Jewish Literature Award. She lives in Clinton, Ontario, with her husband and a small menagerie of furred and feathered freeloaders.

PROMOTIONAL PLANS INCLUDE

- Print and online advertising campaigns
- Promotion at national and regional school, library and trade conferences
- Extensive ARC distribution, including Edelweiss
- Blog and social media promotion
- Outreach in Orca's newsletter program, including targeted emails to educators, librarians and booksellers in Canada and the United States

BISACS

JUV039030 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Death, Grief, Bereavement

JUV039050 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Emotions & Feelings

JUV013040 JUVENILE FICTION / Family / New Baby

RIGHTS

Worldwide

AGES

9–12

PUBLICITY

For more information or a review copy, please contact media@orcabook.com.

Order online at orcabook.com or orders@orcabook.com or 1-800-210-5277



ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
orcabook.com • 1-800-210-5277

@orcabook









ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

JOANNE LEVY

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

Copyright © Joanne Levy 2025

Published in Canada and the United States in 2025 by Orca Book Publishers.
orcabook.com

All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training and similar technologies. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher.

The publisher expressly prohibits the use of this work in connection with the development of any software program, including, without limitation, training a machine-learning or generative artificial intelligence (AI) system.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: All the things we found / Joanne Levy.

Names: Levy, Joanne, author

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20240490266 | Canadiana (ebook) 20240490274 |
ISBN 9781459839533 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459839540 (PDF) |
ISBN 9781459839557 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8623.E9592 A79 2025 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024947335

Summary:

In this middle-grade novel, Ruthie's mother announces that she's pregnant—but Ruthie is still mourning the death of her baby brother, who was stillborn. With help from her dog, Izzy, and a surprising new friend, Ruthie finds that while you can't avoid grief, you can find comfort in honoring those you've lost.

Orca Book Publishers is committed to reducing the consumption of nonrenewable resources in the production of our books. We make every effort to use materials that support a sustainable future.

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover and interior artwork by Marie-Eve Turgeon.

Design by Troy Cunningham.

Edited by Sarah Howden.

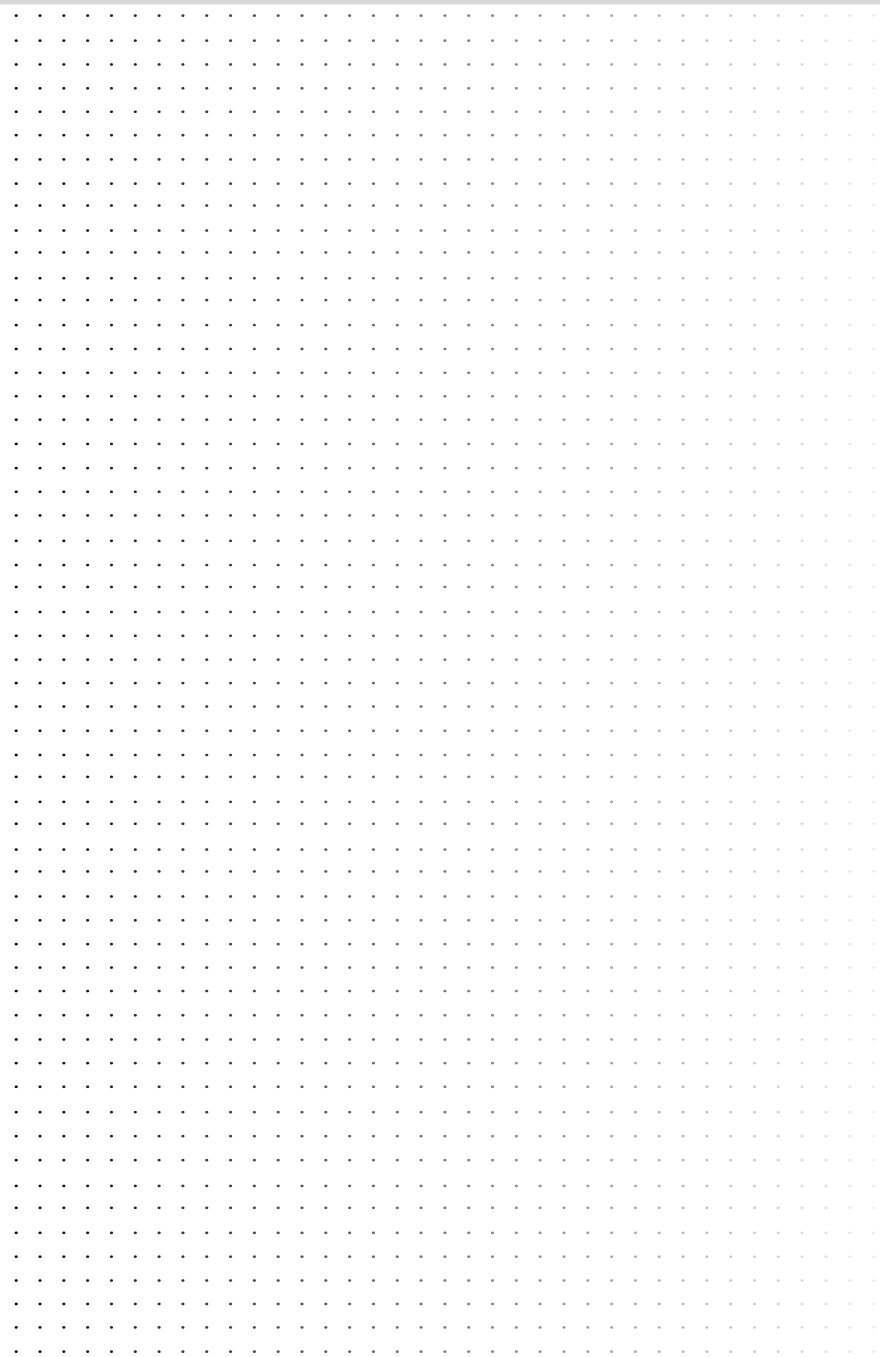
Author photo by Tania Garshowitz.

Printed and bound in Canada.

DEDICATION

*For Lisa and Marissa, who gave me my
first peek behind the curtain.*

And for Zoe, the real Izzy. Best. Dog. Ever.



CHAPTER ONE

“It’s an arm!” Jenna yelled. “Izzy has found a tiny arm!”

“What?” I shrieked. It sounded like my bestie had just said my dog had found *an arm*.

Jenna’s eyes were huge and wide with terror. “AN ARM! From a baby! RUTHIEEEEE!”

Oh. Em. Gee. I really *had* heard her correctly.

But wait. Jenna couldn’t be right. There was no way my dog had found an actual baby’s arm while we were playing in the woods.

Right? I glanced over toward the cemetery that was just on the other side of the trees.

No. Couldn’t be. I shivered. Not from the cold either, since it was a warm spring day.

“Izzy!” I said to the dog in my most stern you’d-better-not-ignore-me voice. “Drop it!”

Obediently the dog spit out the pink thing in her mouth. She was a very good dog and almost always obeyed, especially when I used *that* tone.

“What have you dug up now?” I muttered. She was *always* finding stuff in the woods. It was her superpower. I looked

JOANNE LEVY

down at what Jenna had said was a baby's arm. The thing that was caked with dirt and a shiny coating of dog slobber.

"What the...?" I crouched down to get a better look.

My heart stopped. Then it started to pound hard. *Really* hard. Because now that I was looking closely, it *did* look like an arm. It even had a hand with curled fingers and everything. I looked up at the dog. She seemed quite proud of herself, mouth open in a doggy grin, tongue hanging out the side of her muzzle as she panted.

"SEE?" Jenna wailed. "It's a baby's arm. Your dog is a murderer!"

"Izzy! What have you done?" I dropped to my knees and looked even closer. Because it really, really couldn't be what it looked like. Izzy was a *good* dog. A *nice* dog. She had almost been a service dog whose job it would have been to help people. She wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone a baby. Please, never, ever a baby.

But what if...

I squinted and moved my head around, looking at the arm from all angles. Something wasn't quite right. I picked up a stick and poked at the thing.

"Oh, thank goodness." I exhaled in relief, sitting back on my heels.

It *was* an arm, but it wasn't a *real* baby's arm. It was plastic. My dog had found, dug up and brought us part of a doll.

I glared at Izzy. She looked back at me, still grinning, tail wagging proudly. It was like she was saying, "I did good! I did so good! Didn't I do good?"

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Then she glanced down at the thing she'd dropped on the grass and looked pointedly back up at me. That was her saying, "*Look* at what I brought you! I did soooooo good! I am *such* a good girl! Treats?"

Silly Izzy!

"It's not real," I assured my friend as I stood up and brushed off my jeans. "It's from a doll."

Jenna's expression changed from terrified to relieved and then to disgusted. "UGH! I thought maybe she got it from the graveyard." She pointed with her thumb over her shoulder toward the cemetery.

Most of the time, we took Izzy to the fenced-in leash-free dog park, but on sunny Saturday mornings like this one, it was packed. We'd gone to the soccer fields beside the forest, and since there hadn't been anyone there, we'd let Izzy off her leash to play. She'd disappeared for a few minutes, but I hadn't been worried. Like always, she'd returned. And, like almost always, with something random she'd found.

Even though I was *very* relieved that my dog hadn't been digging in graves, I rolled my eyes at Jenna for even suggesting it—even though I'd secretly worried about the same thing.

I snapped the leash connector onto the ring of Izzy's collar. "I hope you didn't swipe this off someone, Izzy."

Her only answer was thumps of her tail against the ground. I didn't really think she'd steal a kid's toy. Or part of a toy. Anyway, it was pretty dirty, so it'd probably been in the woods a long time. I wondered if one day she was going to bring back another doll arm. Then a leg. Maybe even the head.

JOANNE LEVY

“Your dog is weird,” Jenna said.

“So weird.” I nodded at my best friend—my best *human* friend. Her left eyebrow was up high on her forehead under her black curls, even as she frowned and shook her head at the dog.

“Last week she found that dirty old glove. Before that it was tennis balls and a water bottle. This is definitely the weirdest thing, though,” Jenna said as she nudged the arm with the toe of her sneaker.

I snorted. “I know. Like, what does she even think we want this junk for?”

“You should keep a list of all the stuff she finds,” Jenna suggested. “It’s all so random.”

“So random!” I agreed. I did like the idea of keeping a list of all the weird things Izzy collected.

“Maaaaybeeee,” Jenna said, stretching out the word as she looked at me sideways, “someday she’ll find a unicorn horn.”

“Wouldn’t that be cool?” I laughed. “It is sort of Izzy’s job to find and bring stuff home, since she’s a Labrador *retriever*. It’s right there in the name of her breed. Although, when I looked it up, it said retrievers are supposed to bring back dead ducks for hunters, not tennis balls and baby-doll arms.”

Jenna frowned. “I hope Izzy doesn’t know that. I hope she never finds a dead duck.”

“Me too,” I said. But I had a feeling Izzy would be sad if she ever found one. She loved every living thing. Still, I said to the grinning dog, “Don’t bring home any dead birds, Izzy.”

More thumps of her tail, which I was pretty sure meant “I won’t! I love birds as much as you do!”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I smiled at her, shaking my head because she was just so cute.

When my parents and Dr. Singh had come up with the idea that I should get a dog—which I thought was the Best Idea Ever!—I’d thought we’d get a little one, like a Yorkie or a Chihuahua. I’d done tons of research on all the best small breeds, so I was prepared for when it came time to pick one out. I’d wanted a puppy that would be easy to take care of, that I could dress up and that would (obviously) sleep in my bed.

I *hadn’t* been prepared for what had happened when I arrived at my dad’s for a visit one weekend and he took me to meet his friends who raised service dogs. In the car on the way there, Dad had told me his friends had a puppy they thought would be perfect for me.

A puppy! For me! I could not have been more excited.

But then, as I was playing with the adorable yellow Lab puppy with chocolate-brown eyes, an adult dog (who was black but had the same chocolaty eyes) had come over to where I was sitting on the floor, lain down beside me and rested her head on my leg with a big sigh. It was like she’d been waiting for me her entire life.

I found out from Dad’s friends that she was a three-year-old dog who had been born there but had failed service-dog training and had never found a forever home. They’d tried to find a family for her, but most people wanted puppies.

That’s when I’d made up my mind. The puppy was cute and all, but Izzy had won my heart from that very first second. Dad said it was a bonus that she was already housetrained and

JOANNE LEVY

knew some commands. At three, she had many years ahead of her, but he still asked me if I was absolutely sure I didn't want a puppy.

I was absolutely sure. I'd never been more sure of anything, especially when I found out she was named Isabella—the name of the most joyful unicorn in my favorite series of books. It was meant to be. She was meant to be mine. We were meant to be together.

I didn't even mind that she was really big and took up most of my bed. Or that she let out stinky farts in the middle of the night. Or that I had to pick up her poop. When someone loves you and snuggles with you when you're sad and never makes you talk about your feelings, you put up with all that other stuff. Even the disgusting stuff.

I rubbed her velvety ears as she leaned into my legs. She deserved it because she *was* a good girl. The *best* girl. I might complain about it out loud, but I kind of loved that she was a treasure hunter. Even if her treasures could sometimes be weird. Life was never boring when Izzy was on the hunt! If there was a unicorn horn out there somewhere, Izzy would definitely find it.

"Come on," Jenna said, looking at her phone. "It's after ten. Isn't your dad picking you up at ten thirty?"

"Uh-oh, yeah," I said, surprised it was so late. We'd been playing Unicorns of Faravelle Forest, a pretend game based on our favorite fantasy novels. We'd been having so much fun galloping around and making up stories, we'd lost track of time.

"What are we supposed to do with that?" I pointed at the doll arm.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Jenna scrunched up her face. “We can’t just leave it here,” she said as she crouched down. “It’s plastic. Bad for the environment.” Jenna was always thinking about the planet—it was one of the things I loved about her.

She slowly reached for it, moaning a little like she didn’t want to touch it at all. I could hardly blame her—it was filthy. And slobbery.

Then she froze. She looked up at me. “Wait. Got any of those little bags?”

“Good idea.” With a nod, I pulled a fresh dog-poop bag (compostable, of course) out of my pocket and fit it over my hand before I bent down again. I used it to pick up the slobbery arm the way I’d pick up Izzy’s “business.” It was gross, but nowhere near as disgusting as dog poop, and I had to pick *that* up every day.

“Thanks,” Jenna said, relieved.

“No problem,” I said as I tied up the bag and shoved it in my pocket to deal with later. “I am, after all, Darylinda, the bravest unicorn in Faravelle Forest!”

Jenna leaned her shoulder into mine. “And I’m Sarabettina, the smartest!”

I gave Jenna the one-horned Faravelle-unicorn salute, touching the back of my wrist to my forehead and pointing my finger up toward the sky. “That’s why we’re best unicorn friends!”

She returned the salute and pawed the ground with her hoof...er...*foot*. “All rainbows lead to Faravelle!” she said with a whinny and then looped her arm into mine.

JOANNE LEVY

Izzy barked, making us laugh. “Oh, Izzy,” I said, giving her head a scratch. “Yes, of course you’re included!” After all, she was the most joyful unicorn in Faravelle Forest.

We galloped home, Izzy jogging happily along beside us.

CHAPTER TWO

When we got to my house, my dad's car was in the driveway. That wasn't weird because he picked Izzy and me up most Saturday mornings so we could spend the weekend with him at his place until I had to go to school on Monday. What *was* weird was that he wasn't in the car. Usually he pulled into the driveway, honked the horn and waited for us to come out.

I wondered why today was different.

Jenna gave me a hug. "See you Monday at school," she said. Then she gave Izzy a scratch on the head like she didn't want to say goodbye to us.

Jenna is an only child, and because of one of her moms' allergies, her only pet is a betta fish. It's pretty and has colorful fins, but it's nowhere near as cool as Izzy. You can't play with a betta fish or take it for a big hike in the woods. It just sits there in its little bowl. Boring.

Sometimes I wished *I* was an only child again. But since my mom had gotten married in November, I now had a new instant family. It was me, Izzy, Mom, Stepbrad (my stepfather named Brad) and Christopher and Matthew, my older stepbrothers who I had to share my bathroom with on the days they were with us.

JOANNE LEVY

Chris, who was fourteen, and Matt, who was a year younger, spent most of their time living with their mom, but when they were in our house, they stuck together and mostly ignored me. I'd tried to be nice to them and treat them like real older brothers, but I must have been doing it wrong because most of the time, they rolled their eyes and gave me pitying looks. Eventually I just stopped trying.

Anyway, while they had each other, I had Izzy.

Having a stepfather wasn't as weird as I'd thought it would be. I'd never love him like I loved my real dad, obviously, but he was always nice to me. And he built cool things in his workshop, like the wood leash holder with Izzy's name on it that now hung by the back door. Plus, he made Mom happy, which was important.

One of the weirdest parts of having this new family was that Stepbrad and the boys weren't Jewish. Mom and I'd had to teach them all about our holidays, like Hanukkah. We'd made latkes, and I'd taught them the prayers over lighting the candles and then we'd played dreidel. I'm pretty sure Chris cheated.

Then they'd taught me all about Christmas, even though I knew most of it from TV and Jenna. But Mom and I had helped decorate their tree while we listened to Christmas songs and ate chocolates. It had been pretty fun.

I put Izzy in the backyard and then entered the house through the side door. I heard grown-up man voices—my dad's and Stepbrad's—but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Hello?" I yelled up the stairs.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

The voices abruptly stopped. Which was weird. Something was definitely going on. I hurried to join them, not bothering to take my shoes off.

“Oh hey, Ruthie,” my dad said as I got to the kitchen. They were sitting across the table from each other, looking really serious. My dad and Stepbrad got along okay, but it wasn’t like they were best friends. It was odd seeing them sitting there together.

They both looked at me strangely. Like *I* was the weird part of this picture.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Dad said, quickly adding, “Ready to go?”

Nothing was going on? Seriously? I recognized a fib when I heard one. Especially the kind that meant there was more to the story but it was grown-up stuff he wasn’t going to tell me about. Please. Did he think I’d forgotten everything we’d been through? All the things they’d hidden from me until they couldn’t anymore?

“Where’s Mom?” I asked suspiciously, looking around.

Stepbrad answered, “In the bathroom. She’s not feeling well.”

“Again?” I looked toward the back of the house. “Did she eat more cheese?” Two days earlier, right after she’d cooked me breakfast, she hadn’t felt well. I was sure she’d snuck some of the cheese she’d sliced for my omelet. Mom was lactose intolerant, so she wasn’t supposed to eat dairy foods. But she loved cheese. I could hardly blame her. What’s not to love about cheese?

And now that I was thinking about it, there was also last Monday, when she’d canceled our weekly bird-watching walk because she’d said she was too tired.

Why were Dad and Stepbrad being so weird?

JOANNE LEVY

Like now, how they looked at each other and then at me. “That’s probably it,” Dad said. “You know your mom and her cheese.”

He laughed, but it sounded fake.

“Anyway, kiddo,” Dad said as he stood up. “Get your stuff. We should be going.”

I went to my room and grabbed my weekend suitcase, but left it in the hall so I could check in on Mom first. I walked through her bedroom to the door of her private bathroom. The one she only had to share with Stepbrad and not two teenage boys.

“Mom?” I said as I knocked on the door. “Are you okay? Dad’s here.”

“Hold on,” she said. I heard a flush and then the faucet turned on. A minute later the door opened. “Hey, Ruthie.” Her face was all blotchy, but she gave me a bit of a smile. Like she was really trying.

“You really shouldn’t eat cheese,” I said, “if it makes you so sick.”

She blinked a few times. “Oh, yeah. I know,” she said and then winked. “But you know me. I love cheese!”

“Dad’s here,” I repeated. “So I’m going. You’ll be okay without me?”

She snorted. “I’ll manage.” She reached down and gave me a big hug. “I love you, Ruthie May,” she said.

“I love you too, Mom. See you Monday. You know, for our bird-watching walk.” She smelled like mouthwash. I let her go and started toward the door to leave.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Right,” she said in a weird tone. “Hey, Ruthie. Can you come back here for a second? I want to talk to you.”

She sat on her bed and patted a spot beside her for me to sit.

“What’s up? Wait,” I said, as a terrible thought occurred to me. “You’re not banning cheese in the house now, are you? When Jenna’s mom Debbie stopped eating sugar, suddenly *no one* was allowed to eat it, and she threw out *everything*.” I was not going to be able to deal if the rest of us couldn’t eat cheese because Mom couldn’t resist it.

She laughed. “No, it’s not a cheese ban. I wouldn’t do that to you. Or to Brad.”

“Oh, good,” I said with a big sigh of relief. “Wait. Is it about bird-watching? Do you not want to go on our walks anymore?”

I held my breath, hoping that wasn’t it. The walk was the one thing we got to do together every week. No matter what.

“No, that’s not it either. I do want to go on our walks, although...maybe we won’t be able to go as often.”

What?

She gave me a side hug and then turned more toward me. Her smile disappeared as she looked into my eyes. “I...we weren’t going to tell you yet. We wanted to tell you and the boys all together, but they’re at their mom’s this weekend and...” She took a deep breath, like she had to really work up to it.

My heart started to race. Whatever it was, Dad knew. That was why he’d come into the house, and it was what he and Stepbrad must have been talking about.

“Tell me what?” I asked, suddenly scared. Whatever she was about to say wasn’t good. You don’t frown when you’re

JOANNE LEVY

telling someone they're going to Disney on vacation. Whatever it was, it was serious news. Serious *bad* news.

Mom sighed and reached for my hand, giving it a squeeze. "You know I love you, right?"

Hub? What is happening? "Yes," I said, my voice suddenly squeaky. "But you're freaking me out, Mom."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," she said. "That's why I didn't want to keep this from you anymore. I *never* like keeping secrets from you, even if it's for good reasons. So...well...I should tell you, the thing that's been making me feel sick recently?"

My brain suddenly filled with a bunch of memory videos. Her feeling sick a couple of nights earlier. Her being too tired to go bird-watching with me. Her in her bathroom just now, puking her guts out. All that, added to Dad and Stepbrad having a serious conversation in the kitchen, could only mean something terrible. Something *really* terrible.

"Do you have cancer?" I whispered as the tears started.

Mom's eyes went wide. "What? Where would you get that idea?"

"Sienna's mom had cancer and had to have surgery and treatments that made her barf all the time. Is that why you've been barfing and are so tired?"

I was suddenly being hugged hard. Really hard. "No, I don't have cancer, Ruthie May," Mom said to the top of my head. "Nothing like that. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Okay," I said, relieved but not completely. "What is it then?" All sorts of other diseases popped into my head. The things kids at school did fundraiser walks for—MS,

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, ALS. I didn't know what all of them were, but I did know none of them were good.

Mom pulled out of the hug. She was holding my shoulders and looking straight into my eyes. She let go of me and wiped one of my tears away with her thumb before it could roll down my face. I wondered if she could hear my heart thumping.

She took a deep breath and kept looking at me until I wanted to scream.

"Mom?"

Then she smiled. *Smiled!* What the...?

She took a long breath and let it out before she blurted, "It's good news, actually. I'm pregnant. You're going to be a big sister, Ruthie."

My stomach felt like it had dropped into my shoes.

This was supposed to be *good* news? How could she say that?

This news was worse than cancer. It was the kind of news I'd finally stopped having nightmares about. And now...

"What? NO! How could you?!" I yelled, and then I jumped up off Mom's bed, yanking out of her grasp when she reached for my wrist. I ran out of her room, down the stairs and out the side door.

I didn't stop running until I got to the dog park.

It was only then that I realized I hadn't stopped to get Izzy, who I now needed more than anything.

Because I had just gotten the worst news in the world.

CHAPTER THREE

There wasn't any reason to go into a dog park without a dog, but there was no way I was going back home either. Not yet. Maybe never.

No, not really. I wouldn't abandon Izzy. Plus, I was eleven. It wasn't like I could get a job and rent myself an apartment.

I walked around the outside of the fenced area and through the woods, not really going anywhere, just wandering. I wished I'd stopped to get Izzy or at least my binoculars, but it was too late for that now.

A while later, before I even realized where my feet had taken me, I was looking up at the giant iron gates of the cemetery.

I'd been there before, of course. Sometimes, if the dog park was too busy, the soccer fields were being used or the trails in the woods were wet and sloppy after a rain, I'd keep Izzy on her leash and we'd walk along the paved paths in the cemetery. It wasn't really scary, although there was one section near the back that I always avoided.

Today, even with my feelings so jumbled up, I found myself going that way. Or maybe I was going that way *because* my

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

feelings were jumbled up. It didn't make sense. It felt like I *needed* to go there, but at the same time I really, really didn't want to.

It made me mad. And sad. And ugh...I didn't know how I felt. Just...not good.

I did know one thing, though, and that was who was responsible for my feelings. Mom. And her terrible news. How could she have done this? And what about Stepbrad? He knew what had happened before. Didn't he care about us at all?

Okay, so I was mad at both of them. Like, seventy-eight percent at Mom and the rest at Stepbrad.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to push my angry thoughts away as I walked down the path. It didn't feel right to be angry here. The people I was mad at weren't here.

The paths were like tiny smooth roads for golf carts. But instead of weaving along golf greens, these paths were lined by graves. I didn't look at the headstones because it felt weird reading about the people who were buried there. Like it was an invasion of their privacy or something. I knew that didn't make sense, but still.

As I walked, I listened to all the birds up in the trees. I didn't even have to see them to know which ones were singing—the short chirps and *pew-pew-pew* of cardinals, the rattle of a woodpecker, the whinny of a robin and a couple of chickadees calling to each other: *chicka-dee-dee-dee*. And yes, that's how they'd gotten their name—I had looked it up.

I was still mad, but hearing the birds made me feel a little calmer. Still angry but not out-of-control-want-to-stamp-my-feet angry. I didn't know how Dr. Singh had known that

JOANNE LEVY

bird-watching would be something Mom and I would actually like doing together, but whatever. She'd been right about a lot of things, so it made sense.

"Are you okay?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. For half a second I thought one of the gravestones—or someone buried underneath one—had spoken to me.

Holding my breath, I turned toward the voice. I was relieved to see a real live woman not far from me. I'd seen her a few times before, sitting on the bench in the middle of the cemetery. A weird place to hang out, but she wasn't hurting anyone.

She had a pen in her hand, a red notebook on her lap and a giant purse on the seat beside her. She was about my bubby's age (which was fifty-nine) and had short reddish-brown hair with streaks of gray through it. She wore cat-eye glasses on her scrunched-up face, and deep lines ran across her forehead.

It occurred to me that maybe her face was scrunched up because she'd asked me a question and I, obviously emotional, hadn't answered. I stared at her while I tried to figure out what to say. Or if I should speak to her at all.

As upset as I was, I knew it was rude to just gawk at her and not answer her question.

"No. I'm not all right. I'm the total opposite of all right," I said finally. Then added, "But thank you for asking."

"Oh," the woman said, her brow creasing even more. "I'm sorry."

I shrugged. She wasn't the one who should be sorry. I wiped my tears with the sleeve of my T-shirt, wishing I had

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

an actual tissue so I could blow my snotty nose. Tears were okay to wipe on my shirt, but that was where I drew the line.

Like she'd read my mind, the woman reached into her purse and pulled out a tissue, holding it out to me.

"Thanks," I muttered as I stepped forward and plucked it from her hand. I pressed it against my eyes. It smelled lightly perfumed, sort of like my mom's makeup. Which just made me cry more.

The woman tucked her purse against her side, making room on the bench. She pointed toward the empty spot. "Would you like to sit for a minute? Maybe talk about it?"

Talk about it? If I'd wanted to talk about it, I wouldn't have run out of my house!

Not that she could know that. But why was she so interested? Was she some sort of graveyard therapist or something? So weird. And what was she even doing there, just randomly sitting on a bench in a cemetery, writing in a notebook?

"No, thanks," I said. "Thanks for the Kleenex. I have to go. Bye."

I turned toward the part of the graveyard I normally avoided. At first I walked with purpose. But then my feet decided to slow down as I got closer.

Then they just stopped. I couldn't go any farther. I totally chickened out.

Now I wasn't just sad. I was also angry at myself for being a coward. Looking around, I noticed another bench in the opposite direction from the lady. Being careful not to step over any graves, I walked over to it and sat down.

JOANNE LEVY

I sat there a while, focusing on the birds chirping around me. I heard the beeping of a red-breasted nuthatch and watched as it scuttled down a tree trunk upside down, its beak facing the ground.

After it fluttered off, I took a few deep breaths and then looked toward the grave I was avoiding.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I just can’t. I’m *not* the bravest unicorn in Faravelle Forest after all.”

I buried my face in my hands and cried for a long time, thinking about what had happened three years earlier. Before I’d gotten Izzy. Back when Mom and Dad were still married. It was just before I’d turned nine. Before I’d even really understood what was happening to our family. Things I’d never wanted to think about again. Things I’d thought were in the past. Things that had turned my life upside down in the worst ways.

And mostly I thought about what it meant now that my mother was pregnant and how it was all going to happen again. My life had finally started to be normal, and now this.

A while later, when I was all cried out, I heard a soft snuffle that wasn’t my own, followed by a gentle yip. I dabbed at my eyes with the tattered tissue before I sniffed and looked up. There was Izzy, her mouth open in her doggy grin, tongue hanging out the side. She was panting hard. She must have run all the way from home to find me.

She shoved her wet nose into my hand, and I suddenly felt so much love for her that my heart ached and felt too small to hold it all in. She’d known. Somehow she’d known that I needed her, and she had come to find me.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I hoped she hadn't dug her way out under the fence again, though. Stepbrad would not be happy if he had to fill in that hole a third time.

"Ruthie?"

I looked up. My dad was walking up the path toward me, Izzy's leash in his hand.

Oh. I smothered a sigh. Izzy I was very happy to see, but my dad? Not so much. Didn't he understand I'd run away for a reason?

"Good girl, Izzy," Dad said, giving the dog a scratch behind her right ear before he sat down on the bench beside me. "She really is great at finding things—and people. She could be a search and rescue dog."

He was right, of course. Izzy was the best at finding stuff. But at that moment I hadn't wanted to be found. Well, maybe by her, but not by anyone who was going to want to talk. And Dad was *definitely* going to want to talk. Dad always wanted to talk.

As if on cue, he took a deep breath. "So...I'm not going to ask if you're okay."

"Good plan," I said. Although his *not* asking was just a different way of asking.

He put an arm around me, pulling me into his side. His T-shirt smelled nice, like he'd just pulled it out of the dryer. I took a deep breath, and it made me feel better. Even though I knew I wasn't going to like what came next.

"Look, Ruthie," he started.

I instantly felt terrible again. "Can we not talk about it?"

JOANNE LEVY

“Ruthie, I think we—”

“Dad,” I barked. “I. Don’t. Want. To. Talk about it. Please!”

Izzy whined, shoving her muzzle against my hand. She got it. Why couldn’t my father?

“Ruthie, your mom—”

Seriously? I was so done. I shrugged out from under his arm. “My mom is selfish and stupid.”

“Ruthie!” His eyes widened. “Don’t say that. Your mom isn’t selfish, and she’s definitely not stupid.”

Izzy leaned against my leg and whimpered again. Automatically I put my hand on her head to soothe her. “Why else would she want to have a baby?”

“She’s—” Dad sighed. “Wanting that doesn’t make her selfish or stupid. It’s complicated, honey.”

“No it’s not!” I said, angry tears welling up in my eyes again. “It’s not complicated at all. Last time this happened, it ruined everything! It’s why you got divorced.” I didn’t wait for him to respond, blurting out, “I know it is, so don’t pretend. It’s why she—” I couldn’t even finish what I was going to say. But of course Dad knew—he’d been there too.

“Ruthie, it’s not that simple.”

“It *is* that simple,” I said. “She has me. Now she has Christopher and Matthew. She has a big family now—isn’t that enough? Why does everything have to change?”

When he didn’t answer, I looked up at him, squinting because the sun was blazing into my eyes. He looked as sad as I felt. He even had tears in his eyes too. Or maybe it was just a trick of the light.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“I don’t think it’s a matter of enough,” he finally said. “I don’t want to speak for your mom, though. Let’s go back and you can talk it out with her. She’s the one you should be asking these questions.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I’m not ready to talk about it. I’m too... emotional.”

“That’s fair,” Dad said. “And I understand. You two do need to talk about this, and she’s very worried about you. But you have a right to take some time and space to sort out your feelings.”

“Thanks,” I said, appreciating that he’d given me at least that much. I sniffed, and we sat there for a long few minutes, listening to the birds and looking out over the gravestones. It might have seemed peaceful and nice if it weren’t for what I’d just learned and the fact that we were in the middle of a cemetery.

“Ready to go?” Dad asked a while later as he stood up. “Izzy, come.”

Obediently Izzy sat in front of him so he could snap the leash on her collar. He handed me the loop at the other end.

“Hold on,” Dad said when I turned to leave the cemetery.

I knew where he wanted to go. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him I didn’t want to go there, so I fell into step with him as we walked over to that back section. The exact place I’d been avoiding. With him beside me, I felt a little braver.

When we got to the grave, Dad crouched down and picked up a rock. He put it on top of the little gray headstone, beside all the others that were there, signifying that people had been to visit. Izzy sat on the grass while I bent down and picked up a rock of my own to place beside Dad’s.

JOANNE LEVY

I read the engraved words on the headstone, but it wasn't like I was learning anything new. I already knew it all by heart. I'd been there on the day they took the cover off the stone, months after the funeral. Of course, I'd been at that too.

Dad returned to my side and reached for my hand, giving it a squeeze as we both stared at the headstone.

After a few long, quiet moments, Dad squeezed my hand again. "We should go," he said in a soft voice filled with sadness.

We turned to leave, starting back down the path toward the gates. I had Izzy's leash in one hand, and Dad still held on to the other. I didn't mind. Not here, especially with the news about Mom and how everything was going to fall apart again. Him holding on to me made me feel I wouldn't fly away like a helium balloon.

"Why would she do this?" I asked, my breath hitching. "You don't like it either, do you?"

Dad didn't answer for a long time. "It's not for me to like or dislike. It's what she's wanted for a long time." He let go of my hand, which felt like the worst thing until his arm came around me and he pulled me close. "But if I'm being honest, I'm a little worried."

I was *a lot* worried. "Why can't I be enough?" I asked as I mashed my face into his shirt, not even caring that I was soaking it with tears.

"You are," Dad said strongly, giving me a squeeze. "You are everything I ever wanted. You know I love you. We both love you, Ruthie."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“I know, Dad. I know I’m enough for you,” I said, sniffing. “But not for her.”

He took a deep breath. “It isn’t about you not being enough. Your mother always wanted a big family. It’s hard to explain the longing to be a parent. I guess it’s sort of like loving a kid in advance and needing somewhere for that love to go...”

His voice trailed off, and I knew his thoughts were still back at that grave. I didn’t know what else to say, so I kept quiet as we continued toward the gates.

We passed by the other bench, but the lady was gone.

“How did you know where I’d be?” I asked. Especially when *I* hadn’t even known my feet would bring me here.

He sighed. “I wasn’t sure, but, well, it’s where I wanted to come when your mom told me the news. But, of course, Izzy helped.” He smiled down at the dog, who was busy sniffing the ground as she walked. “As soon as I got through the gates, she knew you were here. She yipped and yanked at me until I let her off her leash.” He laughed a little.

“Dad?” I asked.

“Yeah, Ruthie?”

“Do you think about him a lot?”

“I do. Every day.”

“It makes my heart hurt that I never even got to meet my little brother.”

“Me too, Ruthie,” Dad said sadly as he pulled me even closer. “Me too.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“So then what did your mom say when you got home after running off?” Jenna asked at the end of my story.

It was Monday morning, and we were on the bus to school. Jenna had asked me how the rest of my weekend at my dad’s had been, like she always did on Monday mornings. I had planned to just say “fine” like usual (because not much ever happened at my dad’s that was worth talking about). But my mouth had different plans, and I’d blurted out that my mom was pregnant and then told her about all the drama that had happened after the big announcement.

Even though I hadn’t meant to tell her, I felt better after I had.

“She didn’t say much.” I shrugged. “Dad came in the house with me to get my stuff, and I told her I wasn’t ready to talk about it. I said I was still processing.” I’d learned about things like “processing emotions” when my parents made me go to therapy with Dr. Singh after my brother died.

Jenna nodded. “You’re so lucky, though,” she said with a sigh.

Lucky? I frowned at her. “Did you not hear what I just told you?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Yes, but, um...” She seemed confused, like it wasn’t obvious.

I looked around, but no other kids on the bus were paying any attention. Still, I leaned close and whispered, “The last time my mother got pregnant, the baby died inside her, before he was even born. Then *she* got really sick too. And then, when it looked like she would get better, my parents split up. Don’t you remember?” How could she think any of this made me lucky?

Jenna pursed her lips as she frowned back at me. “I know. But that probably won’t happen again. And then you’ll have a new baby sibling. That’s what I meant.”

“Jenna, my mom got depressed. She basically couldn’t get out of bed for *weeks*,” I said, my voice squeaky. I had to change the subject quickly or I was going to be in a full-on meltdown by the time we got to school. “My entire life became the worst, and there was nothing I could do about it. Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s like that time in Unicorns book four,” Jenna said, because why *wouldn’t* she ignore me when I said I didn’t want to talk about it. “Remember? When Darylinda was just learning how to fly and fell and broke her horn and was afraid to try again. But then she did. And when she flew to the top of Sparkle Mountain, the magical goat declared her the bravest unicorn. And then he healed her horn so it was even stronger and more magical than ever before.”

Of course I remembered. Book four was our favorite Unicorns of Faravelle Forest book (so far). We’d acted out that exact scene a million times. But...

JOANNE LEVY

“Jenna, that isn’t real. None of that really happened. Unicorns aren’t real. My mom isn’t a unicorn, and neither is a baby. They can’t just go to the top of a pretend mountain and get healed by a magic goat. Life isn’t like that. You can’t just make everything be okay with magic.”

Jenna’s eyes went wide like *I* was the one who was being ridiculous. “I know that. Of course I do, Ruthie! But...it’s not really about the goat, is it? The book is about trying again, and about good things happening even though the first time didn’t work out. Like a do-over.”

“The baby died, Jenna. My baby brother *died*. You don’t get a do-over when someone dies!” How did she not get that?

She opened her mouth to say something else, but I cut her off. “Don’t,” I said. “I don’t want to hear it, okay?”

“But Ruthie—”

“Please! I said don’t.” I turned away from her, staring out the window as the bus finally turned into the school parking lot. She got the hint and stopped talking. But it didn’t matter. I was already ruined for the day. I couldn’t face school. I couldn’t face her. I just...nope.

When we got off the bus, I didn’t follow her toward our lockers. Instead I went in the opposite direction, ignoring her when she kept calling my name.

I went straight to the school office and up to the tall counter. The secretary, Ms. Middleton, looked up from her computer on the other side. “Can I help you?”

“I need to go home,” I said, reaching for a tissue from a box on the counter.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Ms. Middleton got out of her chair and came up to the counter, taking one look at my face—eyes wet with tears, my cheeks probably covered in red blotches—and nodded. I had been ready to fake sick but was relieved I wouldn't have to.

“Ruth Sydner, right?” she said.

I nodded. “My dad is Ken Sydner. He works from home, so he'll come pick me up.”

“Have a seat,” she said, pointing at the bench along the wall. “I'll give him a call.”

She returned to her desk while I sat down and used the tissue to mop up my tears and then blow my nose. A few minutes later she returned to the counter. “Your mom will be here shortly.”

What? No! “You were supposed to call my dad!” I said, louder than I'd meant to.

Ms. Middleton's eyebrows went up. “I beg your pardon, young lady, but your father said he was in an important meeting and suggested that since it's your mother's day off, she could come get you.”

Ugh. I may as well have gone to class! I still wasn't ready to talk to my mother, and now I would have the whole day with her—a nurse, who was definitely going to know I wasn't really sick.

“I think I'm feeling better,” I said to the secretary, giving her what I hoped was a big convincing smile and also hoping she wouldn't notice my sudden hiccups. “Maybe I'll just go to class.”

JOANNE LEVY

Ms. Middleton looked at me suspiciously. She crossed her arms, looking very much like my mom when I was getting busted for something. Like faking being sick. “Your mother is on her way. I suggest you take this up with her.”

Sigh.

CHAPTER FIVE

“So,” Mom said as I buckled up in the passenger seat beside her. “Are you really sick?”

I froze, thinking about my answer. It wouldn't take much for her to figure out I was fine, so telling the truth was probably the best way to keep from getting grounded. I was *already* at risk of getting grounded. But lying about being sick, making her come to school to pick me up, getting *caught* faking *and then* trying to cover that up with lying would be worse. Way worse.

“Not really,” I said with a sigh. “Just...I couldn't deal today.”

“All right,” she said, not sounding all that mad as she started the car. “Thank you for being honest with me. Sounds like you wanted a mental health day?”

Yes, but with Dad and Izzy, I didn't say. I just nodded as I looked out the window. At least she understood. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. She'd had plenty of days when she couldn't deal.

“I understand, you know,” she said, reading my mind. “But we do need to talk about all this, Ruthie.”

JOANNE LEVY

I sighed again.

“But,” she added before I could say anything more, “it’s a lot to process, I know. Believe me, it is for me too, which I’m sure sounds odd.”

It did.

She backed the car out of the parking spot and put her left blinker on when we got to the road. “So if you’re not ready—”

“I’m not,” I said, still looking out the window.

“Okay,” she said. And then *she* sighed. “You know what? I need a mental health day too. Let’s make an appointment to talk about the hard stuff tonight after dinner. Today is just for having fun and putting all that on pause. How does that sound?”

I turned toward her. “Really?”

“Really. We can do whatever you like today. Your choice.”

Was she serious? She was really going to let me skip school *and* take me wherever I wanted for a whole day off?

“It’s a beautiful day. We can go on an extended birding walk,” she said with a smile. “We can stop at home and get our binoculars and sunscreen.”

I normally liked our bird-watching walks—we went nearly every Monday after school, since it was her day off—but it meant a lot of intense one-on-one time. And *that* meant unavoidable talking. So, while I did like the idea of getting outside and hunting birds with my binoculars, Izzy by my side, I definitely did not want to do it with my mom today.

“How about the mall?” I suggested, sure she was going to say no because she hates the mall.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

She smiled at me, and not even one of those half smiles that said she wasn't all that happy about what she was agreeing to. "I said your choice, didn't I?"

"So..." I looked at her sideways. "Orange Julius?" Orange Julius was my favorite.

"Obviously," she said. "Although I'll have to skip the hot dog. Nitrates and all."

I didn't know what that meant, but it wasn't like she'd said *I* couldn't have a hot dog. "What about the pet shop?"

Her eyebrows went up. "Your dog has more toys than any dog could ever need, but if you want to go, I'm in. Yes, Ruthie, I said whatever you want to do."

She wasn't wrong about all the toys. And Izzy kept finding more at the park, so her collection was growing. But I still loved looking.

"What about the bookstore?" Because it wouldn't be a trip to the mall without a stop at the bookstore, would it?

"Sure," Mom said. "A mental health day for me definitely includes some trashy celebrity mags." Mom changed her blinker from the left one to the right, and off we went.



It was too early for lunch, so we started at the pet store. Mom was super patient and only tapped her foot a few times when I couldn't decide what toy to get for Izzy. When she reminded me that Izzy didn't need any more toys, so if I wanted to get her anything it would be out of my allowance,

JOANNE LEVY

I realized she was probably right. It was still fun to look around, though.

Then we went to the bookstore, where I strode right to the kids' fantasy section. I scanned the spines until I got to the *M* shelf.

There it was. A whole section of books with the familiar spines that all matched: *The Unicorns of Faravelle Forest* by Lexi Marks. There were five copies of book one and a couple each of the rest, up to book seven.

Humph. Still no book eight. I looked around in case it was mixed up with some other books in the next section over, but no. I weaved through the aisles to a self-serve computer kiosk to look it up, just like at the library. I typed in *Unicorns of Faravelle Forest* and hit the Search button.

Just like I'd discovered on the shelves, the store had only books one through seven.

There had been a chapter from book eight at the end of book seven. And a note that read *Book 8 coming soon!* That was almost a year ago! I knew it had been that long because my grandmother had bought me the book for my birthday. She'd known it would be the best birthday present—not just because I'd asked for it, but because she was the one who had first introduced me to the books, and since then I'd become Lexi Marks's number one fan.

When she'd given it to me, Bubby had said that it was an *extra* special one because she'd gotten it signed by the author. Then she'd winked.

Right, I'd thought. Like my grandmother had tracked down the famously mysterious and reclusive Lexi Marks and gotten her to sign a book just for me.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

After we'd finished book five, Jenna and I had decided to send Lexi a message to tell her we were her biggest fans, but we had found only a mailing address for her publisher. We figured that meant some assistant would read it and probably not answer. The real Lexi Marks would likely never even see our messages. So why bother? And really, snail mail? Who used that? But my bubby hadn't had any trouble tracking her down? Uh-huh. Real believable.

The inscription on the book said *For Ruthie May—All rainbows lead to Faravelle! Yours in sparkle, Lexi Marks.*

Bubby had probably written it herself, but it was one of those it's-the-thought-that-counts situations. Like on Hanukkah when she'd bought me socks for night four and I'd had to pretend to be happy and grateful. About plain socks. (They hadn't even had unicorns or birds on them!) Mom had said I did a great job pretending and that I took after my grandfather and maybe had a career in acting ahead of me. I had rolled my eyes and reminded her I was going to be a famous author. Just like Lexi Marks.

Speaking of Lexi, seriously, where was book eight?

While Mom strolled up and down the aisles in the romance section, I looked for a store employee. When I couldn't find anyone in the kids' area, I went up to the checkout counter and waited in line.

"What can I help you with?" the clerk asked with a smile when I got to her counter. She was older than a teenager but not as old as my mom. She had dark skin and pretty, yellow, thick-framed glasses.

JOANNE LEVY

“I love your glasses,” I said.

She smiled and adjusted them on her nose. “Thanks.”

“Do you know when the next Unicorns of Faravelle Forest is going to come out? Number eight? I have numbers one through seven already.”

She nodded knowingly and turned to her computer. “Those books are very popular at this store, as you can imagine.”

I nodded. “Well, they are the best books in the world. That probably has something to do with it.”

She smiled as she typed on her computer. “It shows a release date of next month.”

I couldn’t help the squeal of excitement that came out of my mouth.

“But wait...” The clerk’s face fell. “Oh, I’m sorry. It looks like it got canceled.”

“What?” My stomach lurched. “Canceled? How can that be?”

She turned from her computer to look at me. “It doesn’t say anything else. No rescheduled date or anything at all. I’m really sorry.”

“Is that it, then? No more unicorns?”

“I honestly don’t know.” She shrugged. “There are plenty of other books here you might like, though.”

Mom came up beside me. “What’s wrong?”

“The next Unicorns of Faravelle Forest book. It was canceled!”

“Oh,” Mom said. “That’s too bad. But maybe you could find something else.” She nodded toward the back of the store where the kids’ books were. “There’s plenty to choose from.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“No,” I said. “I’m too sad. I can’t even consider reading something else.”

“Ruthie,” Mom said. “You can enjoy other books, can’t you? I’m sure there are plenty of others that you’ll like.” She looked at the clerk for help.

“Is it just unicorns you’re into?” the woman asked me. “Or all mythical creatures and fantasy?”

I shrugged.

She reached for the phone on her counter. “I can call over to the kids’ section. I’m sure Trina is back from her break now and would be happy to suggest—”

“No, thank you,” I said, trying my best to be polite. Weren’t they listening? “This is terrible news. I need to process.”

“Ruthie,” Mom said. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

I looked at her, and it was like she didn’t get me at all. Plus, who was she to tell *me* not to be dramatic? “You said this was my day. If I don’t want to look at other books, isn’t that up to me?”

She took a deep breath, and I thought she was going to argue, but in the end she just let the breath out slowly and said, “I’m sorry. You’re right. If you don’t want anything, that’s fine. But let me go get a magazine.”

She turned and walked toward the big wall of magazines, leaving me at the front of the store. It didn’t take long for me to realize I was in the way of the line, so I moved aside toward a big carousel display of notebooks. I spun it around. I wasn’t really interested—it was just something to do.

Then something caught my eye. I gasped as I grabbed the rack to stop it from turning. The most beautiful and perfect

JOANNE LEVY

notebook in the world had landed right in front of my face. It had the cutest painted picture of a black dog on the cover, tongue hanging out the side, soulful brown eyes looking right at me. Even if I had the best art skills ever, I couldn't have painted a more perfect picture of Izzy.

It was a sign. This would be the journal of all the things Izzy found on our walks.

I squealed a little as I took the notebook off the rack, and I couldn't help but hug it to my chest. Then I got worried the clerk was going to think I was about to steal it, so I turned toward her. "My mom's going to buy this for me," I called out as I held the notebook up over my head.

She hadn't even been looking at me, but she glanced up and nodded.

When Mom finally returned with two glossy magazines in her hand, I was waiting impatiently, shifting my weight from foot to foot. I was still devastated about the Unicorns book but, at the same time, excited about the journal. I had learned in therapy that sometimes feelings are complicated.

"What's that?" Mom jerked her chin toward me.

I showed her the notebook. "Isn't it perfect?"

Her eyebrows went up and she nodded. "Is that a diary to write down your feelings in? Like Dr. Singh suggested in therapy? That's a fantastic idea, Ruthie."

I stared at her. It had been a long time since we'd gone to therapy. So while I remembered some of what I'd learned—like that feelings could be complicated—I didn't remember

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Dr. Singh suggesting I keep a diary. Did Mom really want me to write about my feelings? Because yeah, no thanks.

"I...I don't know," I finally said, worried that if I told her what I actually wanted the book for, she'd think it was a silly idea and make me put it back on the rack. "I hadn't really thought about what I would do with it. I just love that it has Izzy on the front." I pointed at the cover. "Maybe I *will* write my feelings in it. Or what birds we see on our walks. I don't know yet, but please can I have it?"

"All right then," she said. "Come on. I'm ready for Orange Julius."

"Isn't it going to give you a stomachache?" I said as we took our things up to the counter. "Because there's dairy in Orange Julius."

She gave me a lopsided grin. "Probably. Still worth it."

"It's not going to make you barf, is it?" I asked as the clerk scanned our stuff. "You know, because..." I gestured toward her belly.

Mom cringed and glanced at the clerk, then back at me. "Hard to say, really. But probably not from the dairy, if that's what you're asking."

Mom got one of her reusable shopping bags out of her purse, and I slipped our stuff inside before looping the handle over my wrist.

The clerk wished us a good rest of our day and we went back out into the mall and started to make our way toward the food court. "So wait," I said, a thought suddenly occurring to

JOANNE LEVY

me. “Those other times when you said it was cheese making you sick?”

Mom had a guilty look on her face. “It wasn’t cheese. Morning sickness. Or...all-day sickness, I guess.”

“Why does that happen?” I asked.

Mom shrugged. “Hormones. You know what havoc hormones can wreak on a body.”

I’d been getting my period for only a few months, but yeah, I knew all about how awful hormones could be. Still, I’d never thrown up from them.

I took a deep breath. “So...it’s not a sign that things are going wrong?”

“Not at all,” she rushed to say. “It’s a very normal part of pregnancy.”

“And barfing won’t hurt the baby?” I glanced down at her belly.

“No,” she said. “I’m staying hydrated and taking vitamins. Doing everything to keep us healthy.”

“*Us*,” I said. It sounded so weird for her to refer to herself and the thing growing inside her as *us*. There had been an *us* before. Until it had become just a *her*.

Mom sighed. “I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you the truth sooner, Ruthie. I wanted to be very sure. The morning sickness should taper off soon. It rarely lasts past the first trimester—three months.”

Us. Trimester. Morning sickness. It really was happening. My mom really was pregnant. We were going to go through all of this again.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“But it’s a nice surprise, isn’t it?” she asked, sounding so hopeful.

“I don’t like surprises,” I said. Especially surprises that meant my life was going to be turned upside down again.

“I guess I knew that,” Mom said as she put her arm around me and squished me into her as we walked. “We’ll talk about all this later, okay? Let’s focus on the fun stuff right now.”

“Okay,” I squeaked out.

But how could I have fun when all I could think about were bad things? The worst things. Like how I was terrified that this time I might lose not just a brother I’d never even get to meet but my mom too? No matter what happened, nothing would ever be the same again. And there was not one thing I could do about it.

CHAPTER SIX

Somehow I managed to mostly push all the bad junk away for the rest of the afternoon. Food helped. I snarfed a hot dog and a giant Orange Julius. Mom changed her mind at the last minute and just had a decaf coffee and a toasted bagel. Boring. But, not wanting her to barf, I supported her choices, no matter how sad.

After we ate, we walked around the mall for a while until it was time to pick up Izzy at Dad's house. When we got into the car, I glanced at the clock and calculated that I had maybe three hours until I'd have to have that awful talk with Mom. Not like it would change anything. So really, what was even the point?

When Mom pulled into the driveway of Dad's townhouse, I jumped out of the car and used the code on the door to let myself in.

"Hello! It's me!"

Only a second later I heard the excited *yip* and *thump, thump, thump* that was Izzy rushing down the stairs, then it was the click and scrape of doggie toenails on the floor as she rushed to greet me. I felt bad that she always slid around on

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

the hard tile floors, but it never stopped her from sprinting at me like a puppy, even though she was six, which Dad said was middle-aged for a dog. Not that she acted her age—she would have knocked me over if I hadn't been expecting it.

Every. Single. Time. Even if I'd been gone for only five minutes.

I loved that she was always so excited to see me. I toed off my shoes and then crouched down to give her a scratch while she sniffed at me.

“What you're smelling,” I began, “is the mall. And maybe hot-dog molecules.” Probably that, since she seemed so interested.

“Hey, Ruthie,” Dad said as he came down the hall. “Feeling better?”

Even though they were divorced, Mom and Dad still talked a lot. If I told the truth to one, I had to tell the other. “I wasn't really sick,” I said, adding, “Taking a mental health day.”

He nodded like he wasn't at all surprised to hear it—Mom had probably texted him when I'd been busy looking at dog toys. “And you and your mom are okay?”

I crossed my arms and tilted my head. “Did you make up a meeting so we would have to spend the day together?”

“No,” he said, folding his own arms. “I really did have a meeting with my team, and since your mom was off today...”

Dad was the boss of a technical writing firm. He and his employees worked for a lot of different companies, doing their websites and pamphlets and even things like Instagram. I didn't know exactly what he did, but I did know that Zoom

JOANNE LEVY

meetings were a big part of it. I decided it was believable that he'd had a meeting that morning.

"Okay," I said, starting toward the stairs. "I'm just going to get our stuff."

"Did you and your mom talk, though?" Dad asked before I could get past him.

"Not really. We put it on pause," I said, then quickly added, "Which means I don't have to talk about it until way later. With *anyone*."

He must have gotten the hint, because he nodded and stepped aside so I could get my stuff from my room.

When I returned, Dad had Izzy in her collar and leashed, ready to go. I slipped into my shoes and gave Dad a big hug.

"See you Wednesday," he said.

Dad always picked me up on Wednesdays for a midweek dinner and sleepover. It was also chicken wing night at O'Flannery's, the pub around the corner from his place, so we went there for wings and beer (root for me, real for him) and then walked back and watched a movie that I got to pick. It was nice not having to negotiate with Mom, Stepbrad and my new stepbrothers for what to watch. I was always outvoted and got stuck watching superhero movies or stuff with lots of car chases that seemed to go on forever.

"Hey, Ruthie?" Dad said as I was reaching for the door.

I stopped and turned back around. "Yeah?"

He frowned. "Just...be open-minded and listen, okay? Your mom really wants you to be happy about this. Just try to see her side."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Was he kidding me right now? His serious face said he wasn't. Of course he hadn't forgotten what had happened. But how could he be so calm? Was it because he wasn't married to her anymore?

If he were, would *he* be open-minded? Would she even have gotten pregnant? They'd never told me exactly why they'd got divorced, except to say it had nothing to do with me. I knew that was true. But seriously. I didn't need them to say out loud that most of the reason they had broken up was because of what had happened to the baby. It had to have been.

They were friends now—or, I guess, whatever divorced people were. I knew he still liked her, maybe even still loved her a little. They always got along when they came together to my school stuff. Even when I'd done a play at the Jewish Community Center and looked out at the audience, I'd seen them sitting together and chatting like normal people. I'd thought maybe they'd get back together.

Until Stepbrad came along, and I knew for sure that we'd never be a real family again. I'd figured at least she had the three kids she'd always wanted.

I'd been so wrong.

I wanted to yell and argue and jump up and down because it was stupid and unfair. I still wasn't ready to talk to her about it. Or be open-minded. Or even pretend I'd ever be happy.

But all I could do was nod and say, "I'll try, Dad."



JOANNE LEVY

We got home not much later than the school bus would have dropped me off and found Jenna sitting on our front porch stairs. When I thought back to how I'd run off right after we'd gotten off the bus that morning, I wasn't really all that surprised.

I got out of the car and opened the back door for Izzy. She jumped out and ran right up to Jenna, her tail wagging in happiness as she greeted her. She couldn't know that I was still a bit miffed at Jenna and her lack of understanding. Still, it bugged me a little that my dog couldn't read my mind.

Jenna laughed at Izzy's enthusiasm and stood up to pet her. But then she looked at me, and her smile fizzled away.

Mom waved. "Hi, Jenna. Hope you weren't waiting long."

Jenna shook her head. "Hi. Um, no, just a few minutes. Maybe...could we take Izzy for a walk?" she said, looking straight at me.

I grabbed Izzy's leash from the back seat and snapped it onto her collar. "Yeah. Good idea."

"I guess that answers my question about our birding walk," Mom said.

I glanced over at Jenna and then back at my mother, giving her an apologetic look.

She waved it off. "It's fine. But don't be too long, please." She grabbed my weekend suitcase and our bag of stuff from the mall. "I could use some help with dinner and the boys have softball after school."

I nodded and then looked at Jenna. "Let's go to the park."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

As we started out, Izzy dropped her nose to the ground, sniffing as she walked, sucking up all the scent molecules. I wondered what she did with all that information.

“Are you mad at me?” Jenna asked.

I looked over at her. “Huh?”

She nodded, biting her lip. “You didn’t seem sick on the bus. But then you bailed right when we got to school. And we’d been talking, so...”

“No,” I said. “Not really mad, just...” I glanced over my shoulder. We were several houses away from mine, and Mom had gone inside anyway. “I wish you understood why I hate that my mom is pregnant.”

Jenna raised her eyebrows at me. “But this time will probably be different.”

I shook my head. “This is why I bailed on school today, Jenna. I didn’t want to think about it, and I definitely didn’t want to talk about it. Not about the last time and especially not about *this* time. I don’t want to think about *probablys*.”

She exhaled. “Okay. I guess I understand.”

It didn’t sound like she did. But whatever.

She changed the subject. “So what did you do all day?”

I told her how Mom and I had taken a mental health day at the mall. She was jealous, not understanding that I would rather have stayed in school if it meant Mom wasn’t pregnant.

“Oh, and hey,” I said. “We went to the bookstore and I asked about Unicorns.”

“Yeah?” Jenna’s eyes lit up.

“Don’t get excited,” I said. “Book eight was canceled.”

JOANNE LEVY

“Canceled?” Her expression of joy melted into one of sadness and confusion. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged, just as heartbroken. “Just like it sounds. The lady at the bookstore said it was supposed to come out next month but got canceled. She didn’t know why.”

“Did she google the author?” Jenna asked.

“I don’t think so. I guess we could again, though.” There was a time when I’d googled *Lexi Marks* and *Unicorns of Faravelle Forest* nearly every day, holding my breath, waiting for a release date for book eight. But after a while, when there was nothing new, I’d stopped looking so often.

“I’m on it,” she said with a decisive nod. “I have to do my book report tonight anyway. I’ll see what I can find out.”

I gave her the unicorn salute. “Should we gallop to the forest, Sarabettina?”

“That’s a grand idea, Darylinda!” Jenna said, adding a loud whinny. Izzy yipped happily, always eager to join in, making us both laugh.

“All rainbows lead to Faravelle!” we yelled together and galloped the rest of the way to the park.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dinner started out pretty normal. I mean, as normal as dinner can be when you're filled with dread.

It was meatless Monday, which meant we were having grilled vegetables and fake chicken fingers. I normally liked the fake chicken. But today it tasted like...well, I didn't know, because I barely touched it. I mostly moved the veggies around on my plate, spearing a piece of sweet potato every so often because it was my favorite. But even that was forced.

If anyone noticed I wasn't eating or talking much, they didn't let on. Stepbrad asked the boys how softball practice went. Chris—the chattier and older of my two newish stepbrothers—gave Stepbrad a play-by-play of the practice. He talked about every single one of his pitches and who he had struck out, blah, blah, blah. I wasn't about to complain, though, because it meant I didn't have to say anything.

I mostly tuned out, working on my escape plan. If I finished dinner quickly and left to take a bath, I could avoid the talk altogether. Or maybe Mom would feel sick and would postpone it anyway. Not that I *wanted* her to be sick, but if she just happened to be, it wouldn't be my fault.

JOANNE LEVY

I glanced over at her. She was eating and smiling. Looking happy and healthy. Not at all like she was going to lose her lunch. Or, I guess, dinner.

The bath thing was going to be my best option. We were almost done eating, but I wasn't allowed to leave until everyone was finished and the table was cleared. It was Chris's turn to scrape and stack the dishes in the dishwasher, but he was busy going on and on about his pitching. I tried to send him thought lasers to shut up and eat already, but they didn't work.

Then even Mom seemed to get bored of hearing about it. With a little sigh, she suddenly pushed her chair back and started stacking plates.

Chris seemed to realize he was the last one eating and started wolfing down his dinner.

"We have cherry pie to go with a family announcement," Mom said, turning back from the kitchen. She had a big, goofy grin on her face.

Both boys looked at her with curiosity and eagerness. Not dread. Not alarm. Not terror.

They had no idea. I was sure they knew what had happened three years before, even though we didn't know each other then. But they weren't connecting the dots now.

Whatever. I didn't want to stick around for when they did. "So, Mom...if...uh...if I already know what the announcement is and don't feel like pie, can I please be excused?" I started to stand.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Mom's smile faltered as she turned to look at me. "No, you may not. We are a family, and we discuss things as a family. Have a seat, Ruth."

Ruth. Not Ruthie or Ruthie May. So yeah, Mom was serious. I sat back down and pressed my lips together, holding in the words that wanted to pop out. If I reminded her that Chris, Matt and even Stepbrad weren't really my family, and that Dad—an important part of *my* family—wasn't here, she would just get mad. There was absolutely no escaping this now.

"What is it?" Chris asked after he'd finished his last bite of fake chicken and jumped up with his plate, even though he was still chewing.

"Let's finish clearing," Stepbrad said.

It seemed to take forever for Chris to finish with the dishes while Mom got out the pie, vanilla ice cream and whipped cream. A real special-occasion treat—especially for a Monday. We usually got real dessert (fruit didn't count as real dessert) just on Friday nights or on someone's birthday.

But I'd skip pie and all that went with it if we didn't have to have this family meeting. Or the reason for the announcement in the first place.

Finally Chris returned to his spot, and Mom cut the pie into equal wedges and started dishing it out. Matt put a rounded scoop of ice cream on each plate, and Stepbrad finished each by adding a squirt of whipped cream from the can. Since I was stuck there anyway, I changed my mind and took a slice.

JOANNE LEVY

Once we all had our dessert, Stepbrad and the boys started in right away, like they'd never eaten pie before. I'd seen Izzy eat with better manners. Sheesh.

Mom traced her fork through the whipped cream and then suddenly took a deep breath. She looked up and smiled. "So," she said softly, nervously. "The family announcement?"

Chris and Matt kept eating. I wondered if they'd even heard her.

"Boys," Stepbrad said. "Listen up."

"Huh?" Chris said as he and his brother stared at Mom, waiting.

She took another deep breath. "We're going to have a new addition to the family. I'm pregnant." Her face froze in a big smile.

There was a long moment of...nothing. Mom's smile started to fizzle in tiny increments with each passing second. This was obviously not the reaction she'd been hoping for.

Stepbrad finally broke the painful silence. "You're going to have a new sibling."

He was looking at his sons expectantly. Of course he was—I already knew the news. And I'd run out of the house when I'd heard it. Matt frowned down at his pie as he chewed slowly.

Chris seemed to clue in all of a sudden. His fork dropped onto his plate with a loud clatter. "Seriously?"

Stepbrad's brow crinkled in annoyance. Like when he had to remind me to go out into the yard and pick up Izzy's poops. "Yes, seriously." He turned to his other son, sounding hopeful when he asked, "Matt? What do you say?"

Matthew didn't look any happier but just shrugged.

"Where are we going to put another kid?" Chris huffed. "This house is already too small!"

"Chris," Stepbrad said sternly. "First of all, check your tone. Second, we're looking at all our options. Renovating this house if we can. Although moving isn't off the table."

"Moving?" I squeaked. Because *this* was new information. New information I really, *really* didn't like.

Mom reached over and squeezed my hand. "It's a possibility. We're thinking we'll probably renovate—put in an addition or finish the rest of the basement. But moving is an option too. We'd stay in the area, though. We wouldn't want to disrupt your lives too much."

"Wouldn't want to disrupt our lives?" Chris snorted loudly. "First we have to live here half the time. Matt and I have to share a tiny room and the bathroom." He shot a not-so-nice look at me. "Plus there's dog hair everywhere. The backyard is filled with dog-poop land mines. And now this? A screaming baby? Oh no, wouldn't want to disrupt our lives *too much!*"

Whoa. I mean, he wasn't wrong, but I couldn't believe he'd said it out loud.

"Christopher!" Stepbrad barked. "I'd like a word in the other room, please. You too, Matthew."

My stepfather—whom I'd never seen so angry—and the two boys got up out of their chairs. Chris with a big huff, Matt after taking a final big bite of his pie. The three of them exited the room, leaving just Mom and me in the kitchen.

JOANNE LEVY

So awkward. I scooped up pie with my fork while I watched Stepbrad follow his sons into the other room.

“So that went well,” I said, shoving a forkful into my mouth.

It was exactly the wrong thing to say.

A sniff drew my attention to my mother just as her face crumpled and tears began rolling down her cheeks. She dropped her head and covered her face with her hands.

Even though I hated that she was pregnant, I hated even more that she was this upset. Way more. Especially after the way I’d reacted to the news earlier and what I’d just said. I had just made things worse.

I jumped up from my chair and threw my arms around her. “I’m sorry, Mom,” I said into her hair as I squeezed her tightly. “I didn’t mean...”

“Oh, Ruthie,” she said. “It’s not your fault. I thought...I thought they’d be excited. I hoped *you’d* be excited. You were so thrilled when your dad and I told you that you were going to be a big sister.”

Well, that did it. Now I was crying too. Not just a few tears, but big, ugly sobs. Because I *had* wanted to be a big sister. I *had* been excited. Until it all fell apart and I knew nothing would ever be the same again.

Mom squeezed me hard, and we hugged for a long time.

Finally I pulled away and wiped my face on my sleeve. “I’m really sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to be so awful.”

“I know, honey,” she said. And then she dropped her eyes and said softly, “But...do you really not want a sibling anymore?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“It’s not that,” I said. My throat was so tight, it hurt to get the words out. “I just...after last time. I’m scared. Really scared.” The last part came out as a whisper. “About the baby and...you.” *And me*, I didn’t say.

“I understand.” She reached for my hand and gently squeezed my fingers. “But Ruthie, I’m being really careful. I have lots of doctor’s appointments and tests booked. I’m going into this with my eyes open. It’ll be different this time.”

Different *how*? I thought. “But...” I hiccupped and wiped my face again. “Can you promise...”

I couldn’t finish. Mom squeezed my hand again and then let it go so she could wipe away my tears with her thumb. She knew what I was asking but couldn’t say out loud. “Ruthie, life offers no promises, no certainties. But I *can* promise you that we are doing everything we can to make sure the baby is healthy and that *I* am healthy both physically and mentally. I know you want a guarantee, but I can’t do any better than that.” She pushed a piece of my hair behind my ear and looked intently into my eyes. “If I did, I’d be lying, and I want to be one hundred percent honest with you. Do you understand?”

I nodded and then swallowed hard. “But why do you even want a baby? *I’m* your baby.”

It sounded so silly, but it made her smile. “You *are* my baby, even though you’re actually a big girl, hardly an infant anymore. But you will always be my baby—even when you’re forty. Even if you have babies of your own.”

I wrinkled my face. “Ugh, Mom.”

JOANNE LEVY

She laughed and booped my nose. “But while I love you more than anything, I have even more love to give. More than I can give to you and Brad and Chris and Matt.”

I didn’t think Chris and Matt deserved her love right now, after being so mean, but I didn’t say anything.

“Brad feels the same. We both have a lot of love to give and, well, you and the boys are getting to where you’re looking after yourselves.

“But,” she went on, “I see now that this should have been a family discussion *before* we went down this road. To be honest, I got pregnant very quickly after we started trying and—what?”

She stopped talking. Probably because of the expression of horror on my face. “*Mom!* Please don’t tell me about...*that*. Jeez, do you always have to be so open about everything?”

Being the child of a public health nurse meant I’d been the first kid in my class to understand about periods and where babies came from (a whole year before they’d taught us that in school) and also that I’d had the important responsibility of telling Jenna. She’d been very interested but also very suspicious that I was lying to her. Until health class confirmed it all.

“I’m not going to apologize for wanting you to understand how bodies work, but point taken.” She chuckled and booped my nose again. “I am sorry I wasn’t more sensitive about how we told you. I guess we thought we’d get a more positive response.”

I shrugged. It didn’t really matter how they told us. Because even if I’d objected at the beginning, I still wouldn’t

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

have gotten a real vote. They pretended that what I thought mattered, but it didn't really change anything. Kids didn't get to make real decisions.

"How about I make us an appointment with Dr. Singh?" Mom suggested. "We can go together."

"No, thank you," I said.

She sighed. "Are you sure, Ruthie? I think it could be really productive to talk all this out."

"Positive." Because, like she'd said, she couldn't give me a guarantee that things would turn out differently this time. And if she couldn't guarantee that everything would work out, the last thing I wanted to do was talk about it. Talking didn't change anything. Talking just made you realize how powerless you were.

"Are we really going to have to move?" I asked.

"We're not sure yet. We'd like to get a bigger place so the boys could have their own rooms. The baby too. But housing prices are high, and we're already looking at a big jump in our monthly financial obligations. That doesn't even take into account my being off work."

Maybe you should have thought of that before, I wanted to say. But didn't.

"If moving does end up being our best option, we're definitely going to be looking in this neighborhood. We want you and the boys to stay at your schools. Plus we're so close to their mom and your dad and our work that this area is ideal. And I know you love taking Izzy to the park."

At least she'd thought of me and Izzy a little.

JOANNE LEVY

“Okay,” I said.

“Thank you for being open to all of this, Ruthie.”

I wasn’t. Not really. But seriously, what could I do?

“Maybe I’ll go write in my journal,” I said. “Can I be excused?”

Her eyes darted toward the living room, where Brad was still talking to the boys. I could hear his voice but not what he was saying. I wondered if they would get grounded for being mean.

Mom took a deep breath and then pasted a smile on her face as she looked at me. “You don’t want to finish your dessert?”

I looked down at my plate. I’d taken a couple of bites, but mostly it was a mess of vanilla cream soup and some red cherry blobs. If I thought about it too hard, it looked really gross. “No, I’m good.”

Mom gave me a sad smile. “Okay.”

I gave her another hug. Just because she looked like she really needed it.

Or maybe I did.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After I'd put Izzy out for a pee in the backyard, I led her into my bedroom. My newish bedroom that used to be Mom's work-at-home office.

For a short time it had been a baby's room, waiting for my little brother to come home.

When Mom had found out she was pregnant that first time, Dad had moved all the office furniture out and painted the room light green and yellow, and on one wall he'd put up wallpaper that had cute rainbows on it (they had let me pick it out).

I'd loved the room, partly because of the rainbows but mostly because I'd been so excited about being a big sister. At first I'd been weird about the idea of having a younger brother, but my parents had been so excited and had made it sound like the best. Mom had said he would look up to me and think of me as the coolest person in the world. And Dad had said that I'd be able to read my unicorn books to him, take care of him and help him grow up. That someday he'd be my best friend, the same way *he* was best friends with *his* older brother, my uncle Charlie.

JOANNE LEVY

None of it had ever happened.

After the baby died, the door had closed, and no one went in there.

Until one night after I'd gone to sleep, and Mom was still sick in bed with depression, and Dad decided to redecorate.

I'd woken up in the morning to find he'd torn down the wallpaper. When I got home from school, the office furniture was back and the room had been painted beige—the color it was now. It was like my brother had never existed.

When we'd gone to therapy a while later, Dad had talked about how he'd hoped that changing the room back would help by taking away the reminders of what we'd lost. He'd done it to help us heal, even though it hadn't helped at all.

Redecorating couldn't take away sadness—even I knew that. After he'd explained that he'd been trying to help, I wasn't as angry about his changing the room back. But I wasn't any less sad.

When Stepbrad and the boys moved in and it became *my* room (the two boys got my old room because they wouldn't both fit in the office—just one more thing I had no say in), I noticed that Dad had missed peeling off a part of the wallpaper in the corner behind the desk. I saw it when I was plugging in my bedside lamp. It was just a small, uneven piece of rough-edged wallpaper—half a rainbow.

It had felt like a sign. Like that tiny rainbow had been broken because my brother had died. His life had been cut short and ripped apart. I had sat there under the desk for a long time, thinking about my brother. I'd used a Sharpie

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

to write his name inside the broken arch of the rainbow. It became my own little memorial to him that no one else knew about. Well, Izzy did because she'd sniffed at it when I made it. But she wasn't telling anyone.

As I came into my room now, I glanced under the desk and could just see the corner of the rainbow. I sent some love toward it like I often did. What would happen if we had to move? What would happen to my broken rainbow—all I had left of my brother?

This stupid pregnancy was ruining everything.

I plopped myself down on my chair and looked at the journal sitting on top of the desk. Relieved to have something else to think about, I traced my finger over the adorable dog on the cover. The book was almost too nice to write in.

I swiveled and held it up to show it to Izzy, who was sitting beside me. "Look, it's you."

Her tail thumped on the carpet.

"I know," I said. "So cute. You love it, right?"

Thump, thump.

"I'm going to write down all the stuff you find."

Thump, thump, thump, thump. She tilted her head to the side inquiringly.

"I don't know why," I said, answering the question I imagined she might have asked. "Maybe someday people will be interested in all the random things you come home with. Maybe you'll set a record for most things ever found by a dog. Maybe you'll be famous! You could have your own YouTube channel and everything! Izzy's Channel of Found Things."

JOANNE LEVY

I doubted that, but it didn't matter. She was the best dog ever, even if no one else knew it.

I opened the notebook, suddenly excited. And almost scared to write in it. I pressed the page down with my palm so it would lie flat and took a deep breath as I grabbed my pen to start.

Except the pen was filled with black ink, and this notebook was way too special for plain-old boring black ink. I rooted around in my desk drawer until I found the purple one I liked to use in birthday cards to make them special. Purple was my favorite color. Which meant it was Izzy's too—perfect for the notebook of her found things. I slipped my favorite unicorn pencil topper onto the pen for extra inspiration.

The tip of the pen hovered over the first line as I hesitated. I was suddenly worried I'd mess it up. Ink is so permanent. I opened the drawer again and pulled out a pencil. It was nice and sharp and even had a fresh pink eraser on the end, just in case. I took the unicorn topper off the pen and slid it onto the pencil.

Finally, on the top line, I wrote a heading:

Stuff Izzy Has Found in the Forest

But before I started writing down items, I stopped to think about the list. Should I write it in the order of when she'd found things, starting with the very first tennis ball she'd fetched, soon after we'd brought her home? That would mean that the last item (so far) was the broken pair of glasses

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

she'd picked up when Jenna and I had taken her to the park just that afternoon.

It would be the best way to organize the list, but Izzy had found a lot of things over the past few years. Like, a million things. I'd never be able to put everything in the proper order. If only I'd started the list on that first day. But how could I have known?

The people we'd gotten her from had said she'd flunked out of service-dog training because her retrieving drive was too strong. I'd thought that meant she liked to play ball a lot (which she did). But it really meant that she was too easily distracted from the important work of being a service dog. Service dogs have to have laser focus when they're working. If she could be distracted by a toy, the person she was supposed to be helping could get hurt—walk into traffic or not be warned about a dangerous seizure. Izzy was a good dog, but she couldn't be depended upon to be laser-focused all the time.

She could still be the best friend a girl could have, though.

Anyway, it was too late to start the list at the very beginning, so I started writing down things as I thought of them:

- Glasses (broken)
- Tennis balls (x a million)
- Rope toy
- Spoon
- Old sneaker (where is the other one?)
- Gloves and mittens (singles and pairs)

JOANNE LEVY

- Soccer shirt
- Broken kite
- Candy bar wrappers, chip bags, coffee cups, drinking straws and other garbage that jerks leave in the park (x a million)
- Water bottle (plastic x 10,000 + a green Yeti bottle)
- Starbucks travel mug
- Baseball cap (x 3 4)
- Baby-doll arm

I shivered at the last item, remembering how freaked out Jenna and I had been before we'd realized the arm was from a doll. Not that Izzy would ever dig in real graves.

Thinking about the cemetery and the last time I'd been there, after Mom's announcement, made my heart ache with sadness.

That was the last thing I wanted to think about. I slapped the notebook closed and looked around my room for a distraction.

There. The one thing that always put me in an amazing mood? My Unicorns of Faravelle Forest books. Mom liked to say that my happy place was actually *inside* Faravelle Forest. She wasn't wrong. I'd spent a million hours reading the books and many more playing with Jenna, pretending we were the unicorns living in the forest. We'd started reading the books a long time ago, and maybe we were too old to play make-believe with them, but we loved them so much.

And, of course, I was the books' number one fan. I knew every single one almost by heart. If there were ever a movie made of them, I'd be the first in line to get a ticket.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

But then I remembered what I'd learned at the mall. That there might never be any more books. Yes, I loved reading them over and over and found something new to love every time and would never get bored of them. But I needed *more*. New stories and more adventures. How would I ever find out what happened to Darylinda, my favorite unicorn? What about her sisters, Sarabettina and Isabella?

I glanced up at the special shelf Stepbrad had made for me in his garage workshop to showcase the seven (with room for more!) books. All were arranged perfectly, the numbers on their spines counting them in order. In front of the books stood my three unicorn figurines. They weren't official Faravelle unicorns merch—it, sadly, wasn't a thing (yet)—but they were close to how I imagined them.

The one most like Isabella was actually a purple (obviously) My Little Pony. The one most like Sarabettina was a soft Beanie Baby that Mom had bought on eBay. The third, a figurine made by Schleich, was perfectly white with flowers in her mane. It was the one I thought of as Darylinda. The bravest and best unicorn in all of Faravelle Forest, which happened to be the one I always played when Jenna and I acted out the books.

At least, the first seven books.

“What will happen now?” I asked the unicorns. They didn't have any answers. Neither did Izzy, although she did thump her tail twice.

I slid book seven from its place and opened it up to the title page. I read the inscription out loud.

JOANNE LEVY

*For Ruthie May—All rainbows lead to
Faravelle! Yours in sparkle, Lexi Marks.*

Even though it probably wasn't real, I still loved it. I could pretend it was legit and that I'd met Lexi Marks. As on the publisher's website, her picture on the back of the books was a comic, but I knew I'd be able to recognize her from her curly dark hair, red glasses and big smile. Plus, the way her books spoke to my heart, I knew we'd be best friends if we ever met.

Not that that would ever happen. With a sigh, I closed the book and slid it back in its spot.

I returned to my desk, opened the notebook again and stared at the first page. The list suddenly seemed so silly—who even cared what Izzy found? It wasn't like she'd get a reward or anything. She wasn't a real search and rescue dog, just a service-dog reject. She didn't find lost people, just junk that people had thrown out in the woods.

I was about to tear the page out of the book when there was a knock on my doorframe. Izzy's tail thumped on the floor in greeting. I swiveled in my chair to face my mom.

"Writing in your new journal?" she asked.

I closed the book so she wouldn't see the list and turned toward her. "Yes, thank you. It's perfect."

My eyes went to her belly. There was nothing there that made it obvious she was pregnant. It didn't seem totally real yet. Was she even really sure? She was a nurse, so probably.

"When are you supposed to have it?"

She smiled. "My due date is December 17."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Wow. That seemed so far away. It was only May.

“But if you aren’t ready to talk about it, that’s fine. It’s not the reason I came in here,” she said.

“Hiding from the boys?” I asked.

She snorted. “No. I thought it would be a good time to talk to you about something else. Your birthday. Twelve is a big deal—almost grown up. You’ll even be starting bat mitzvah lessons in the fall.” She gave me a goofy smile. The same kind she’d given me when I told her I’d gotten my period for the first time.

I was sort of excited and also sort of not about the bat mitzvah thing. But I had the whole summer before I had to worry about all that.

“So your birthday falls on Thursday, but the next day is a PA day. I can take that day off. You want to do something special, don’t you?”

Yes. I’d like to buy a time machine so I could go back to Saturday morning, when I didn’t know you were pregnant.

But all I said was, “I don’t know. Maybe we could go out for pizza?”

Her face fell. “Oh. No party? I can talk to your dad...”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, I know better than to plan a surprise party for you.”

“I don’t like surprises,” I confirmed with a nod.

“How about a spa day?” she asked hopefully.

“No, it’s fine,” I said. I was trying not to be annoyed that she didn’t understand I didn’t feel like celebrating. She was

JOANNE LEVY

pregnant. Book eight had been canceled. Twelve was going to be worse than eleven, so what was there to celebrate?

But still, pizza was pizza, and it was my favorite. We didn't get it very often, between Mom's lactose problem and Matt's celiac issues. "Pizza at the Station would be good. Maybe we can invite Jenna to come?"

"Of course. And your dad and grandparents too." Mom came over to give me a side hug. "Whatever you want, Ruthie May."

She didn't really mean it. If she did, she wouldn't have gotten pregnant.

I kept quiet as she pressed a kiss to the top of my head, gave Izzy a scratch behind the ear and left my room.

I opened the journal back up and stared at what I'd written. I cringed at it and flipped to a fresh page.

I stared at it for a very long time. Then suddenly, before I'd even realized what I was doing, I wrote on the top line:

Unicorns of Faravelle Forest—Book
Eight, by Ruth May Sydner

Then I stared at it. What was I thinking? I wanted to be a writer when I grew up, but I was still only a kid. Who didn't know anything about writing.

About to erase what I'd written, I realized I'd grabbed the purple pen. Ugh. It was there in ink forever. If I wanted to get rid of it, I would either have to rip out the page or scratch out the words. Both things would ruin the notebook.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Izzy groaned. I looked as she rolled over until her four feet pointed up in the air, her tongue hanging out of her open mouth and almost touching the carpet. Not that she would have cared. I'd seen her lick the carpet. I'd also seen her stare at her butt while she farted, like she was fascinated by what came out of her. So gross.

"What a silly dog you are," I said. She angled her eye at me, tail thumping on the floor.

"Sometimes I wish I could be like you," I said. "Never worrying about anything. Joyful no matter what happens that you can't control. Not scared of what *might* happen. Then I could be excited."

She tilted her head.

"I want to be happy about it, Izzy. I really do. I was so excited when...you know...before." I thought about the little broken rainbow on my wall. "But what if...?"

With another groan, Izzy rolled back over and then got to her feet, coming over to me and sitting beside me so I could rub her ears.

"I love you, Izzy," I said, leaning over until our foreheads touched. She smelled good, like musky dog with a hint of corn chip. "Would you be scared if you knew what I know? Or would you just be excited about a new sibling?"

She pushed her face into mine, giving my cheek a nudge with her cold nose—a doggy kiss.

"I know," I said, leaning back to rub her ears. "I know you'd be excited. Like I was last time. Because you are happy all the time. Just like the real Isabella from the books. Nothing

JOANNE LEVY

ever gets you down. You never worry about anything. It never bothers you when everything seems out of your control. You just...live your life.”

She thumped her tail as she looked up at me, not arguing.

“But I’m not like that,” I said. “I wish I was but I...I don’t know how. And I’m scared, Izzy. I’m so, so scared.”

Izzy whined. Like she wanted to help but didn’t know what to say.

I rubbed her ears for a while longer, until I felt a little better. When I let go of her, she jumped up on our bed and circled a few times before lying down with a grunt.

I smiled at her and swiveled in my chair, facing the journal.

Unicorns of Faravelle Forest—Book

Eight, by Ruth May Sydner

And then I began to write. Slowly at first.

One.

Word.

At.

A.

Time.

And then it was like I couldn’t stop.

CHAPTER NINE

“Nothing? Really?” I asked Jenna the next day on the school bus. “You didn’t find out *anything* about Lexi Marks?”

While waiting for the bus, I’d been excited to tell her about my writing. But by the time the bus had come and I’d climbed the stairs, walked down the long aisle and sat down beside her, I had completely chickened out.

I was worried that the story I’d written—well, the beginning of it, since I was far from finished—was stupid. Then I was *sure* it was. So I kept to myself that I’d worked on it all evening.

After Stepbrad had come to my room and knocked on my doorframe to tell me it was lights out, I’d hidden under my covers with the flashlight that I usually used for reading. But it had been hard to concentrate because Matthew and Christopher had been so annoying.

They had been grounded for being mean to my mom—I knew because they’d slammed their door and I could hear them complaining about it through the wall between our rooms. Actually, Chris did most of the complaining, going on and on about where were we going to put this baby and blah,

JOANNE LEVY

blah, blah. I did my best to tune him out, even though he did have a good point.

Anyway, now that I was on the bus, I felt weird about my idea. So instead I told Jenna about the plans for my birthday dinner the following week and then asked her what she'd found out about our favorite author.

She had been excited about the birthday dinner but now blew a loud raspberry. "Nothing. I searched and searched, but all I found was the publisher's website, and it just had the seven books. Nothing about book eight at all. Not a title or that it'd been canceled, just...it was like it never even existed!"

"But it did," I said. "There's a chapter in the back of book seven. It *did* exist."

"I know!" Jenna agreed. "So weird."

"No *Wikipedia* page, either?" I asked.

"Nope." Jenna shook her head. "No *Wikipedia*. Nothing on the *LexiMarks.com* website, no social media at all. Nothing."

"Well," I said with a sigh. "That is disappointing." But I shouldn't have been too surprised.

"Right?" Jenna sighed. "So now what? How will we ever find out what happens to the unicorn sisters?"

I took a breath and held it as I pressed my lips together. Jenna frowned.

There was a long, quiet moment. Well, as quiet as it could be on a school bus packed full of kids.

"Ruthie?" Jenna said suspiciously. "What is it? What are you hiding?"

I looked at her sideways. “How do you know I’m hiding anything?”

She tilted her head, but instead of looking confused like Izzy did when *she* did that, Jenna’s expression was like, *Please, I know you better than anyone. Of course I know you’re hiding something.*

She didn’t even have to say it out loud. I could totally read her face.

“Fine,” I said. “But you have to promise you won’t laugh.”

Her expression got serious. “Is it about your mom? And, you know...” She leaned in close and whispered, “The baby?”

“What?” I scrunched up my face. “Why would I ask you not to laugh about that?” Because there was nothing funny about that situation. Nothing at all.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “But can you please just tell me before we get to school? I promise I won’t laugh.”

“Fine.” I exhaled. “So...I got a new notebook yesterday, and I was going to use it to log all the weird and random stuff that Izzy finds in the woods.”

Jenna did laugh at that. But then she realized she wasn’t supposed to and muttered “Sorry” before she clamped her mouth shut.

I smiled and leaned my shoulder into hers. “That part is sort of funny, so I forgive you. No, what I didn’t want you to laugh at was what I used it for instead.” I took another big breath. “I started writing a story.”

She tilted her head. This time her expression *was* confused, just like Izzy’s. “Huh?”

JOANNE LEVY

"I'm..." I exhaled and then blurted out, "I'm writing Unicorns book eight."

"You're..." Jenna's eyes went wide. "But...how do you know what happens?"

I shrugged. "I'm making it up. I mean, I was already planning to be an author like Lexi Marks when I grow up, so...I guess I'll just start earlier on my career than I'd thought I would." I hoped I sounded a lot more confident and smart than I felt.

Jenna just stared. She was clearly processing. I held my breath, waiting for her reaction.

Finally she blinked. And then a slow smile appeared on her face. It got bigger and bigger until she squealed and then threw her arms around me. "This is the best idea ever, Ruthie!"

I pulled back out of the hug to look at her. "You really think so?"

I could tell by the giant grin on her face that she really did. And that she was as excited as I was.

"Totally!" she said. "We already act out all the stories and the characters. And I can help you. I mean, if you'll let me."

"Of course!" I said, suddenly even more excited because she wanted to help. Playing in the forest and acting out the stories we'd read was fun, but writing a *new* book and doing it with my very best friend? That would be epic. "No one knows the books better than we do, Jenna. Why *wouldn't* we write the next one?"

She looked up at the ceiling of the bus as though she was trying to think hard. "I can't think of one good reason," she said. "We absolutely *should* write the next book."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

She pressed her wrist up to her forehead and stuck her index finger up in the air, giving me the unicorn salute. “All rainbows...” she began.

“Lead to Faravelle!” I said as I saluted back.

CHAPTER TEN

After school we grabbed Izzy from my house and started toward the park, talking the whole way about our book. We could not be more excited. Even Izzy picked up on our enthusiasm and barked and yipped the whole way there.

We needed to start from the beginning, though, because when I'd told Jenna my idea for the story, about how Darylinda would discover a troll in the forest and convince him to unlock the trunk of Faravellian spells, she reminded me how in book two, Isabella had found an elf in a secret cave and enticed him with her joyful song to give up his Book of Enchantments. It was almost exactly the same. So much for my great idea.

So yeah, we needed to come up with something different.

What would Lexi have written? The sample chapter at the back of book seven hadn't really given many clues to where book eight was going.

I wish I knew. Was there a way we could *ever* know?

I stopped in my tracks on the sidewalk, about a block from the park.

Jenna stopped beside me. Izzy kept going, but only until she got to the end of her leash. Then she turned and sat down,

looking at me expectantly, like, *I thought we were going to the park. What's happening?*

"What is it?" Jenna asked.

"Do you think—" I bit my lip, not even wanting to consider it, but I figured it could be true. "What if Lexi Marks is dead?" I whispered the last word.

Jenna gasped. "She—you don't really think she is, do you?"

"It would explain the book being canceled."

Jenna considered this. "Maybe she ran out of ideas or something. She's not dead. No. I know she's not."

Jenna seemed confident about it, but how could she know for sure?

Izzy whined, thumping her tail as if to remind us that we were headed to the park and she had been cooped up all day while we were at school.

"And you watch," Jenna said, looping her arm through mine and tugging me along. "When we publish book eight, I bet she contacts us to thank us for it."

"You're right," I agreed. "It's going to be so awesome. We're probably going to get famous, you know. I hope you're ready for that."

"Are you kidding?" Jenna laughed. "I was born to be famous! Come on."

We began to gallop. "To Faravelle!" we whinnied as we ran, Izzy running and yipping along beside us.

When we got to the park, the fenced-in leash-free zone wasn't super busy, but Duke, a giant mutt with bad manners,

JOANNE LEVY

was in there. Not only was he twice Izzy's size (meaning *huge*), but he also chased and jumped on her in a way that upset her. Half the time she'd run over to me and hide behind my legs. Duke was such a bully, and his owner never seemed to care, always too busy looking at his phone.

So instead we went to the soccer fields, which were, thankfully, empty.

I got tired of Izzy yanking on the leash, so I unclipped it, letting her go.

"Be good!" I yelled as she headed toward the woods. "No baby-doll parts, please!"

Jenna giggled.

"All right," I said, turning back to my friend. "So, book eight. What is it about?"

A half hour later we still hadn't figured out the story. We'd replayed book seven, trying to come up with how the next book would continue from there. We'd started with what we knew about book eight from the sample. But we'd come up blank.

"Writing is hard," Jenna whined.

I nodded. "Once we get it, it'll be epic, though." Or so I hoped. It was hard not to be discouraged.

I hadn't seen Izzy in a few minutes, so I hollered out her name. She bolted out of the woods and started right toward us. Like the good girl she was.

It was obvious she had found something (because of course she had). Her mouth was nearly closed. No happy grin with a big pink tongue lolling out the side.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“What did you find today?” I asked as she ran toward me at full speed and then almost tripped over her own legs when she stopped abruptly, dropping her treasure at my feet.

It was hard not to laugh at how adorably goofy she was. I looked down at what the treasure was, hoping it wasn’t something weird or totally disgusting.

Thankfully, it wasn’t. It was just a set of keys. Covered in dog slobber, of course, but that was to be expected. It wasn’t like Izzy had pockets or even hands to hold stuff in.

“What are we supposed to do with these?” Jenna asked.

“I don’t know. I guess try to find who lost them?”

We looked around but were basically alone in the soccer fields. Like we’d read each other’s minds, we both turned toward the cemetery.

“Maybe someone dropped them at a funeral,” Jenna said.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “We should go check.” I snapped Izzy’s leash on her collar, and we started toward the woods. It was only a minute of walking through the trees before we came out on the other side.

All was quiet other than a robin singing up high in a tree—*doodle-y-dee-doodle-y-doo* over and over. And the sound of Izzy’s snuffling, her nose on the ground as we walked.

“There’s no one here,” Jenna said, glancing over at the empty parking lot.

For some reason my eyes were drawn the other way, toward the bench where that lady normally sat.

I was both surprised yet not to see her there again, sitting in the exact same spot. Her red notebook was open on her

JOANNE LEVY

lap, pen gripped in her hand as though she was just about to write something.

“There,” I said, pointing my chin toward her. “They’re probably hers.”

Jenna nodded, and we started toward the lady, Izzy in front, leading us.

When we got close, the woman looked up. She was wearing a striped blue-and-green shirt and jeans with sneakers. Her giant purse sat beside her on the bench.

“Hello,” she said, adjusting her glasses.

Jenna waved. “Hi.”

I wanted to ask the woman why she hung out in a cemetery. And what she was writing in her notebook. And what she kept in that enormous purse. But it seemed rude to ask personal questions like that. I wouldn’t have wanted her to ask me why I had been in the cemetery the previous Saturday.

I held up the keys and said, “We found these. Are they yours?”

“Oh no. Not mine.” She clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Someone’s going to be looking for those. Where did you find them?”

I shrugged and pointed over my shoulder. “My dog found them, so I’m not exactly sure. She finds a lot of random stuff. It’s her superpower.”

The woman smiled at Izzy. “Clever dog.”

“She’s a service dog,” Jenna said.

“Is that so?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Well,” I said, reaching down to rub Izzy’s ear, “not exactly. She was *supposed* to be a service dog, but they said she’s too easily distracted. She failed the program, so now she’s just my pet.” I glanced down at Izzy apologetically, but she didn’t seem offended. Or maybe she was glad she’d flunked out because it had meant we got to be together. I was pretty happy about that.

“I see,” the woman said. “Well, why don’t you give me the keys.” She held out her hand. “I’ll do what I can to find the owner. Whoever lost them must be looking high and low.”

I glanced at Jenna, but she just shrugged. I turned back toward the woman. “Okay, here you go.”

I handed her the keys. It wasn’t until they were in her hand that I realized I should have warned her they had dog slobber on them. Oh well, too late now, I thought as I watched her drop them into her purse.

“What are you writing?” Jenna asked her.

Have I mentioned my best friend has zero filter?

The woman slapped her book closed with a loud *thwack!* “Nothing,” she said in a stern voice.

“Sorry,” Jenna muttered.

There was a long, weird silence. Izzy whined and leaned against my leg. Either she knew it was awkward or she just didn’t want to sit there any longer. Probably both.

“Uh,” I said. “Anyway, we should go.”

Jenna nodded. “Thanks for finding the keys’ owner. Okay, byeeee!”

JOANNE LEVY

The woman gave us a curt nod and stared down at her notebook but didn't open it.

Jenna, Izzy and I turned and started walking quickly away, down the path.

"What a weird lady!" Jenna said in a loudish whisper. "She seemed nice and then...not."

"I know," I said, glancing over my shoulder to make sure we were far enough away that the woman wouldn't hear us talking about her. She had her book open again on her lap and was writing now. I couldn't help thinking that maybe she was writing about us. Which would be so weird. "I wonder what's in that book. Probably all her secrets."

Jenna blew a loud raspberry. "Pffft. It's probably the names of all the kids she's eaten."

"Jenna!" I nudged her shoulder. "She probably hasn't eaten any kids. At least"—I looked at my best friend sideways, doing my best not to laugh—"not enough that she'd need to keep a list. You'd think you'd remember something like that without having to write it down."

Jenna snorted.

"But," I said, "do you think she'll really try to find out who the keys belong to?"

"Why wouldn't she?" she said with a shrug.

"I don't know, she just seemed...weird." And there was a fluttering in my stomach, like maybe we shouldn't have trusted her.

"So weird," Jenna agreed. "Do you think..."

"What?" I asked.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“I don’t know. Maybe...what if she uses them to break into the person’s house?”

Have I also mentioned that my best friend, in addition to having zero filter, is obsessed with crime shows, making her suspicious of *everyone*?

“How could she do that?” I asked. “It was just a ring of keys. There wasn’t a tag or anything.”

“I guess.” Jenna shrugged. “She probably wouldn’t. Unless she already knew whose keys they were. But probably not. She looked strange, and maybe a little creepy, but not like a thief. She reminds me of Gertabeth, to be honest.”

I laughed. Gertabeth was the crotchety old unicorn from Faravelle Forest. She wasn’t exactly a villain, but she was always crabby toward the sisters. Everyone knew she was harmless and probably just lonely. She’d lost her powers eons ago and was so old that her horn had been worn down to a useless gray nub on her forehead.

As I thought about the woman on the bench, I decided the name Gertabeth fit her.

“It’s probably fine,” Jenna said. “She’s *probably* not a burglar.”

There was that word *probably* again. I looked over my shoulder, but we were already in the woods and I could barely see through the trees to the woman. Until she stood up and started walking very quickly in the other direction. Like she suddenly had somewhere very important she had to be. With those keys.

“Gertabeth is in an awfully big rush to get somewhere,” Jenna muttered.

JOANNE LEVY

“No kidding,” I said.

As we watched her disappear, I hoped we hadn’t just been accomplices to what was about to be a crime.

No. She was probably just a harmless older lady.

Probably.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We never did hear about a local robbery, and because Jenna's moms watched the news every day, she would have heard for sure if there'd been one. So we knew that meant the lady—whom we now called Gertabeth—either wasn't a burglar or just hadn't found the home she could rob using those keys.

So this was good news.

The bad news? Writing *Unicorns of Faravelle Forest* book eight was not going well.

Like, it wasn't going at all. When I returned from the park after Jenna and I tried to figure out the story, I read through what I'd written the night before. Then I skimmed through the real book two, *Return to the Forest*. Drat; Jenna was right. My story was totally the same as book two, just with the characters swapped. It wasn't going to work at all.

We needed something new. Something fresh! Exciting! Epic!

Lexi's books always, *always* left me happy but wishing for more. Now that I was determined to write the next one, I couldn't imagine what that more might be.

JOANNE LEVY

“Lexi Marks did too good a job,” I said to the unicorns on my shelf that were guarding the books. “Maybe I won’t be a famous author after all.”

Which was disappointing.

I reached for book six, *The Garden of Magic* (my very favorite of the series—well, after number four...and maybe tied with number three), and took it down from the shelf. I stepped over Izzy, who was gnawing on her red Kong toy, and lay down with it on my bed.

I opened the book to somewhere in the middle. I didn’t need to start at the beginning—I’d read the book so many times, I could pick up the story after reading a line or two.

And that’s when I was reminded how Sarabettina had gotten so discouraged when her magical tulipweed garden refused to grow. Isabella (the unicorn, not my dog) had shown Sarabettina that tulipweed didn’t just need sunshine and water to grow. What made it magical was a special third ingredient. It needed sunshine, water and *rainbows*. And what creates rainbows? Happy unicorns. So Sarabettina and Isabella played and laughed. Even when they were tired and wanted to quit, they kept at it and never gave up. And then suddenly, when they were just about to drop from exhaustion, the magical flowers began to sprout and grow and *grow*. Just like, well, weeds.

I glanced up at the shelf. The three unicorns gave me knowing looks. Or what I imagined were knowing looks.

“They didn’t give up. And they stayed positive,” I whispered. “I need to keep trying. I need to be positive and keep at it. Even when it seems hopeless. Right, Izzy?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

When she heard her name, the dog dropped her toy and stood up. She gave herself a big shake and came over to press her nose into my arm. I held the book toward her.

“See?” I said. “I just need to make some rainbows.”

She didn’t know what that meant. And it wasn’t like she could read. But she was always up for whatever, and she gave me one of her encouraging doggy grins.

But despite how determined I was, I still didn’t come up with anything in the days that followed. Neither did Jenna. We tried and tried every day, on the bus in the morning, at lunch and then on the bus again after school.

Even at night, when I turned out the light and lay in bed, I was trying to come up with something. But still, nothing.

By the time Friday arrived, Jenna didn’t seem to want to talk about it anymore. I couldn’t really blame her, as it had started to feel like we’d never come up with a good story and become famous writers. I was still disappointed that she’d lost interest so quickly, though.

That day as we were leaving school and walking toward the bus, I heard my name. I looked up to see my mom standing outside her car, waving me over. I had a moment of panic, because Mom never picked me up at school for no reason, until I saw that she was smiling. Still...

“This is weird,” I said to Jenna. “I don’t like it.”

Jenna shrugged. “Maybe she feels guilty and is taking you shopping or something.”

I couldn’t imagine that being it, since we’d just had our day at the mall on Monday, but the sooner I left my best

JOANNE LEVY

friend and got in the car, the sooner I'd know. I gave Jenna a quick hug and started toward the car.

"Hi, Ruthie," Mom said as she went around to the driver's side. "Get in—I don't want to be late."

I tossed my bag into the back seat and then got in the front, buckling up as I started to worry. "Late for what?"

She started the car, then looked at me with a big smile. "I have an ultrasound today, and I want you to come with me."

Wait, what?

Of all the things that had run through my head in the three minutes since I'd first seen her standing there waiting for me, going with her to an ultrasound appointment was not one of them. Not by a long shot.

"Um, so, no thanks," I said, pressing the button on the seat belt to unlatch it. "But you don't have to drive me home, if you're running late. I can still get the bus." Of course, when I turned to look at the bus, it was pulling away. *Shoot.*

"Ruthie," Mom said, not in an angry tone but a sad one that brought my attention back to her. "I'm not going to force you if you're really uncomfortable with it. But I think it would be good for you to come with me. I think it will make you feel better to see for yourself that the baby is fine."

"Can you promise?" I asked as I turned back to the window again.

She exhaled a loud breath. "Like I told you before, Ruthie, I *can't* promise. There are no guarantees in life. But I want you to be a part of this and see for yourself that things are going the way they should."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I glanced over at her. Her sad expression made my heart hurt. I didn't want to make her sad, but didn't she get how hard this was? Why wasn't it this hard for her after all we'd been through? Why was she doing this when no one could promise that the same thing wouldn't happen again?

I didn't want to go. I'd rather walk into a volcano or a room full of spiders or even stinging scorpions. Naked.

But the look on Mom's face was worse than even those things. Ugh. Why did I have to deal with this?

"Fine." I nodded and reached for the seat belt again. Once it was latched, Mom grabbed my hand.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I really appreciate this, Ruthie. It'll be great having you with me."

It was hardly like I had a choice. "Where's Stepbrad?" I asked.

She sighed. "He's stuck at work. He has a big audit coming up and couldn't get away. But I told him you'd be a great stand-in."

I doubted it, but whatever.

"Why don't you put some music on?" Mom suggested. "Help me take my mind off the fact that I really, really have to pee."

As I turned on the radio, I noticed that she was bouncing in her seat a little. I laughed. "Why don't we stop at home?"

She glanced at me and smiled. "I wish. You have to have a full bladder for the ultrasound so that they can see everything. I've had about nineteen decafs today. I just hope the technician doesn't make me wait."

JOANNE LEVY

I was going to tease her about Niagara Falls and running water, but then a thought occurred to me. “Wait,” I said. “What exactly *is* an ultrasound?” I’d heard the word before and knew it had something to do with looking inside your body, but that was about it.

What I *really* wanted to know was if this would be like the giving-birth video she’d made me watch when she’d explained to me where babies come from (and how they get there). Because, nope. Have I ever mentioned that my mom is a public health nurse with zero ability to be embarrassed about anything?

She darted a look at me before returning her eyes to the road. “It’s a picture taken through my abdomen and into my uterus. They have a special camera that looks through the skin using sound waves. You’re not going to see much of the baby, especially this early on, other than a rough black-and-white image.”

I cringed. “But...I won’t see, like, all that?” I waved toward her lap.

She laughed. “No. You won’t see ‘all this.’” She pointed at her crotch. “Just my belly will be on display. Sorry to disappoint.”

She was joking, obviously. But still, I was pretty relieved. “So what is the test for?”

Mom hit the turn signal and made a left onto Main Street before she said, “To confirm my due date and just make sure all is going well. Not that we think it isn’t,” she added quickly. “I’ve already had one ultrasound, when I first learned I was pregnant, and it all looked great then.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I wondered when she'd had it. Probably while I was at school one day and had no idea my life was going to be turned completely upside down. Again.

"It's routine," Mom continued. "Think of it like the wellness checkup you get every year."

"Okay," I said. "Would they be able to see if..." I didn't finish the sentence.

She looked over. "If there are any birth defects?"

I nodded.

She returned her eyes to the road again. "Maybe. But like I told you, Ruthie, we're being very careful. There's no reason to think this baby will be anything other than healthy."

But there were lines in her forehead that told me maybe she was a little worried. Because there were no promises.

I was a whole lot worried. And I hated that I had to be there for the ultrasound. But I supposed she shouldn't be alone if she was going to get bad news.

Please don't let it be bad news.

I channeled my Darylinda bravery.

"Okay, Mom," I said. "You're probably right. It'll probably all be fine."

Probably.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I'd thought I'd sit in the waiting room while Mom went in for her appointment, but about twenty minutes after she'd left with a technician in scrubs, that same technician came out from behind the closed doors.

Alone.

My heart pounded as I prepared myself for the bad news. The worst news.

But she just smiled and said my mom wanted me to join her for the exam. Her smiling had to mean it wasn't bad news. Didn't it? Ugh, I hated being there. Why couldn't Stepbrad have come instead of me?

"Oh, uh, no thanks," I said to her with what I hoped was a smile. My face felt weird, so it was hard to know for sure. "I'm good."

She lifted her eyebrows and gave me an apologetic look. "I got the feeling from your mom that it's not optional."

What did that even mean? What was happening?

I got up and followed her down a hallway, past a bunch of doors and into an exam room. The woman sat down beside a

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

machine with a monitor and pointed to where I was to stand, giving me a front-row view of the weirdest thing I'd ever seen—in real life, I mean.

“Come see, Ruthie May,” Mom said from where she lay on the exam table. Her shirt was pulled up, exposing her belly. The technician squirted clear gel onto Mom's skin and then used a wand that she moved around to “see” through Mom's skin and guts into her uterus.

The technician cooed about how it all looked perfect with the baby.

Perfect. I let out a sigh of relief.

But looking at the weird black-and-white photo projected on the monitor, I thought it hardly looked like a baby. To me it looked like a badly rolled burrito. Sort of. If the burrito were an alien. All babies must start out looking like this, though, because neither my mom nor the technician seemed alarmed.

Still. It looked so weird.

“You're sure it's okay?” I asked the technician.

I watched her face closely to make sure she wasn't lying. Because sometimes grown-ups lie to kids when there's bad news they don't want to talk about.

“So far, so good,” she said, looking at the monitor as she moved the wand around. She seemed very happy and chatty and took some screenshots. She didn't say anything about aliens or burritos or—the real thing I was afraid of—*birth defects*. The phrase I'd heard a million times three years ago and hoped I would never hear again.

JOANNE LEVY

I glanced at Mom as she stared at the monitor. She looked relieved, and it made me realize she'd been tense in the car and nervous as we'd walked to the medical office.

I was glad, of course, that there weren't any problems, but at the same time it made me angry. Really angry. How could Mom have made me come with her if there was even a chance everything might *not* be fine? Was that why she'd gone in alone at first? Just in case?

But still, if it *had* been bad news, I'd have been right there in the waiting room. There would've been no way I could have avoided it.

I didn't have time to really think more about it because the smiling technician, who was clearly clueless about how stressful this entire thing was, cheerfully asked if we wanted to know the sex of the baby.

What? I glanced at the screen. You could tell that by looking at an alien burrito?

Mom looked at me. "It's your choice, Ruthie," she said. "Do you want to know?"

Seriously? I didn't want to know. Because once I knew that, I'd start thinking about names. And once the alien burrito had a name, that would make it real. And if it was real, it could die.

I tried to smile as I told them I wanted to be surprised. Mom nodded and told the technician that she wanted to be surprised too. I wasn't sure if that was true, but I sort of liked that she left it up to me. Even as I hated it at the same time.

Ugh. Feelings are complicated.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Once the appointment was over, Mom ran to the bathroom to get rid of her nineteen decaf coffees, and then we got in the car to go home.

My emotions were so jumbled up in my head that I couldn't even figure out what I was feeling. What I *did* know was that I definitely didn't want to talk about anything, so I asked if I could put on the radio. I could feel Mom's concerned eyes on me as I stared out the window, but all she said was, "Sure."

By that one word, it was obvious she really did want to talk about it, but I had nothing to say that wouldn't upset her. There was now proof. She was definitely pregnant. There was no denying it. And there was no going back, so what would be the point of talking about it? Nobody had wanted to talk to me about it *before* they decided to have a baby, so why bother now?

"I'm going to take Izzy for a walk," I said when we pulled into the driveway.

"Should we go for a bird walk?"

Ugh. Didn't she understand that I wanted to get away from her?

"No, thanks. I'd like to process."

"I understand." Mom nodded as she shut off the car and turned toward me. "Thanks for coming with me today, Ruthie. I hope you feel better about all this."

Not really, I thought. But what I said was, "Sure."

"I—" She sighed as she stuffed her keys into her purse. "I feel better. I didn't want to upset you, but I was a little worried, I confess."

No kidding. "I know, Mom," I said.

JOANNE LEVY

She looked at me, surprised. “You did?”

“Um, duh?” I rolled my eyes but smiled so she wouldn’t think I was being mean about her terrible acting skills. “Why did you want me to come with you if you weren’t 100 percent sure that everything would be okay?”

She looked straight into my eyes. “Because you deserve the truth, Ruthie. Whatever happens, you deserve for us to be honest with you. We are in this together. As a family.”

My eyes filled, spilling over when I blinked. “Mom...” It came out as a whine, my throat closing up so I couldn’t finish what I’d been about to say. Or maybe my throat knew I didn’t want to have to say it.

Mom knew, though. “I’m absolutely not trying to scare you, Ruthie.” She reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. “I just don’t want you to think we’re hiding things from you.”

Not like last time. Not like their hiding from me that the baby had died inside of her until they came home without him and instead of having a party, we were having a funeral. It still felt like a betrayal that they’d let me think everything was fine. That I was going to have a new baby brother. Until I didn’t.

I squeaked out, “Okay.” But it wasn’t. Now that I knew what *could* happen, I kind of wanted them to hide everything from me. Until there was good news. They could hide all the bad stuff from me forever. But it was too late for that now. She couldn’t unsay that she was pregnant. I couldn’t unsee the alien burrito.

Mom took a breath and said, “What happened three years ago was a very rare thing. The odds are actually against it happening again.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I looked at her and raised my eyebrows.

“Really.” She nodded. “That’s the truth. And I’m still seeing a therapist.” I opened my mouth, but before I could ask, she added, “Not because anything’s wrong. Just to talk. I want to be as mentally strong and ready as I can be.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“And the offer stands. If you want to go to therapy, either with me, on your own or with your dad, if that makes you most comfortable, we’ll make it happen.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to, but thanks.”

She took another breath, like she was going to argue, but all she said was, “All right. Just putting that out there.”

“Thanks,” I said again.

“So, Ruthie. Are we good?”

Not really. But I nodded.

“Good.” She squeezed my hand again and then let me go. “Come on. I have to pee again.”



I dropped my stuff off inside and then took Izzy to the park, glad to have an excuse to get out of the house and not have to talk to anyone. Other than Izzy, of course. But she never made me discuss feelings and other stuff I didn’t want to talk about. She was always happy to listen to me go on about the unicorn books, even reciting some of my favorite parts. Her favorite was when I acted out the parts with Isabella in them, because she loved hearing her name. But she was always a great audience no matter what.

JOANNE LEVY

Duke was in the leash-free section again, so we kept on walking to the soccer fields. No luck there either—we were later than normal, and a couple of soccer teams were there.

I kept Izzy on her leash and walked her through the forest toward the cemetery. I wondered if Gertabeth with her giant purse would be there. But as we emerged from the woods, I saw that her regular bench was empty.

As we walked along the path, I listened to the birds, hearing the call of one I didn't recognize off in the distance. I strained to hear, trying to memorize the notes, turning them into words so I could identify the song later when I looked on YouTube. It was a high-pitched *tuuurwhee tuuurwhee twee-twee-twee*.

Izzy was more interested in the smells of the forest than the sounds. All I could smell was the freshly cut grass and a bit of pine. But, of course, Izzy's sense of smell was much stronger. I'd once read that while humans can smell a cake, dogs can smell the cake's individual ingredients.

Could she smell the graves? Did she know this was different than a regular park? I wondered, for about the millionth time, what she did with all the smell information she gathered. Sometimes she barked and kicked in her dreams. Did those dreams include the smells she collected on our walks? There was so much I didn't know about her and what went on in her head. But the most important things I *did* know—that she loved me no matter what, that balls were her favorite toys and that she would do anything for dehydrated liver treats.

A few minutes later, while I was still contemplating her doggy brain, we began to get close to the section in the back

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

that I normally avoided. I slowed down and thought about going there to visit. I'd been there with my dad just the other day, and it hadn't been that scary.

But after all the drama of my mom's appointment and what I feared could still happen even though today it had gone well, I couldn't. I just couldn't bring up all those old feelings while so much could still happen.

It made me the least brave unicorn, but whatever.

I cleared my throat. "This way, Izzy," I said, turning around and leading her back toward the woods like it was no big deal. Like I wasn't avoiding anything. Like it was my plan all along to get this far and then just leave.

The great thing about Izzy was that she never judged. She never thought I was anything less than the bravest.

As we walked by Gertabeth's bench, Izzy stopped and sniffed. I stood there letting her fill up her nose with aroma molecules, since it was her favorite thing to do. She sniffed and sniffed and sniffed some more. Jeez, you'd have thought the bench had been rubbed with chicken or something.

After a few very long minutes of patiently letting her sniff to her heart's content, I got tired of standing there.

"All right, Izzy," I said. "That's enough. We should get home." Except no amount of pleading (and even gentle yanking) would get her to come along with me. She was intent on sniffing every single square inch.

"You must be smelling Gertabeth's molecules." Some dogs can smell people's scents even days later. I wondered what Izzy thought of Gertabeth. Izzy pretty much loved

JOANNE LEVY

everyone, but did she have different thoughts about some people? Did it all depend on what they smelled like? Maybe Gertabeth kept chicken nuggets in that big purse of hers.

“Do you think she’s weird too?” I asked the dog.

Izzy yipped. For a second I thought she was answering me. But then she started really tugging on the leash as she crouched down, practically on her belly, and tried to crawl under the bench.

“Izzy?” I held her back as much as I could, but that dog was determined! “What the—?”

That’s when I saw what she was so excited about. Under the bench, just out of her reach, was a red leather notebook.

I’d seen that notebook before. On Gertabeth’s lap.

Before Izzy could get her mouth on it, I dropped to my knees, pushed the dog aside and grabbed it. As I stood up, I brushed a scuff of dirt off the cover. Even though it didn’t have a painting of a dog on it, it was still a very nice notebook. I figured it was expensive.

“Hello?” I called out and looked around. “Anyone lose a notebook?” And by “anyone” I meant Gertabeth.

Silence. Izzy and I were the only (living) beings in the graveyard. I paused, listening for a long moment for a human voice above the birdsong. When none came, I took one last look around before I tucked the notebook under my arm and led Izzy home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After I logged Izzy's find in *my* notebook, I spent the entire night reading Gertabeth's.

Yes, I felt guilty about it because yes, it was wrong to read someone's personal journal. I would hate it if someone read mine.

Except that I *had* to open it to do the right thing—I needed to see if her name and address were in it so I could return it.

They weren't.

After that, I just couldn't stop myself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next morning I stood at the kitchen window and stared down the street, waiting not-so-patiently for Jenna. Like every Saturday, we were going to the park with Izzy before my dad took me for the rest of the weekend. But while the park part was the same as every other Saturday, the rest of today would be different because of Gertabeth's notebook. What was inside it. And, more specifically, what we were going to do about it.

Jenna finally, *finally* came strolling down the street.

"Izzy!" I yelled. She jumped up from where she was lying on the mat by the back door and came running, ready for adventure. I already had my shoes on and Izzy's collar buckled around her neck. I snapped on her leash, grabbed a couple of poop bags, hoisted my backpack over my shoulders and rushed out the door.

We ran the half block to meet Jenna.

"Ruthie?" Her eyes went wide, and she backed up a couple of steps like she was scared I was going to ram into her. "Whoa! Everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," I huffed. "I mean, kind of...I just...I need to show you something. Something sort of..." I couldn't find

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

the right words to describe what was in the notebook. “Just, I don’t know, you gotta see it!”

“Okaaaay.” Jenna laughed. “So show me!”

“Not here.” I shook my head. “Let’s get to the park.”

“Oh. Well, that sounds mysterious. We should probably run, then,” she suggested. “You know, because of the suspense!”

We did the unicorn salute and set off at a run, Izzy jogging beside us.

Once we got near the dog park, I was relieved to see there were only two dogs in the leash-free part, and they were both friends of Izzy’s. One was a border collie named Scout, and the other was Tank, a German shepherd.

Izzy must have recognized them too, because she started whining and tugging me toward the double gate, eager to get inside.

I waved at the dogs’ owners, who were chatting together across the park. The second I unlatched Izzy’s leash, she rocketed over to her friends, making me laugh. It was sort of how I had sprinted up to Jenna on the street earlier. Izzy bashed into her friends, but they didn’t mind. Maybe it was part of their game.

The three dogs circled and sniffed each other, saying hello and sharing the news, as Dad liked to say. Then they started to jump and run and play, living their best lives. I loved watching them sharing so much joy.

“Just think of all the rainbows they’d be making if they were unicorns!” Jenna said with a snorty laugh.

“I know, right? Our tulipweed garden would be totally overgrown!”

JOANNE LEVY

“All right, come on,” Jenna said, pointing toward an empty picnic table. “What do you need to show me? I’m so curious!”

Once we were sitting across from each other, I pulled off my backpack, which contained only one thing: the red notebook. Well, it also contained a bottle of water for Izzy, but that hardly counted. I hadn’t wanted to have to explain the notebook to my mom or, worse, Matt and Chris, who enjoyed busting me on stuff, so I’d tucked it in my bag to keep it a secret until now.

I undid the zipper, pulled out the notebook and slid it across the table toward Jenna.

She frowned down at it and then up at me. “What’s this?”

“Gertabeth’s notebook. Izzy and I found it in the cemetery yesterday.”

“Ohhhhhh,” she said as her eyes widened, and then she pushed it away like it was a plate of fried liver. “Wait. It doesn’t *really* include the names of all the kids she’s eaten, does it?”

I shook my head. “Worse.”

“Worse?” Jenna shrieked. Her eyes got even wider. “Like...the names of the kids she’s *planning* to eat?”

I shook my head. “Worse.”

Her voice was now almost a squeak, it was so high. “Worse than some lady who wants to eat people?”

I rolled my eyes. “Jenna, please. This isn’t the old Hansel and Gretel fairy tale—that stuff doesn’t really happen.”

“Obviously I know that,” she huffed, her voice almost back to normal. “But what could be worse than that? Eating kids is pretty bad, Ruthie.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Nobody eats kids in real life.” I tapped my finger on the red leather cover. “This notebook. Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” she said impatiently. “I’m ready. Come on, Ruthie!”

“This notebook,” I repeated dramatically, “contains a plot to kill the mayor.”

Jenna stared at me and then exclaimed, “The mayor! What do you mean, the mayor?! *Our* mayor?”

I’d known Jenna would freak out at that. One of her moms worked at city hall in the clerk’s office. She mostly did boring stuff with different types of licenses, but she knew the mayor really well. They’d even been invited to the special city-hall staff Christmas party at the mayor’s home the year before. “But why?” Jenna asked. “I love the mayor! She’s the nicest person ever!”

I opened the notebook to the first page and pushed it back toward her. On it was a sketch of the outside of city hall. There were lots of scribbled notes around the sketch and in the page margins, all about the security system and cameras. There were arrows pointing at the mayor’s office windows and notes about their height and what length of ladder you’d need to climb up to them.

The drawing on the next page was a floor plan of all the offices. There were tons more notes in the margins about what office belonged to whom. Jenna’s mom’s name wasn’t there (I’d checked), but she didn’t have her own office at city hall, just a window, like at a bank. Still, she could be in danger.

“Whoa,” Jenna said, glancing up at me. “This is weird!”

“Wait,” I said as I flipped the page and pointed. “Look.”

JOANNE LEVY

The next page was a list. The heading? *MURDER WEAPONS*.

Jenna gasped, just like I had the night before when I'd seen it.

"Murder weapons! What the what?" Jenna asked, looking at me with eyes wide as saucers.

"Keep going," I said, gesturing at the book with my chin.

She looked back down and then read the list aloud, her voice getting higher and louder with each word. "Knife, samurai sword, gun, crossbow, poison, a bronze globe—wait." She frowned up at me. "A globe?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't put it on there."

She looked back down at the list. "That is so messed up. Murder?!"

"Shhh," I said, looking over my shoulder, but the two grown-ups were busy talking. "I know, right? Murder weapons and all those plans of the building. Ladders for breaking in. That adds up to a pretty detailed plot to kill the mayor. I couldn't believe it, but it's right there. I mean, just look." I poked at the pages again with my pointer finger. Normally Jenna was the one to jump to conclusions about crimes, but there was no denying that a plan for a crime was what we were seeing.

"That is just...whoa," Jenna said, flipping to the page before and then back again. "I can't believe this. And that she left it just sitting in the park for anyone to find!"

"I don't think she left it on purpose," I said. "I think she dropped it. Izzy found it under the bench in a patch of grass that the mower missed."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Jenna nodded. "That makes sense."

"And then look at this," I said, flipping a few pages farther and pointing at a page of writing.

I miss my mark
Death envelops
The world no longer turns
Except it does
For all but you
And yet, I am alone

Jenna read it and then looked up at me, frowning. "What a creepy poem."

"I know—but I think it's more than that," I said. I'd read the notebook long into the night. Way after lights-out. Even after the batteries in my flashlight had died. I'd waited for everyone to go to bed and then snuck out to the kitchen to get a new set from the junk drawer.

I'd studied every inch of that notebook so well, I had a feeling I knew what it meant. Mostly.

"A mark is a target. So 'miss my mark' maybe means she tried once and it didn't work. Maybe with an envelope—can you die by paper cut?"

Jenna screwed up her face. "I mean, they hurt a lot, but I don't think so. How would you even do that?"

I shrugged. "But then I think the part about the world turning, that means the globe is the murder weapon, like on the list. Is there a globe at city hall?"

JOANNE LEVY

“Oh my gosh, yes!” Jenna nodded excitedly as her eyes got wider and wider. “In the mayor’s inner office. She has a big one. I know because Mom took me on Take Your Kid to Work Day!”

I sat back and crossed my arms, pretty proud that I’d solved the mystery. “So, there it is. She failed once, but she’s going to try again with the globe. Maybe she’s going to mail the newspaper about it in an *envelope*. And she works alone.” I tapped my finger on the final line of the poem.

Jenna screwed up her face. “I don’t know. A globe seems like a pretty awful weapon. That thing is big. It probably weighs a ton too.”

I’d already thought of that. “Yes, but it means she doesn’t have to take it in with her. If she took in a gun or a sword, she’d be stopped by security for sure. But if the murder weapon is already there...”

“Oh, that’s smart,” Jenna agreed, pointing at me. “Good thinking, Ruthie. So what should we do?”

“I think it’s obvious,” I said.

“You’re right.” Jenna nodded decisively. “Um, what?”

I rolled my eyes. “We have to stop it.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Jenna said. “We’re going to have to go to the mayor’s office and save her life.” She started to stand up.

“Jenna,” I said, motioning for her to sit back down. “We’re kids. We can’t stop an actual murder.” Plus, even the brave Darylinda would have known better than to try to stop a murder without having serious backup, and *she* had a deadly horn on her face. We were just a couple of kids with a dog

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

who loved everyone. “And, well, it’s Saturday, so city hall’s not even open.”

“Good point,” she said, deflating a little, like she was disappointed that she wasn’t going to actually stop a murder plot by herself. “So, what do you propose?”

“We have to go to the police.”

“Oh,” Jenna said. “Yeah. That’s a much better idea. Okay, good plan.”

I closed up the notebook and slid it into my backpack as we got up.

“Come on, Izzy,” I called out. Like the good dog she was, Izzy came running. Her tongue was hanging out, and she was panting hard from playing so exuberantly with her friends. I pulled open the spigot of her water bottle and squeezed, shooting the stream of water into her mouth. When she was done, I put the leash on her and nodded at Jenna.

“All right, let’s go to the police station.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It wasn't our first time at the police station—we'd been there on a school field trip. We'd met some officers and learned about when to call 9-1-1 and other safety stuff. But this was obviously different.

By the time we got to the doors, I felt weird. Definitely not quite as sure of our plan.

Jenna frowned as she looked up at the big building. "You're sure we have to go in there?"

I nodded. "We need to report the plot so we can save the mayor." But I didn't sound as confident as I had been before. Neither did I move to grab the door handle.

"Right, of course. Because the mayor is in danger," Jenna said. It sounded like she was trying to convince me. And maybe herself.

"Totally," I said, not moving. "A lot of danger."

"So..." Jenna shuffled her feet. "We're going in, right?"

Izzy whined and pressed her body against my leg. It was like she was calling me a chicken, which would have upset me except that maybe she was right. The reminder of her beside me made me realize something.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Oh, wait a minute. I can’t go in with Izzy.” I pointed at the sign on the door that said *No Pets*. “You’d better go.” I held out the notebook.

She didn’t take it. Instead she looked at the door. “But the sign says service dogs are allowed, so you can go in with Izzy. She’s as good as a service dog.”

“She’s *not* a service dog, though,” I said. “You can’t lie to the police, Jenna.”

“Oh,” Jenna said. “Well, I can hold her. You know, since you found the notebook. You should be the one to go in and report it. You’ll need to tell them where you found it and everything.”

I opened my mouth to protest when the door opened.

We turned to face the uniformed officer standing there. It was a man, but not one of the ones we’d met on the field trip. He was about my dad’s age, with dark skin and a bald head. The silver badge over his chest pocket said *Roberts 553*.

“You girls okay?” he asked.

“Oh,” Jenna said, standing up straight. “Yes, sir. We’re fine, but—wait. How did you know we were here?”

He smiled and pointed up at a security camera attached to the building, aimed down at us. “We were watching from the desk. We thought you might never come in.”

Just then Izzy let out a yip and stepped forward to greet the officer.

With a smile, Officer Roberts crouched down to give Izzy some love, scratching behind her ears. “And who is this?”

“That’s Isabella, sir,” I said. “Izzy for short. She’s a service-dog dropout. But she’s still the best dog ever.”

JOANNE LEVY

He laughed. “She certainly is the friendliest.” He gave her an extra ear scratch before he stood up. “So what can I do for you?”

Jenna took a deep breath and then turned to me.

Thanks a lot, I thought. *Time to channel my Darylinda.* “So...” I cleared my throat and held up the book. “We found this notebook in the cemetery.”

The officer nodded. “And you wanted to turn it in to the lost and found.”

“Um, yes. Sort of?” I said. “I mean, we know who lost it. But we’re not exactly here because of that.”

Officer Roberts tilted his head and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a plot to kill the mayor!” Jenna blurted out, pointing at the book as though it had just burst into flames.

The officer did a double take. “What’s that now?”

Jenna nodded, her eyes wide. “Ruthie found it, and there’s a plot in it to kill the mayor. There are maps and everything. But don’t worry, it won’t be today, because city hall is closed on the weekends, so you have time to stop it. But yeah, you’re going to have to save the mayor. Who is awesome, by the way. Oh, and also, it wasn’t us who wrote it. So don’t arrest us, please.”

Officer Roberts stared at her for a very long time.

Jenna was struggling not to fidget. She swallowed and then looked down at her shoes.

“Okay,” the officer finally said, and then looked at me, taking the book when I held it out to him. “And you know whose notebook this is?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Yes,” I said. “It belongs to the lady who sits on a bench in the cemetery. The one closest to the front gates.”

“The lady who...” His eyebrows went up. “A name would be helpful.”

“Uh...” I said.

“Gertabeth!” Jenna blurted.

I glared at her. “That’s not her real name.”

Officer Roberts opened the book and began to flip through the pages. “No name in here anywhere?”

“No,” I said sadly. “I read every single page. No name. Just, you know, a murder plot.”

The policeman nodded solemnly. “Right. The murder plot. Well, thank you for bringing this to our attention.”

“Wait!” Jenna said. “How will we know when you find her? And that the mayor’s safe? We should probably warn her. I’ll get my mom to call her. She works at city hall.”

Officer Roberts coughed. “You’d better not. You don’t want to compromise the investigation, do you?”

“Oh,” Jenna said, nodding in agreement. “Good point. No, of course we don’t.”

“Thanks again. We’ll take it from here,” he said, and then, after giving Izzy a final scratch on the head, he disappeared inside.

Jenna and I looked at each other. I gave her the unicorn salute. “Sarabettina and Darylinda save the day again. We’re heroes!”

“Of course we are!” she said, saluting back. “And don’t forget Izzy! She found the notebook in the first place!”

Izzy yipped as if to say, *Yeah! Don’t forget me!*

As if we ever could.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I was sure the police would find Gertabeth and arrest her immediately. So sure that I asked my dad to put on the local news while we ate dinner so I could see the story about it. Normally dinner was screen-free time, but sometimes Dad would make an exception. Especially if it was for hockey playoffs.

He grabbed the remote. “You’ve never been interested in news before.”

“I’m maturing,” I said with a shrug as I stabbed a potato with my fork. “It’s important to know what’s going on in the world.”

“That’s very true,” he said. He found the local station just as the six o’clock newscast was starting. As I picked at my chicken, I waited impatiently to hear about the foiled plot.

But it wasn’t the first headline. Or the second. Or even the third or fourth. Then it was the weather. Sports, entertainment, then the weather again. *Seriously? Who cares that much about the weather? It’ll be warm and sunny—we get it!*

Then, before I knew it, the news was over. No mention of the mayor or a notebook or a weird lady who was maybe

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

a burglar but who had definitely been plotting a murder and was now in jail. Nothing.

But I knew now what the weather was going to be like for the next seven days, how a local automotive parts plant was shutting down and how an old actor I'd never heard of had died at the age of ninety-six. Oh, and did I mention the weather?

"Why do you seem so disappointed?" Dad asked. "I hope it's not the chicken."

"Oh," I said, giving him a smile as I glanced down at my nearly empty plate. "Not at all. It's really good. The potatoes too. But can I be excused? I need to call Jenna. It's...about our project."

He gave me a weird look, like he didn't believe me, but nodded. "Put your dishes away first."

Jenna had watched the news too, so when I called her, she was just as surprised as me that there hadn't been a story about Gertabeth. "Maybe they haven't figured out her name yet," she suggested. "I bet they're checking the notebook for fingerprints. That's how they do it on *CSI*. I hope they don't find ours and think we wrote it, though. Do you think they would? We're not going to get arrested, are we?" Her voice got higher with each question.

"No," I said. "We have small fingerprints. And anyway, Officer Roberts knows we weren't involved. I don't think he would have been so nice if he thought we were behind the plot."

"You're right," Jenna agreed, sounding relieved. "Good point. But ugh, Ruthie! I hope we find out soooooon. The suspense!"

JOANNE LEVY

“I know,” I said, feeling just as anxious as her. “I bet they’ll find her before the mayor goes back to work on Monday. They’d have to solve it by then.”

“Right,” Jenna said. “It’ll definitely be over by then.”

But then Monday came and went. We watched the news, waiting for the story. But nothing.

It was officially a mystery.

One we were absolutely determined to solve.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

So here's the thing about mysteries. When you're kids who have to go to school, and you don't know the name of the person who wrote in a notebook about a planned murder, and you don't have your own CSI lab or even access to the notebook anymore, there really isn't much you can do to solve them.

By Thursday we were no closer to knowing what had happened with the notebook. It had rained for a couple of days, keeping us from the park, but when we did go, we didn't see Gertabeth there. There had been nothing on the news, and we'd watched every night. And Jenna's mom hadn't come home with a story about a foiled plot to hurt the mayor or even a mention of increased security at city hall.

She'd only said everything was fine and normal, like every other day, and why did Jenna keep asking, for goodness' sake?

We were relieved, of course, that nothing bad had happened. Still. We expected some follow-up.

But now I had something else to think about—my twelfth birthday. That meant a special breakfast cooked by Stepbrad (Mom had to leave early for work, but not before coming into my room and giving me a big birthday hug and

JOANNE LEVY

kiss), a day of being wished a happy birthday by my friends at school and then dinner out with my family (and Jenna).

I sort of wished I'd said yes to a party when my mom had offered. But now that they were interviewing contractors and maybe looking for a new house, they'd mentioned a few times that we'd have to cut back on "frills." I had a feeling a big party was a frill. Especially when I'd be having a very big party the following year for my bat mitzvah.

But going for pizza at the Station restaurant was my favorite thing to do, and I'd get to celebrate with my bestie and my whole family, so it was still going to be a good day. Dad was coming with Grandma Carol and Grandpa Phil, his parents, and Bubby (my mom's mother) was also meeting us there. Oh, and Stepbrad. And Chris and Matt, of course, since they were my new family and I couldn't avoid them.

After school Jenna stayed on the bus with me, and we took Izzy to the park to exercise her before we went out for my celebration. If she'd been a real service dog, we could have taken her with us, but dropouts weren't allowed.

We took her through the woods to the cemetery, but Gertabeth wasn't there.

We wondered where she was and decided she must have heard we were onto her and was hiding in her basement. Or she'd run away to Antarctica or something. Jenna had even joked that maybe she had escaped to Faravelle Forest.

Speaking of Faravelle Forest, no matter how much we'd talked about it, Jenna and I still had no good ideas for book eight. We promised each other that once the Gertabeth mystery

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

was solved, we'd return to figuring out our story. I suspected Jenna wasn't as excited as I was anymore, but first things first.

Real-world problems, then made-up ones.

"What are you going to have?" Jenna asked me. We were sitting at one end of the giant table in the center of the huge main room of the Station. It was so noisy in there—tons of families, everyone talking and laughing, enjoying themselves at the best restaurant in the world. Every once in a while the wait staff would come out and sing "Happy Birthday" to someone at a different table.

They'd do that for me, too, but not until dessert. I was already excited about it, though. I'd get a special hat and a piece of cake with a lit sparkler on it. I loved everything about this place. Especially, maybe, the delicious smells—zesty tomato sauce, cheese, pasta, pizza. And the garlic loaf they brought to the table while you decided what to have. I couldn't wait until they brought us ours.

We were still waiting for Dad and my grandparents, but we'd already gotten our root beer floats (it being a special occasion and all). Jenna had left hers to melt so she could mix it all together, but I'd eaten a few spoonfuls of the ice cream before it mixed in. It was like eating dessert first (even though I'd still get another dessert at the end of the meal after my pizza!). Have I mentioned how much I love this place?

Jenna was on one side of me and Bubby was on the other, her reading glasses low on her nose as she looked at the menu too. I didn't know why she bothered—she always got the chicken parm.

"Pizza for sure," I said to Jenna. "Pineapple and double mushrooms. Want to share?"

JOANNE LEVY

Jenna made a face, just as I knew she would. “Pineapple? And mushrooms? On pizza? Blech. No, thanks. I’m going to get the Margherita. It’s not just delicious but it’s fun to say, isn’t it? Margherita.” She said it slowly and in a fake Italian accent, making me laugh.

I liked the Margherita, which was just a fancy way of saying cheese and basil pizza, but mushroom and pineapple was my favorite topping combo. I considered it a bonus that no one else would eat it. It meant I’d get lots of leftovers to take home that wouldn’t disappear before I’d had a chance to eat them. Which was pretty important, because when you lived with teenagers, you quickly learned that they would eat almost anything, including *your* leftovers. Well, Matt wouldn’t eat my pizza because of his celiac disease, but Chris and even Stepbrad couldn’t be trusted without the pineapple-and-mushrooms defense.

“OMG!” Jenna suddenly whispered urgently as she jabbed her elbow in my side. “Ruthie, OMG, Ruthie!” Then she jabbed me again.

“Ow! Jenna!” I angled away from her before she could poke me a third time. “What is it?”

“Look,” she said, not moving her lips. She was staring toward the front door of the restaurant. “It’s...OMG... Gertabeth,” she said, so softly that I almost didn’t hear it.

Oh, but I’d heard it. “*What?*”

I glanced over to where she was looking. There, beside the hostess stand, was Gertabeth. Or, rather, the lady we called Gertabeth—not the unicorn, obviously. She was wearing jeans and a cute top that made her look nice. Not

like a murderer at all. Not that you could always tell—sometimes murderers looked like regular people. That was what made them especially dangerous.

She was talking to the hostess, who took one of the big menus off the pile on her podium and nodded as she crossed something off her clipboard. I looked back at my friend. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” Jenna said with a shrug. “Should we call the police? We should probably call the police.”

“Maybe,” I said. Another time when having my own phone would have been really helpful. “I’ll see if I can get my mom’s phone.”

But Mom was on the other side of the long table and way down at the other end. She was turned away from me, talking to Stepbrad.

I was about to get up and go over there when Bubby asked, “Everything okay, Ruthie?”

“Oh!” I said, turning toward her. “Can I use your phone?”

She smiled. “Is it to take a birthday selfie?” Before I could answer, she put her arm around me and pulled me in tight. “Get ready! Say, ‘It’s my birthday!’”

I did, laughing awkwardly as she took a picture of us, our cheeks smooshed together.

“Ruthie!” Jenna said in my ear as she jammed that pointy elbow in my side again.

“Oof!” I grunted. “Thanks, Bubby. Can I use it for—”

“Oh!” she said. “Look who it is!” And then, before I could even figure out what was happening, she jumped up out of her chair and strode quickly toward the door.

JOANNE LEVY

No. Not toward the door.

Right. Toward. Gertabeth.

I held my breath. *What is happening right now?*

And then the two women hugged. *Hugged.* Like they knew each other and were long-lost friends or something. They pulled away and Bubby said something. Gertabeth smiled and nodded.

Then both of them turned toward us. All the voices and sounds in the restaurant faded, and all I could hear in that second was my heart pounding in my ears. Tears pricked at my eyes, because what was happening?

“What the *what?*” Jenna whispered.

“I don’t know,” was all I could say.

“Ruthie!” She yanked on my shirt. “Your grandma knows Gertabeth! Your grandma is friends with a murderer!”

“Shhhh!” I hissed at Jenna, keeping my eyes on the women as I pulled my good shirt out of her grasp before it got stretched out.

“Ruthie!” Jenna said.

“I know,” I squeaked. “I mean, I *don’t* know. What is happening?”

One thing I *did* know? I wasn’t cut out for solving mysteries after all. Detectives never felt like this, I was sure. I had no idea what to do.

So I did nothing. I didn’t call. I didn’t run. I didn’t do anything other than sit there and stare and do my best not to cry while ignoring the bony elbow that Jenna kept ramming into my side. Which then abruptly stopped. Because now Gertabeth was right beside us.

“Look who it is, Ruthie!” my grandmother said in a singsongy voice.

I glanced at her, and she was grinning so widely, I knew she was totally clueless. But how did she know Gertabeth?

And then my brain just skidded to a halt. “Wha—?” was all I said.

Gertabeth’s eyes widened, and she suddenly seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see her. “Wait a minute. *You* are Rachel’s granddaughter?”

Rachel was my bubby’s name. I nodded.

Bubby was still smiling at me. “You don’t mind if she joins us for your birthday dinner, do you, Ruthie? I invited her to be your special guest as a surprise.”

“I don’t like surprises,” I said automatically as I tried to process what was happening.

She’d just asked me if I wouldn’t mind a murderer at my special birthday dinner. Why would I want a murderer as my special guest?

This. This was the kind of thing that made me hate surprises. I hated not knowing what to expect. That anything might happen. That no matter what I might hope for, things never turned out that way. And I had zero say in any of it.

The ice cream in my stomach seemed to sour. I wanted to run away. I wished Izzy was with me so I could rub her ears for comfort.

“Ruthie?” Bubby looked puzzled.

“I...” I was still clutching Bubby’s phone, so hard that my knuckles were white.

JOANNE LEVY

“You’re not going to call the police on me again, are you?” Gertabeth said, the corner of her lips turning up into a tiny smirk.

Gab! She knew?!

“What? Call the police?!” Bubby exclaimed, her head swiveling from Gertabeth to me and back, like she was watching a very confusing tennis match. “Ruthie? Why would you call the police on your favorite author? And wait. *Again?*”

Jenna gasped.

“My favorite...*what?*” was all I could get out.

Bubby crossed her arms over her chest. “Can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

Gertabeth suddenly laughed and put her hand on Bubby’s arm. “Not to worry, Rachel. There was no harm done. It was simply a big misunderstanding. These girls found my journal and apparently thought my notes were a plot to assassinate the mayor.” She looked pointedly at me and Jenna. “Which is not at all what they were. They were just an author’s ramblings as she plots a *book*. Not an *actual* murder.

“Although,” she went on, “I suppose they were being good citizens when they told the police what I was plotting—the murder, not the book. And that I had to be found and arrested immediately.”

Bubby coughed. Or maybe she laughed and covered it up with a cough. “So wait,” she said, pointing from Gertabeth to me and then back again. “You know each other?”

I could have asked my grandmother the same question. But she was staring at me, waiting for an answer.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Sort of,” I said, my brain still whirling, but now in a different direction. “But...wait a minute.” If Bubby had said what I thought she’d said...

I turned to Jenna and grabbed her arm. “Favorite author?” I turned back. “Just a second. Are you LEXI MARKS?”

Jenna shook her head. “No. It couldn’t be. OUR VERY FAVORITE AUTHOR IN ALL THE WORLD?” She was hollering too now, but in the noisy restaurant, no one even noticed.

Gertabeth nodded.

“But you don’t have curly black hair,” Jenna said suspiciously. “Your author photo shows curly black hair and red glasses.”

“Jenna,” I squeaked. “That author photo is a *comic*. It’s not real.”

Gertabeth didn’t seem mad as she shrugged and looked up toward the ceiling. “I don’t bother with perms or coloring anymore. And I got new glasses. That illustrated portrait was done a long time ago.”

Together my best friend and I looked at her, the woman we’d been calling Gertabeth.

She was smiling and nodding. “It really is me. I promise.”

It all clicked into place. “THE INVENTOR OF FARAVELLE FOREST?!” I couldn’t help but yell. Because was the woman in front of me really the very best author in all the world, the AH-MA-ZING Lexi Marks? Could it even be possible? Was this even my life?

She smiled and winked at me. “Happy birthday, Ruthie. I understand you’re a fan.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

What I was expecting to be a nice dinner at my favorite restaurant suddenly turned into the best birthday celebration in the history of birthdays. I barely tasted my mushroom and pineapple pizza, but whatever. Who cares about pizza when you're sitting beside the best author ever?

Once my grandmother swore she wasn't pranking me, Jenna and I made room so Lexi could sit between us. Even though it wasn't Jenna's birthday, she was (almost) as big a fan as I was, so of course she'd want to sit beside Lexi too.

Bubby said she sat with Lexi nearly every Monday at their weekly mah-jongg game.

What?

Bubby and I would be having a talk later about how she had known Lexi Marks this whole time and never told me. Of course, I realized now that my Unicorns book seven really *had* been signed by the author, so that was amazing (and OMG, now it needed its own special shelf and pedestal, and maybe I'd never touch it again without wearing special gloves), but still. All this time I could have been forging my new best friendship with *Lexi Marks*.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

But instead Jenna and I had been making up terrible stories about nefarious plots and going to the police on her.

Thankfully, she wasn't mad—she actually seemed to think it was funny. But it was still extremely embarrassing.

Anyway, it turned out that Lexi Marks's real name was Alexis Roth. And she said that all her close friends called her Ally. And that *I* should call her Ally (!).

Ally Roth, who was really Lexi Marks who wanted me to call her Ally, was the special guest for my birthday!

I still couldn't believe it. I had a billion questions to ask her. But I felt weird after that whole police thing. And then calling her Gertabeth after the crabby old unicorn from *her* books. The ones *she* wrote. I hoped the police hadn't mentioned that and that she'd never find out. I would be absolutely mortified.

There were so many things I wanted to talk to her about, but I knew she wouldn't want to answer tons of questions from an annoying kid. It was already enough that she was even there, sitting beside me, on my birthday.

Jenna didn't seem to have the same reluctance. In fact, she seemed to have lost the requirement to even breathe. She was asking a few questions, but mostly she was reciting nonstop her favorite parts from the books, almost word for word. I knew they were word for word because they were *my* favorite parts too. We'd acted them out in the woods many times. I wondered if Ally would think that was weird. Probably.

Jenna finally did stop talking long enough to take a few bites of her pizza. I was about to ask Ally about book eight when Grandma Carol asked me how I was doing in school.

JOANNE LEVY

Honestly? I'd kind of forgotten my other grandparents were even there. I fought a sigh. It wasn't fair to be annoyed at my family. It was my birthday, and they were there for me. Normally I loved seeing my grandparents, who were old but were still cool people. Grandma Carol was a geneticist—a scientist who researches DNA—and Grandpa Phil acted in tons of commercials. They always told the best stories.

But today I'd barely said hi to the two of them when they came in with Dad. I'd exchanged hugs and kisses with them before they sat across from us. But I'd basically been ignoring them since then, not wanting to miss even one word that came out of Ally's mouth.

I felt my father's glare on my face. Yes, I was being rude, but who could blame me? I had a legit famous author sitting right beside me. She was my special guest—Bubby had said so.

"School is okay," I said. "Same old...you know."

"Still planning to be a famous novelist?" Grandpa Phil asked.

I glanced over at Ally, hoping she hadn't just heard that. Ugh, so embarrassing!

But Ally was looking right at me, her eyebrows high up on her forehead like she was waiting for my answer.

"I dunno," I said with a shrug. "Maybe."

"You're very creative," Grandma Carol said, and then looked at Ally. "She wrote a wonderful story last year about—"

"Grandma!" I blurted out, because OMG, she was not going to tell Ally about the silly story I'd written for school the year before, about fairy clones taking over the world. Ugh!

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

It was so awful. But Grandma and Grandpa had loved it and even put it up on their fridge. Now I had to see it every time I went over there. I mean, it was nice that they'd saved it, but did they have to bring it up *now*? In front of a famous author? "Why don't you tell Ally about your science research?" I suggested. "I'm sure she'd be interested."

She was. Or she pretended to be and was just being polite. Whatever. At least it changed the subject.

Finally, after we'd finished eating and the server had taken the plates away, including my leftovers to be boxed up, the restaurant staff came out with my birthday cake, topped with a lit sparkler.

But when they sang to me, all I could focus on was that Lexi Marks/Ally Roth was sitting right next to me, singing "Happy Birthday." To me, the luckiest girl in the world—at least, in that very moment.

The only thing that would have made it better would be if she'd pulled a copy of book eight out of her giant purse and handed it to me, complete with her signature, which I would know was real right away this time. But when I made my wish, it didn't happen.

I had only taken the first bite of my cake when I finally got up the courage to turn to her and ask (after I was done swallowing, of course), "So...um...Ally?"

She smiled at me, and I almost fainted because she was just so amazing and nice and everything I could have hoped she'd be. "Yes?"

"Um...what happened to book eight?"

JOANNE LEVY

“Oh,” she said. It seemed like a regular enough question, but she pursed her lips, and her forehead crinkled into a frown. Then she glanced at my grandmother for a moment before she looked at me and said, “It’s complicated.”

It’s complicated?

“What does that mean?” Jenna asked.

“Girls,” Bubby said. “Why don’t you finish your dessert?”

It wasn’t really a question. And it wasn’t like she actually cared if we finished our dessert. It was one of those “I’m changing the subject on purpose” things that grown-ups say when it’s too awkward to actually say “I’m changing the subject on purpose.” Even though everyone knows what they’re doing.

“Oh,” I said, and turned toward Ally. “Sorry,” I added, though I wasn’t sure what I’d done wrong. But I’d obviously upset her by bringing up book eight. It was also obvious that my Bubby knew what “it’s complicated” meant.

“Don’t be sorry,” Ally said. But she looked really sad. Then all of a sudden her face brightened. “Oh! I nearly forgot your birthday gift!”

I nearly choked on my cake when I exclaimed, “You mean *you’re* not my gift?”

“Ruthie,” Jenna said with a big eye roll. “You can’t gift *a person*. You don’t get to *keep* her.”

I clucked at my friend. “I meant her being here, Jenna. Sheesh.”

Ally laughed. “Well, my being here is your grandmother’s gift to you, but I brought you a little something too. Can’t come to a birthday party empty-handed, can I?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

She reached into her bag and pulled out a wooden bookmark that was shaped like a unicorn. On it was written *All rainbows lead to Faravelle. Yours in sparkle, Lexi Marks*. Just like what was in my signed book!

“Oh my goodness!” I said, staring at the bookmark, which was magical perfection. Just like my birthday had become.

“It’s not much,” Ally said. “But I understand you have all the books already.”

I beamed a smile at her. “I do. They’re my absolute favorite things in the world and...I mean...this is...” I began to cry, big fat happy tears, because today was the best day ever and I was so overwhelmed with happiness and just couldn’t hold it in one second longer. “Thank you so much. I’m crying because I’m happy, by the way. Not because I’m sad at all. Feelings are complicated.”

“I absolutely understand that,” Ally said, and she was nodding seriously, so I could tell she knew it was true.

“That is such a cool bookmark!” Jenna said. And she was being really nice about it, but I could tell just from her voice that she was jealous. Her last birthday had been spent at the Community Center pool. Still fun, but not the same.

Ally smiled at her. “I happen to have an extra, if you’d li—”

“Yes, please!” Jenna squealed, clapping her hands and bouncing in her chair.

Ally laughed and put my bookmark down on the table beside me. I was about to pick it up to have a closer look at it when I noticed a blob of red icing on my hand. I used my

JOANNE LEVY

napkin on it, but I didn't feel clean enough. "I'm going to go wash my hands. I'll be right back."

I rushed off to the bathroom, eager to get that done so I could pick up my special new signed-by-the-famous-author-Lexi-Marks-who-told-me-to-call-her-Ally bookmark. As I got to the bathroom and pushed open the door, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so happy about anything.

But all that changed one second later. When I saw my mother standing at the sink, her face covered in blood.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“MOM?!”

My mother whirled around toward me. “Ruthie?” Her left palm shot up as though to hold me back, away from her, but it was her other hand I was focused on. The one pressing a wad of blood-soaked paper towel against her face.

My heart was pounding as hard in my chest as if I’d just run a marathon.

Had she barfed and fallen into the toilet face-first?

Did she have a concussion?

Was she going to have brain damage?

What about the—

I looked at her belly, but it looked the same. Flat. I’d never have guessed there was a baby in there if I hadn’t seen it on the ultrasound. Could she feel it in there? How would she know if something was wrong?

“What happened?” I asked, tears pouring out of my eyes. Not from happiness this time, though.

“Ruthie, Ruthie, it’s fine!” she said, her voice muffled by the paper. “It’s just a nosebleed. Please don’t cry, honey.”

I took another staggered breath as her words sunk in. “What?”

JOANNE LEVY

She pulled the bloody paper away from her face and looked in the mirror, tipping her head back and flaring her nostrils. “I think it’s stopped.” She glanced at me in the mirror. “It’s just a nosebleed, Ruthie. No big deal. You’ve had nosebleeds before.”

She was right. I’d gotten one after being smashed in the face by a soccer ball in PE class. It had hurt. A lot. Reminding me of that wasn’t helping.

“What happened?” I asked. “Did you get hit or something?” I wasn’t the kind of person who normally fainted at blood or anything, but I suddenly felt a little dizzy. It all felt like too much.

She turned on the tap and wet some clean paper towel, then carefully cleaned around her nose, still looking in the mirror. “No. I didn’t fall or get hit. It’s just a pregnancy thing.” Then she turned to look at me straight on. “Please don’t worry, Ruthie.”

Don’t worry? She randomly gets a nosebleed and says not to worry because it’s “just a pregnancy thing”? Was she kidding? Wasn’t losing blood dangerous? Couldn’t it hurt the baby? Shouldn’t she be more freaked out?

She tossed the paper towel into the garbage and grabbed a fresh one before she came over to me. She held my chin in place as she dabbed at my tears. A moment later she tossed that paper into the trash too and then grabbed me gently by both shoulders. “Ruthie?”

My eyes were on the rusty-red floor tiles. I wondered if I’d see the blood if any had dripped on the floor. I sniffled.

“Look at me, honey.”

I didn’t want to, but I did.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

She was staring at me intently. "It's fine. I'm fine. *We're* fine."

We're fine. I didn't think she meant me as part of the *we* in that sentence. But how could she be so sure the baby was fine? She hadn't known the last time when...

"Mom." I sniffed. "Shouldn't you go to the hospital or something? What if..."

She squeezed my shoulders and then pulled me into a hug. "It's stopped," she said as she tucked me into her. "It's fine. It was just a little blood, which always seems scary, but it looked worse than it was."

"Will it..." I took a big breath. "Will it hurt the baby?"

She pulled out of the hug and held me by my shoulders again, her eyes like lasers. "No. It was just a little nosebleed. Nothing to be alarmed about and perfectly normal in pregnancy, as weird as it seems. Growing a baby takes extra blood, so many pregnant women are vulnerable to nosebleeds." She took a big breath before she went on. "But Ruthie, I promise you, if anything happens that puts me or this baby at any risk, I *will* go to the hospital."

She could promise that, but she couldn't promise that what had happened last time wouldn't happen again.

"I don't want you to worry," she said.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said. I didn't want to worry either, but nothing I thought or did would make any kind of difference. All of this was totally out of my control. So, of course, I was going to worry.

She gave me another hug. "Are we good, Ruthie?" she asked when she pulled away.

JOANNE LEVY

“Sure,” I lied, swallowing back my tears. “I need to pee.”

She gave me a concerned-mom look. “You all right, Ruthie May?”

“Yes. Perfect. Everything is great,” I lied again, then left her to go into a stall, locking the door.

She sighed. “I’m going out there before Brad comes looking for me. I hope you’re having a great time with your special guest. Make sure you remember to thank your grandmother. She was behind all that.”

“Fine,” I said. “I will.”

I heard the door open and close with a squeak, and I let out a breath.

And just like that, my birthday had gone from the top of Sparkle Mountain, the most magical place of all, to a real-life, blood-filled house of horrors.



After I left the bathroom, I returned to my seat between Ally and Bubby. Everyone was done eating, and all the plates had been cleared. My unicorn bookmark was on top of a pile of envelopes stacked at my spot. There were two gift bags on my chair.

It was time to open my gifts—the special things everyone had brought for my birthday. Twenty minutes ago I would have been squealing with joy.

But now? I barely cared at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

On regular school days, I liked seeing my friends and being in class, but today I was relieved that it was a PA day. I was glad to be able to sleep in and not have to deal with what I was sure would have been a drama-filled day.

Jenna would have started by telling everyone about meeting Ally/Lexi. Then she'd have shown off the bookmark and bragged to everyone that we were now besties with our favorite author ever.

It *was* exciting, and normally I'd have been right there with her, telling everyone about Ally coming to my birthday dinner as a special guest.

Except I just couldn't get the picture of my mom's bloody face out of my head.

Even though, when we got home, she'd made me sit with her while she googled *nosebleeds in pregnancy* and shown me that it was common and really wasn't a big deal. It didn't matter how many different sites said the same thing. I still felt sad. And scared.

Mom had gotten sad then too, telling me she wished I could be as excited about the baby as she was.

JOANNE LEVY

That just made me feel worse. Why didn't she get it? I couldn't start thinking everything would be okay and get excited about a sibling and being a big sister and then have the same thing happen again.

I couldn't. I just couldn't go through that again. Especially if Mom got sad like before, and I was helpless to do anything but watch her suffer through her depression.

Maybe she'd forgotten what it had been like, but I sure hadn't. She hadn't gotten out of bed for over three weeks. She'd cried every day. She'd tried to hide it—telling me (and having Dad tell me) that her body was healing. But *please!* I had eyes and ears.

At first, before I'd really figured it out, I'd liked that Dad would make hot dogs or fish sticks or we'd get takeout. But after about a week, I'd gotten sick of it. Worse than that was the empty space at the dinner table. The one neither Dad nor I talked about. Instead we'd acted like robots, pretending nothing was wrong and eating junk food. But everything was wrong. It had felt like it would never be right again ever.

Eventually Bubby had started coming over and cooking dinners and tidying up the house, taking care of me when Dad returned to work (he worked at a real office back then). She'd also spent time with Mom in her room, sometimes with the door closed. I didn't know what they'd done or talked about, but I'd thought it helped.

In time Mom had started to get better, coming out for meals and pretending she was interested in my life. Then we'd started to go to therapy, and that's where I learned about grief and feelings and what depression was.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

A while later Mom had started getting dressed every day and doing regular things again. Finally she'd felt good enough to go to work. Things were getting better. Not like they had been, but better.

And then my parents had separated. We'd gone back to therapy again. Things had gotten a little better from there but were never the same. They would never be the same again, but at least I'd thought we were done with baby drama.

But now here we were.

I didn't want to be this upset, but it wasn't like I'd *asked* to feel sad about everything. I reached for Izzy, who groaned as I rubbed her ears. She accidentally kicked me in the leg as she rolled and snuggled into my side, letting out another sleepy growl. I smiled at how cute she sounded, like an old man who didn't want to get out of bed. Sometimes she liked lying in bed even more than I did. Although never because she was sad.

It was a Friday, so Mom and Stepbrad had to go to work. But on her way out, Mom popped her head into my room and offered to take me to Dad's to start my weekend early if I got out of bed that very second to get ready, but I wasn't in the mood for him to interrogate me about my feelings.

Staying home with Chris and Matt was my best option. They'd play video games and basically ignore me all day.

Izzy and I had breakfast (kibble for her, cereal for me, which was basically human kibble, I guess) and got ready to go out. It was just the two of us, since Jenna's moms had taken the day off from work and the three of them were going to

JOANNE LEVY

Niagara Falls for the weekend. I was a bit jealous that they were going to see the falls and also a butterfly conservatory where you go in this giant building and the butterflies land on you. It sounded really cool. Not as cool as if they were going to the aviary with all the exotic birds, which I knew was also in Niagara Falls, but still.

I grabbed Izzy's water bottle, leash, collar and poop bags, and then my binoculars, which I hung over my neck before I opened the side door. On my way out, I hollered down toward the basement, "I'm taking Izzy to the park!"

Chris and Matt were already up playing their games and didn't bother replying.

It was just after nine thirty, but when I got to the park, the leash-free enclosure was full. There were even kids from my school there—Josh Carr and Mindy Leung and, if I was seeing right, Sal Pinder. I shouldn't have been surprised, since it was a PA day and *I* was there with *my* dog, but I just wasn't in the mood to have to talk to anyone. Especially kids from school.

I took Izzy the other way, keeping her leash on as I went through the woods toward the cemetery, where I would be left alone.

But when I came out of the woods, there was Ally sitting on her bench. I froze for a moment, trying to figure out what to do. Since leaving the restaurant, so many questions had whirled around in my head.

Questions like, Even though she wasn't a murderer, what was the deal with her notebook? Why did she want to write a book about killing the mayor? What about book

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

eight—would she ever tell us about that? And why did she hang out in a cemetery all the time? I wanted to know everything! Now that I'd met her and learned she was friends with my grandmother, I'd hoped that maybe someday I'd get the chance to ask her more questions.

But I'd never imagined it would be today. I wasn't ready. I hadn't prepared. I didn't want to annoy her so much that she'd find a new place to sit.

Plus, there was that whole being-upset-about-Mom-and-the-baby thing. Besides the nosebleed, what other stuff was going to happen to my mother? I couldn't even guess. I supposed I could google about pregnancy, but I had a feeling that would just make me feel worse.

Ugh. I didn't want to think about it. I just wanted to walk with Izzy and look at birds and listen to their songs and not think about anything else for a while.

I was about to quietly turn around and sneak back into the woods when Izzy noticed Ally and yipped a hello. Then she started toward her, pulling on the leash. Obviously my dog hadn't gotten the memo that I didn't want to have to deal with other humans.

It was too much to hope that Ally hadn't heard Izzy's greeting. She lifted her head and looked over and then smiled and waved.

There was no escaping now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I pasted a smile on my face and waved as I started toward Ally.

“I didn’t expect to see you today,” she said with a smile. She had her red notebook (the police must have returned it) on her lap and a pen in her hand. She looked nice in black capri pants and a sleeveless top and sneakers. Her big purse was beside her on the bench.

“PA day, so no school,” I explained. “I didn’t expect to see you either. You haven’t been here lately.” Like, all week. I knew because Jenna and I had checked every day except for the two when it had rained.

She scooted over to the end of the bench and pulled her purse against her, making room for me to sit. “I’ve been coming in the morning. In the afternoon, the sun breaks through the trees right over this bench.” She pointed up at the big gap in the leafy canopy. “I don’t need more sun damage. I have enough wrinkles already,” she added with a laugh.

I didn’t think she had a lot of wrinkles, but I didn’t say anything. Dropping onto the bench, I looped the end of the leash around the metal arm. “Lie down, Izzy,” I instructed, giving her a pet on the head when she obeyed. “Good girl.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I turned toward Ally. “You could sit over there.” I pointed down the path toward the next bench. “That one is right under a giant maple tree. Shade all day.”

She shook her head. “This is my bench. I don’t mind coming in the morning. A bit of change in the routine isn’t a bad thing—keeps me from getting too set in my ways. Not turning into a crotchety hermit is important.” She paused, then added, “I don’t *really* want to be like Gertabeth, do I?”

Ugh. She totally knew about that.

I started to stutter out an apology, but before I got very far, she winked and put a warm hand on my arm, giving me a squeeze. “I was just kidding. Don’t feel bad, Ruthie. I probably did come across as a crabby old unicorn with no magic left in her.” She sighed. “Some days I sure feel that way.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

She went on. “But I do think it was very Darylinda-like to turn in my notebook to the police when you thought something nefarious was afoot.”

Was she saying I was brave like Darylinda? Because seriously? Best. Compliment. Ever.

“Anyway.” She reached down to give Izzy a scratch behind the ear. “After you returned from the bathroom last night, it seemed like something was bothering you. Want to talk about it?”

Not really. I gave her my best innocent face. “What do you mean?”

She lifted one eyebrow the same way my mom did when she didn’t buy my story. And then she twisted her face into

JOANNE LEVY

a knowing grin. One that told me I absolutely wasn't getting away with the innocent act.

I sighed. "You must be a mom."

"Yes, I am." She chuckled. "But my two girls are grown and have kids of their own now. I'm actually a grandmother six times over. A few of my grandkids are around your age."

I was about to ask her if I might know them when she said in a sad voice, "They don't live nearby, though."

"Oh," I said. "What do they think of having a famous author for a grandmother?"

She snorted. "They're not as impressed as you might think."

She had to be joking. But it didn't look like she was. "Really?"

She shrugged. "Really. They've read some of the books, but...I don't know. Not their thing, I suppose."

That seemed so weird. And impossible! I couldn't imagine what I would do if she were *my* grandmother. I'd be so fangirly, I wouldn't be able to stand it!

"But enough about that. Will you tell me what upset you?" Ally asked. "It must have been something."

My mother had said we weren't supposed to be telling people yet outside our own family that she was pregnant (I didn't tell her I'd already told Jenna, who had probably told *her* moms, and who knows who *they* had told). But at the same time, I felt like I knew Ally. I'd read all her books. I almost had them memorized word for word. What she'd written made me feel so many things. Sometimes it felt like she could see right into my heart. It was like we were really close friends—or even family—even though we'd never met.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

But my own mom didn't get how I was feeling, so how could I expect this lady who didn't even know me to understand?

"It's—I don't know." I sighed.

And then it occurred to me that she might be thinking my change in mood at the restaurant had been because of something she'd done wrong. "Oh, but it wasn't anything about you! Meeting you was the highlight of my day—no, my *life* so far. It was the best birthday present ever. I think even my bat mitzvah will be a letdown compared to this birthday!"

I took a breath and somehow managed to stop myself from blurting out an invitation to my bat mitzvah. It was over a year away, and she'd probably think inviting her was weird. Because there was a limit to how much you could fangirl on someone before it got seriously creepy.

"Thank you, Ruthie." She laughed. "I love *all* my fans, but somehow..." She leaned in close, even though we were alone in the park. "I could tell you were special. Even though you called me Gertabeth."

She pressed her shoulder into mine, so I knew she was joking. I smiled, even though I was still kind of embarrassed about the Gertabeth thing.

"How did you even find that out?" I asked.

She chuckled again. "The police came here looking for me and thought it might be my name. Actually, the officer said Gertabelle, but it was close enough that I knew a fan had found my notebook. Thank you for saving it, by the way. It would have been ruined in the rain."

JOANNE LEVY

"You're welcome," I said. "I guess the police didn't take Jenna and I seriously."

"They did," Ally assured me. "But it didn't take too much explaining for them to realize I'm not really plotting to murder the mayor. A globe as a murder weapon? Please. What was I thinking?"

"I thought it was pretty smart," I said. "I mean, who would ever suspect a globe? It would keep readers guessing. And the murderer wouldn't have to take the weapon in with them. Just maybe wipe some blood and fingerprints off it."

She turned and looked at me straight on. "That's really great thinking. Very creative. You have the mind of a writer, Ruthie."

First she was telling me I was brave like Darylinda and now that I had the mind of a writer? "Thank you," I said shyly, really hoping she wasn't just saying those amazing things to be polite.

She jerked her chin toward me. "And your having binoculars with you tells me you have the curiosity of a writer too."

I looked down at the binoculars that hung against my chest. "They're for bird-watching. I can identify lots of different birds by sight *and* by their songs. Like..." I tilted my head and pointed toward a thick stand of trees. "What you're hearing from over there? *Oouueep-ooueep-ooueep-cheep-cheep-cheep*? That's a cardinal. Those really pretty red birds. Although only the male is red. The female is beige. Like she lost all her color in the wash."

She nodded. "Very impressive."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“It’s something my mom and I do since—it’s something we do.”

“That sounds really nice,” she said.

I shrugged.

We sat there for a while, not saying anything. But it wasn’t weird. She wasn’t making me talk about my feelings the way my parents always did. She made me feel like it was okay if I *didn’t* tell her what had happened the night before. And it was fine to just sit there next to each other, listening to the birds and randomly rubbing Izzy’s velvety ears.

“My mom is pregnant,” I suddenly blurted out. I hadn’t meant to. It just fell out of my mouth.

“I see,” Ally said after a long moment.

“And...” I took a deep breath and looked toward the back of the cemetery where the grave was. My throat got tight, and the words didn’t want to come out.

“You’re not done grieving your brother,” she said in a soft voice. “And you’re worried it could happen again. Is that it?”

“How do you know?” I squeaked.

She tilted her head. “Your grandmother is one of my closest friends. I didn’t realize who you were until last night, but I do remember when your mom lost the baby. Your grandmother was devastated too.”

Really? “She never seemed super sad about it,” I said. “Not that I thought she didn’t care, but she cooked and helped around our house. I guess she got over it a lot faster.”

Ally frowned. “Knowing your grandmother, I’m sure she kept up a brave face for you and your mom. But make

JOANNE LEVY

no mistake, she was hurting inside too. Her daughter had suffered a terrible loss. As had you, her granddaughter. And she had lost a grandchild only a few weeks before the due date.” Ally shook her head. “I can’t even imagine. But it’s her nature to be stoic and keep busy. That’s how she copes.”

She took a deep breath and went on. “Just because someone doesn’t appear to be hurting doesn’t mean they don’t have painful things going on inside. Losing a baby would be tough on the whole family. But not everyone shows their grief the same way.”

Now I felt guilty for *another* thing, for not realizing my grandmother had been sad too. I’d been so focused on my own sadness, and what was going on with my mom, that I’d never even thought about how Bubby might have been feeling. Now I was worried about how she’d feel if—no. I wouldn’t think about it. I pushed it all away.

Instead I focused on a double gravestone in front of us. It was blank on one side but engraved on the other. I read it over and over. *Mark Roth, Loving Husband, Father and Grandfather.*

When Ally finally spoke again, her voice was soft. “I know your mother had a difficult time afterward. And I’m sure it was hard on you as well, Ruthie. I’m very sorry about that.”

“My mom had depression.” I kept my eyes on the stone but reached for Izzy’s ear, giving it a rub. “That’s why I don’t understand why she’s doing this again. Why would she risk...” I didn’t finish the sentence.

“I can’t answer that for her,” Ally said, understanding. “But it’s a valid question. Have you spoken to her?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I nodded. "It doesn't change anything, though, does it? Plus I think talking to her about it makes her feel bad."

"Maybe," Ally said. "I really am sorry you're feeling this way, Ruthie. I wish there was something I could say to make it all better, but of course there isn't. In life there are no promises."

"That's what Mom said." I turned away from the grave I'd been staring at and looked toward my brother's, swallowing back tears. "I don't *want* to be sad. I don't *want* to make my mom feel bad," I said. "But...I just don't know how I'm supposed to feel. No matter how I feel, it seems wrong. Like I'm hurting someone."

Ally put her hand on my arm again. "You're supposed to feel exactly like you do, Ruthie. You are absolutely entitled to feel conflicted and scared and even a little angry."

I sniffed. "That's what Dr. Singh said in therapy. Back when *it* happened. But how can my feelings be right if they make other people feel bad?"

"That's where it gets complicated," she said. "But I assure you, your feelings are not wrong."

She was saying it so fiercely that I had to believe her. "Thank you," I squeaked.

She closed up her notebook and dropped it into her purse. "May I give you a hug, Ruthie?"

Maybe it was weird to get a hug from a famous lady I barely knew, and in a cemetery, but in that moment I couldn't think of anything I wanted more.

"Yes, please."

JOANNE LEVY

She moved her purse out of the way and I leaned into her as she wrapped her arms around me. I'd thought it would be a friendly hug with a quick squeeze and a pat on the back, like the kind Jenna gave me before we parted for the weekend. But Ally pulled me in really tight and held me for a long time. She smelled nice, like a flowery perfume, but just enough to be pretty and not make me sneeze.

And as she held me close, I thought it was so weird that Ally Roth, aka Lexi Marks aka the best and most famous author ever, was hugging me really tightly. Like she meant it.

But maybe even weirder was that I wasn't loving it because she was famous but because I felt like she actually understood me. And really cared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When the hug was over, I leaned back and looked at her.

She gave me the side-eye. “What?”

“Well,” I said. “I told you *my* stuff. Will you tell me what happened to book eight?”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened a little in surprise, and then she looked down at her hands in her lap. She picked at a nail, and it looked like she was thinking hard about what to say.

“What was in the notebook—the mayor code thing. That’s not book eight, is it?” I knew that writing a book was really hard, especially since Jenna and I had tried it, but if that turned out to be the next unicorn book, well, I was going to be really disappointed.

She gave me a confused look. “Mayor code thing?”

I screwed up my face, trying to remember. “The part about finding your mark and the death envelopes.”

She frowned and reached for her notebook. “Finding my...death envelopes?”

I shrugged. *She* wrote it—what did *I* know?

She opened the notebook and flipped pages. Past the sketches and floor plan and notes. To the page with the poem.

JOANNE LEVY

I pointed. “There.”

She froze with her eyes on the book. Then she took a long, loud breath and looked at me with pursed lips, her eyes crinkled at the corners. “Not death *envelopes*. Death *envelops*—surrounds.”

My face heated. How embarrassing to have misread something right in front of my very favorite famous author. “Oh. Right. So not death by paper cut. Ha ha!”

She did laugh then. “No. Although they do hurt, don’t they? Anyway.” She paused, her voice getting serious. “That’s not code. That’s a poem. About my husband.”

I looked down at the page and read the poem again.

I miss my mark
 Death envelops
 The world no longer turns
 Except it does
 For all but you
 And yet, I am alone

Something clicked in my brain. I looked at the headstone in front of us. *Mark Roth. Husband* was one of the words, and the other side of the stone was blank, which meant the other half of the couple hadn’t died yet.

That meant...oh.

“Mark Roth was your husband. And he died”—I looked at the dates engraved on the granite—“not long ago.”

Ally’s eyes were suddenly glassy as she took another breath and nodded. “Yes. October.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Everything suddenly made total sense. The poem—I miss my Mark. Why she came to the cemetery. Why she sat on *this* bench, near his grave. And, of course, it was how she understood my feelings about my brother dying. She knew about losing someone important. She knew about grief.

“Do you—” I stopped, not sure I should ask. She didn’t seem all that sad, but then I thought of my grandmother. And how just a few minutes before, Ally had said how people could be sad but sometimes hide their sadness.

“Do I what?” She was looking at me expectantly but not like she was mad or anything.

I got the feeling she would be okay with whatever I asked her. It took me a minute, but I finally blurted out, “Do you have depression?”

She sighed and wiped away a tear with her thumb. I liked that she didn’t try to hide that she was crying. “I am grieving, Ruthie. There’s a really big hole in my heart where Mark used to be. Is that depression? Probably not in the clinical sense, but I’m sad a lot of the time.”

“That’s why you stopped writing book eight. Because you were heartbroken.”

She swallowed hard and said, “That’s part of it. But also...” Her frown deepened. I could see she didn’t want to tell me. But then she looked down at her hands again and said, “He was my writing partner. It was our joy to write the unicorn books together. All seven books.”

“*Alexis* Roth, *Mark* Roth,” I said. “You were *Lexi Marks* together.”

JOANNE LEVY

“There’s that intrepid writer brain of yours again,” she said with a sad smile. Which was her way of telling me I’d figured out her secret.

“That’s—I’m really sorry, Ally,” I said. *I’m sorry* is what you’re supposed to say when someone has died. I learned that three years ago, when people said it to me and my parents. It doesn’t make it better, but it’s the polite thing to do.

She reached into her purse and pulled out two tissues. She handed one to me and then pressed the other to her eyes.

“Thank you, Ruthie,” she said finally. Then she reached over and squeezed my hand as though it was her job to comfort *me*. “Mark got ill, and we’d barely even begun the book—you could probably tell from the teaser in the back of book seven that we didn’t even know what it was about.”

She chuckled before she went on. “And then when he died...I just couldn’t continue. I had no joy to put into my writing.” She shook her head. “I knew kids like you were waiting for it, and I’m so sorry I let you down. You and all our readers who we love so much.” She sniffled into her tissue. “Maybe that’s the hardest part.”

“Oh no. You didn’t let anyone down,” I said, even though it was kind of a lie. I *did* feel sort of let down. But it wasn’t like she just decided she wasn’t going to write book eight because she was bored or something.

She took a deep breath. “Even though all you kids were waiting for it, I couldn’t write at all. I was—” She broke off and shook her head again. “I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“You can, though!” I said, grabbing her hand and giving *hers* a squeeze this time. “I know all about talking about feelings. I went to therapy. You can talk to me. I want to help!”

She gave me a small smile. “You are very kind. Anyway, I couldn’t carry on with the books we wrote as a couple.” She looked over at the headstone as she dabbed at her eyes with the tissue.

“I understand,” I said, even as my heart was breaking. Mostly for her, because it was the saddest story. But also for me and everyone who loved the unicorns.

I thought about telling her how Jenna and I had decided we were going to write book eight and maybe we could do it for her. But I stopped myself because of course she would think that was silly. What did a couple of kids know about writing a masterpiece? We couldn’t even come up with an original storyline!

After a moment Ally exhaled and said, “But I felt like I should write *something*.” She frowned at her notebook. “I thought maybe I’d try a thriller or a mystery—something completely different—but as you probably figured out, I wasn’t getting very far.

“Mostly I’ve been writing about my feelings,” she added.

“Does that help?” I asked.

Ally nodded. “Acknowledging that I’m sad and that I miss him a lot and that *it’s okay* to be sad and miss him helps.

“Sitting here, feeling close to him, helps. Being with friends and playing mah-jongg for an afternoon, talking about anything else, also helps. Time helps. It *all* helps. But

JOANNE LEVY

nothing completely erases the grief. Grief never goes away completely.”

“Oh,” I said, my eyes darting to my brother’s gravestone. That was disappointing to hear.

“But you wouldn’t *want* it to go away completely, Ruthie,” she said, like she was reading my thoughts. “That would mean forgetting the person you lost. Grief is simply a different form of love. When the one you love is gone, at first the hole they left behind is filled with grief. But bit by bit that grief shrinks and is replaced by good memories of them. It can take a long time, but it gets better. More manageable. Then you start to feel the love part more than the loss.”

I nodded because I knew what she meant. It *had* gotten easier. Right after my brother had died, it was the worst. From the funeral to Mom’s depression to the day Dad ripped down the wallpaper and repainted the room. Then Dad moving out and eventually the divorce. That was all so hard.

But after all that drama, when days returned to almost normal, it did get better. Slowly. It wasn’t the same as it had been before, but it did start to improve. Like Ally said, bit by bit.

Until now, three years later, when my mother announced she was pregnant. Now it felt harder. A lot harder. My life felt more out of control than ever.

We sat there for a while longer, until Izzy pressed against my leg and whined.

“Yes, Miss Isabella.” Ally laughed and scratched behind Izzy’s ears. “Looks like it’s time to get some exercise. She’s been very patient, sitting with us and listening to us go on and on.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Izzy’s the best listener,” I said. When she heard her name, the dog looked up at me and gave me a doggy grin.

“But she really likes to run,” I said as I stood up. “And find stuff. Like your notebook and random things in the woods.”

“Well, thank you for finding my notebook, Izzy,” Ally said as she tucked her book back into her purse and got up too. She smiled at me. “I’ve enjoyed talking with you, Ruthie.”

“Me too.” I gave her another hug, until Izzy bounced and yipped like she wanted to be the filling in our hug sandwich, making us both laugh.

“Maybe...” I began, feeling silly.

“Yes?”

“Can we maybe talk again?”

She smiled. “Anytime, Ruthie. You know where to find me.”

“All rainbows lead to Faravelle!” I said automatically. Then cringed when I realized that it might make her sad. Ugh. At least I hadn’t done the salute.

But she wasn’t mad. She smiled and gave me a side hug. “Never lose your sparkle, Ruthie.”

“I won’t,” I promised and then turned to my dog. “Come on, Izzy. Let’s gallop home!”

Izzy yipped in excitement, and we hopped into a run.

What had started out as the worst morning had gotten a little better.

Bit by bit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When I got home, I could hear Chris and Matt downstairs, still playing video games, so I went down to the basement to let them know I was back. Izzy stayed behind on her bed. She didn't like the steep basement stairs.

"Hi, guys," I said in my friendliest voice. They were playing some sort of army shooting game or something. They didn't even look away from the screen, which was pretty rude. But at least I got a "Hey" from Matthew.

"Looks like fun," I lied. "Can I play?"

One of them paused the game, and they both looked over. "We're right in the middle of a game," Chris said. "And anyway, there are only two controllers."

"We could take turns," Matt said to his brother.

Chris made a face. "I don't want to ruin our streak."

Matt gave me a shrug. "Sorry."

Seriously? I stared at them.

"You can play when we're done," Chris said. "We'll let you know when we're finished." He started up the game again, and they both turned away to stare at the screen.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

So that was that. And to think there'd been a time when I'd thought having two older stepbrothers would be cool.

I got halfway up the stairs before I heard Chris yell, "Hey, Ruthie?"

I turned around and came back down. "Yeah?" I asked hopefully, ready to join them on the couch now that they'd realized how mean they were being.

"Don't tell on us, okay?" He pointed at the game console.

Oh, right. They weren't supposed to be playing games because they were grounded. For being jerks to my mom.

"Oh," I said, trying to hide my disappointment. I didn't know why I'd even tried. Why I even cared.

Without another word, I swiveled and stomped back up the stairs.

"What's *her* problem?" I heard Chris ask his brother.

I almost turned around to ask them why they were such jerks.

But I didn't.

Instead I stormed to my bedroom, slamming the door behind Izzy and me.

Izzy jumped on my bed and turned around a few times before she settled in for a nap. I pulled the chair out from under my desk and pushed it out of the way. I got down on the floor and crawled under the desk like it was a fort, moving until I was right beside the broken rainbow.

Always happy for any opportunity to be close to me, Izzy jumped down from the bed and came over, lying on her side

JOANNE LEVY

and resting her face on my thigh, just like she had on the day I'd met her and she'd won my heart.

I stroked her face. "You're such a good girl, Izzy. You'd never be mean to me, would you?"

She thumped her tail and looked up at me as if to say, *Never!*

I bent over and gave her a kiss on her muzzle, noticing a few new gray hairs. She thumped her tail some more. "You're the bestest best friend a girl could have," I whispered into her ear.

As I continued to pet her face, I turned and looked at the rainbow. With my free hand, I traced it with a finger, following the jagged edge of the torn wallpaper. "You would have been a good brother," I said to the rainbow. It made me so sad. And even more angry at Christopher and Matthew. What would a *new* sibling be like? If there even *was* a new sibling.

"Ally says acknowledging feelings helps," I said out loud. "What do you think?"

Thump, thump.

"I wasn't talking to *you*, Izzy." Hearing her name made her thump her tail even more.

"Silly girl," I said and then returned my eyes to the rainbow. I took a big breath. Then another. Then a third before I said, "I'm sad about you, Benjamin. And scared that it'll happen again. I don't want to go through that again. I'm not sure Mom could either."

I sighed and leaned my head against the wall, my eyes so close to the rainbow that it was just a blur of colors.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

A few minutes later my leg started to go numb. “Look out, Izzy.” I gently pushed her out of the way and scootched out from under my desk. She jumped back onto the bed and lay down with a groan.

I sat on my desk chair and grabbed my notebook out of the top drawer, blowing a kiss at the adorable Izzy look-alike on the cover. Flipping it open, I read the list of all the found things (nothing new to add from today) and then turned to a fresh page. I pressed my palm along the spine to flatten out the pages and then stared at the empty lines for a long time.

I thought about what Ally had said about writing about her feelings.

If it worked for her, maybe it could work for me.

I took a deep breath, picked up my purple pen, slipped the unicorn topper on and began to write.

These are my feelings, by Ruth May Sydner

I am sad about Benjamin dying three years ago.
I'm sad that I never got to meet him. I'm sad that
Mom and Dad are sad about him. I'm sad that Mom
doesn't think I'm enough for her.

I'm mad that no one asked me what I think.
I'm mad that I'm just expected to go along with
everything. I'm mad that I'm supposed to be happy
all the time.

I am sad about unicorns book 8.

JOANNE LEVY

I am also sad that Ally's husband died and that she is heartbroken and lonely.

I wish Ally's husband hadn't died.

I wonder what it would be like to love someone and then lose them after many years.

"Izzy!" I yelled just then because she'd farted. It stunk, and I had to hold my nose. "So gross, Izzy!" I said and then returned to writing.

I hope Izzy never dies. I would be so lonely without her.

Is Dad lonely? Does he ever go on dates? Is he on dating apps? Will he marry someone new too? What would my stepmom be like? Would I have more stepsiblings?

"Ugh," I said out loud. "I hope not."

Does Dad wish he never got divorced?

Mom got married so soon after the divorce. Did she do that so she could have another baby?

I'm really scared about Mom.

I'm really scared about the baby.

I'm scared about me. Will I get depression when I'm a grown-up because Mom did?

I'm also angry that Mom doesn't get why I'm scared. I'm mad that she seems to have forgotten

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Benjamin. Or she's pretending he didn't exist. Will she forget him completely if she has this new baby?

Will she forget him completely if the worst happens and the new baby dies too? Will she try again? Will she get depressed again? What if she doesn't ever get better? What will happen to me?

I stopped writing and had to get up to grab a tissue from the box on my nightstand.

I wiped at my eyes and decided to put the notebook away. It felt like too much. So many things were whirling around in my head. Except that my list wasn't finished. I put the tissue down on my desk, swapping it out for my pen.

I feel guilty for being mad at Mom. Ally says my feelings aren't wrong. It doesn't feel right to be mad at Mom. But I am.

I hope Mom is okay. I hope the baby is okay. I hope I'm okay.

I wish I could be happy and excited about the baby. I wish there could be promises in life. I wish nothing sad ever happened. I wish I could fix everything.

Finally I stopped writing. When I put my pen down, I had to shake out my hand because it was cramping up. I normally didn't write so much all at once, but the more I wrote, the more I thought of.

JOANNE LEVY

I could have typed it all on my computer, but something about doing it old-school felt right. Seeing the words written on the page made them seem more real and from my heart. Maybe that's why Ally wrote in her notebook.

A glance at the clock beside my bed told me I'd been working at it for nearly an hour. *Whoa*. No wonder my hand hurt! I wondered if Ally ever got sore hands from all the writing she did.

I took a deep breath and went back to the first line and began to read what I'd written.

Putting the words on the page had felt like I was getting rid of the feelings in a way. But now that I was reading them, they were getting sucked back in. As if they were soaking into me like water into a sponge.

There was so much I was sad about, so much I was angry and scared about and had zero control over. It made me feel helpless. Every word felt like another weight on my heart.

I began to really cry. Like, ugly cry. The one tissue I'd grabbed was soaked and tattered, but I couldn't bring myself to get up to get more. And even that made me cry harder. Enough that Izzy woke up and jumped off the bed to come over and comfort me, pushing her face into my lap and whining. That made me cry more too.

I slid off my chair onto the floor, put my arms around Izzy and sobbed into her neck for a very long time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Even after a night's sleep, I was still heavy with sadness. I had terrible dreams, and even reaching out to Izzy in the middle of the night didn't help. I woke up with dread weighing on me as heavily as the time I'd gotten caught in the rain in my thick hoodie. It had gotten heavier and heavier, until I almost couldn't bear the weight of it.

Except I couldn't take the sadness hoodie off.

Everything had already been so overwhelming, and writing about it had made it worse, not better. I'd even written about things I hadn't known were bothering me. How was *that* supposed to make me feel better?

But even though I didn't want to get out of bed, Izzy had other ideas. Once she woke up, she stretched and groaned and then started nudging me in the cheek with her wet nose, her whines getting more insistent.

She'd never make a mess in the house on purpose, but it wasn't fair to make her hold it too long.

With a sigh I threw off the covers and got out of bed. Izzy jumped down and started doing her good-morning dance, which was like "I'm so excited to start my day!" mixed

JOANNE LEVY

with “I really have to pee!” Which normally made me laugh. Today it was just annoying.

“Yes, Izzy, I’m moving as fast as I can.” I slid my feet into my slippers and shuffled in my pajamas down the short hall to the back door to let her out. I did my best to be super quiet, not wanting to wake up the boys, whose room—that used to be mine—was right beside the back door, then remembered they had left the previous afternoon to go to their mom’s.

I watched through the glass door, waiting for Izzy to sniff around to find just the perfect spot to pee, thinking about how I needed to go out there later with the shovel and clean up her “land mines.”

As I stood there, I could hear Mom and Stepbrad in the kitchen, chatting and eating breakfast. Stepbrad was probably having cereal (I could hear the *clink, clink* of his spoon against the bowl) and Mom was likely eating toast with peanut butter. Both would be drinking coffee (now that I knew Mom was pregnant, I understood the switch to decaf). It was a regular morning, and I was barely paying attention until...

“Ruthie’ll come around soon,” Stepbrad said. “Don’t worry.”

I turned toward the kitchen, straining to hear what they were saying about me. *Come around to what?* I had a feeling I already knew.

The concern was loud and clear in Mom’s voice. “You really think so?”

“It’s understandable that she’s anxious after what happened. But she’ll be fine. She’s resilient and smart.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“I know,” Mom said. “I just wish she wasn’t so worried. I keep trying to convince her that everything’s fine, but then it all goes sideways—she catches me vomiting or having a nosebleed. You should have seen her face when she walked into the bathroom at the Station. She looked at me like I was a crime scene. It was absolutely heartbreaking.”

“But you told her it was just a nosebleed.”

“And I showed her the websites when we got home.” She sighed. “But she’s worried—understandably so. She lost the brother she’d been so excited about. I guess part of that was our doing—we’d built up the whole big-sister thing so much, not wanting her to feel that she’d be forgotten when the baby came. We wanted her to be involved and excited. It was all she talked about from the moment we told her until—” Her voice seemed to get choked with emotion.

My own throat got tight as I thought back to when I’d first learned I was going to be a big sister. I had been more excited than anything. That was before I knew about things like birth defects and that babies could die even before they were born.

“And then, in a way, she lost her mom for weeks. I let her down.” Mom gasped, like she was trying to catch her breath.

“You didn’t let me down, Mom,” I whispered. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Marjie, you didn’t let her down,” Stepbrad said at almost the same time. A second later I heard the scrape of chair legs against the floor. “You were ill. You’d lost your baby. You were filled with grief and had postpartum depression, not to

JOANNE LEVY

mention you'd just given birth and were healing. You didn't let anyone down, I promise you. Ruthie knows that."

I do know.

I imagined he was hugging her as she sobbed. I wanted to hug her. I wanted her to hug me too, but my feet seemed to be stuck to the floor.

"Are we making a mistake?" Mom said a few moments later in a muffled voice.

"No," Stepbrad said in a strong voice. "We consulted doctors, we did the tests, you're taking excellent care of yourself. No one could be more careful. Plus, we wanted this. We both wanted this more than anything."

What about what I wanted?

"Please," he said, his voice cracking, "don't second-guess this."

"But what if..." she began in a tiny voice.

"Don't 'what if,' Marjie. Please," Stepbrad said. "You know the chances of it happening again are small. You're a nurse, you've done the research, and you know the science. I'm a numbers guy, and I've done the math. Science and numbers don't lie."

I wanted to believe him. So bad, I did. But...

Mom laughed and then sniffled before she said, "You're such a nerd."

"A nerd who loves you," he said. "Now, can I get back to my cereal before it loses all of its molecular integrity?"

She muttered something I couldn't hear, but the chair scraped along the floor again, signaling Brad returning to his seat and tucking himself in under the table.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Just then Izzy came rocketing up to the door and barked to be let back in, even though I was standing right there.

The talking in the kitchen abruptly stopped. I let Izzy in and then ducked into the bathroom to pee and wash up.

When I came out and joined Mom and Stepbrad in the kitchen, everything was normal, other than Mom's red-rimmed eyes.

"Good morning, Ruthie May," she said.

"Hi," I said. I put some kibble in Izzy's dish and refilled her water, giving myself another minute before I sat down at the table. Because as soon as I did, I was going to be asked about my feelings.

I plopped myself onto my chair and reached for the cereal and milk, bracing for Mom to start, but it was Stepbrad who spoke first.

"So we have a contractor coming today to do a quote on adding a couple of rooms to the back of the house."

I stopped pouring the cereal and looked at him. Because that was not at all what I was expecting. "Okay."

"But don't worry," Stepbrad said. "We'll have a family meeting before we decide anything."

I supposed *that* was a good thing. "All right." I poured the milk into my bowl and picked up my spoon.

"I hope we can do an addition." Mom sighed. "Although, if it's going to be too expensive, we'll have to start looking at other properties in earnest. I don't really want to move, but it might be our only option."

JOANNE LEVY

I thought of my room—my special shelf that held all my books. It could be moved easily enough. But what about the rainbow? I shoveled a big spoonful of cereal into my mouth and stared down at my bowl as I chewed, and I did my best not to cry.

Great. One more thing to add to my “life is the worst—let’s write it all down” notebook.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The second she was done breakfast, Mom started rushing around the house, tidying up to get ready for the contractor.

After I did the dishes, I told her I was going to take Izzy to the park to get out of the way.

“Thank you. Make sure you’re back in time for your dad to pick you up,” she said. “But tidy your room before you go. Don’t forget to make your bed.”

What? When I asked her why, she said just in case the contractor had to look into my room for anything. Not that they planned to do any renovations in there, she assured me, but just in case they needed to take measurements or something.

That was kind of a relief, but I still didn’t like the sound of them going into my room. Would they go through my things? Touch my stuff? Open my drawers? There was no telling. So after I brushed my teeth, got dressed and made my bed, I pushed my desk over to hide the broken rainbow and tucked my notebook into my backpack. I filled Izzy’s water bottle and slid it in the holder before slinging the bag over my shoulders.

JOANNE LEVY

Since it was a Saturday, the leash-free area was busy. There had to be at least fifteen dogs already inside when I got there.

I wasn't in the mood, but then I saw Tank inside. Just because *I* was in a bad mood didn't mean Izzy shouldn't get to play with her friends.

As soon as we were inside the enclosure and I let Izzy off her leash, she ran right at Tank and the other dogs, yipping in greeting. The play stopped so they could all sniff and share the news. Then, like they'd planned it, they all jumped and barked and started playing again.

I loved seeing Izzy's pure joy at playing with her friends as if she didn't have a care in the world.

About twenty minutes later Tank's owner whistled for him. That seemed to be a signal for a bunch of people to leash their dogs and leave the park.

Now that her group of friends was gone, Izzy seemed to realize she was hot and tired and in need of a drink.

She loped over to where I sat at the picnic table, mouth open as she panted, tongue hanging out the side. I popped the top of her sport bottle and squirted some water in her mouth.

Once she was done drinking, she lay down on the ground at my feet, rolling onto her side, her entire torso heaving as she panted, tongue now lying in the dirt. *Gross*. But she didn't care. I let her catch her breath for a few minutes and then snapped her leash on and stood up.

"Come on, Izzy," I said as she scrambled to her feet, ready to go.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

We hadn't been gone all that long, and the contractor was probably still at my house, so I led Izzy around the park and through the woods. She was tired, plodding along slowly by my side.

I bent down to give her a scratch behind the ear. "I love you, Izzy," I reminded her. She looked up at me with her chocolaty brown eyes and sent her telepathic love back at me.

We got to the other side of the woods and emerged into the cemetery. My eyes went first to Ally's bench, but it was empty. I was relieved and disappointed at the same time.

I led Izzy over to the paved path, and, for the first time, I started to look at all the gravestones. I read the names and then did the math (subtracting the birth date from the date of death) and was relieved to see that most people had lived long lives. Eighty years, seventy-seven years—one person had been over a hundred years old! Most of the stones had two spaces on them, made for couples. On some, one space was blank, which meant that half of the couple was still alive and their name would be engraved when they died. I wondered how that worked. Did the engravers take the stone away, or did they come and do it right there? And how did they even engrave the hard stone? Did they use tools or some kind of special machine?

I'd never really thought about gravestones before, but now that I was surrounded by them and thinking about them, I had a lot of questions.

When I got to Ally's bench, I sat down and looked at her husband's stone. No, her and her husband's stone. The one that

JOANNE LEVY

would someday have her name on it too. How weird—and also kind of awful. Did she have to buy it? She must have.

How could she sit here every day and look at that stone, knowing her name would be on it someday? She was looking at her own grave. Didn't that make her more sad? It made *me* more sad, and it wasn't even mine.

Would I have to order my own headstone one day?

Then I looked across the cemetery toward the single stone that also wasn't mine but had my last name on it. I wondered who had ordered that one. Probably Dad. That must have been the worst.

And then, before I knew what I was doing, I had stood up and was walking toward it, Izzy by my side. When I was about halfway there, I stopped. Was I really doing this? Butterflies in my stomach took flight, fluttering around inside me.

I couldn't figure out my feelings but tried to unravel them. Part scared, part sad, part...curious? Determined? And, in a weird way, part love. Love that wanted somewhere to go.

It didn't make sense. I didn't want to do this. Did I?

I was about to turn back and leave the cemetery. But then the weirdest thing happened—I realized I didn't want to leave. Like, I *really* didn't want to. The love part got bigger than the scared part.

I was still freaked out. Not because of ghosts or anything. It just felt like a big deal to visit my brother's grave by myself.

I took a deep breath and channeled my inner Darylinda for bravery.

A moment later Izzy and I were in front of the little gravestone. It was smaller than most of the other stones in

the cemetery. Which made sense, since Benjamin had been tiny. The dog was sniffing around the stone, which suddenly really bothered me. It felt disrespectful.

“Izzy, sit!” I ordered.

She did.

I took a minute to sort out my words, but finally I took a deep breath and explained, “This is where my brother is buried. He died before we got you, so you never got to meet him. I didn’t get to meet him either. He...he died before he was even born. Mom and the doctors couldn’t save him.”

Izzy leaned against my leg, reminding me I wasn’t done telling her the story. “But Mom didn’t do anything wrong,” I continued. “They said he was sick, and they hadn’t known until...well, until he died, I guess. He had birth defects—his brain didn’t form right. They said it was a blessing that God took him peacefully and he didn’t suffer. It doesn’t feel like a blessing, though, Izzy.”

The pressure of her against my leg was comforting even as I told her this sad story. “I don’t feel blessed at all. I don’t know why they even say that. He didn’t get to live a real life. He was too young to die. It’s not fair, Izzy. It’s just not.”

I swiped at tears with the back of my hand, taking gulps of air as the sobs really started. I hadn’t come over here to get so upset. I’d just thought—I didn’t know what I’d thought. All I knew was that I was so sad, I just couldn’t keep it in anymore.

Izzy whined. Me being upset made her sad too.

“I know, Izzy,” I said. “I really miss him. So much. Which is weird because I never even met him. But I bet he would

JOANNE LEVY

have been the best brother. I would have taken the best care of him until he got old enough to play with. Then I would have taught him things like how to read, so we could read the unicorn books together. And I'd have always let him play video games with me. I'd have been the best sister."

Which made me realize I was sad not just because I'd lost my brother but also because I'd never gotten to be a sister.

I stood there a while longer, processing how I was feeling as I read Benjamin's name over and over, in Hebrew and in English. And the date that showed he only lived for one day. Which wasn't even true. But how could you put less than one day on a gravestone?

The longer I stood there, breathing and rubbing Izzy's ear, the more I started to feel a little better. No, *better* wasn't the right word. Less awful. My heart hurt so much, but in a weird way, I knew my grief for my brother would never be worse than it was right then. Which wasn't even as bad as it had been at the funeral.

Bit by bit.

I bent down and found a little rock and put it on top of the gravestone—the signal that I'd visited. "I'm sorry I never came by myself before," I said. "I was scared. But I was just scared of my feelings. I will always miss you and love you, but I don't think I'll be afraid to visit anymore."

After a few minutes Izzy started to get restless and whined.

"All right, Izzy. Let's go."

We hadn't gotten very far when I saw Ally on her bench. As I got closer, she lifted her head and looked over at me. Her face broke into a smile, like she was happy to see Izzy and me.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

But then she cocked her head like she was figuring out where we were coming from. Then maybe she saw my red eyes that were still filled with tears.

She must have figured it out, because she stood up and opened her arms.

Two seconds later, I was being held in them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After a few minutes Ally let me go and motioned for me to sit beside her on the bench. I told Izzy to lie down, which she did as I hooked her leash over the bench arm.

“Want to talk about it?” Ally asked softly.

I looked down at my hands and shook my head. “No, thank you.” But then, for some reason, I blurted out, “Why do you come here so much if it makes you so sad?”

Ally was quiet for a long moment, and I thought she wasn’t going to answer. But when I looked at her, I realized it wasn’t that she didn’t want to answer me but that I’d upset her.

“I’m sorry,” I said, looking back down. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t be,” she said with a snuffle. “It’s not you.”

I could hear her rummaging around in her purse. A second later a tissue appeared in front of me. I took it from her and pressed it to my eyes. It wasn’t crumpled at all and made me wonder if she’d restocked her tissue supply.

“It’s a valid question, Ruthie. One I ask myself often. That’s why I’m upset, not because of your asking.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I looked at her again. She gave me a half smile that didn't go up to her eyes. "They say you're not supposed to visit too often. They say spending too much time at a loved one's grave hinders you from moving on. I'm starting to understand that." She glanced at the headstone. "But in some ways, I don't want to move on. I..." She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Ruthie. This is a conversation I should be having with my therapist, not you."

"You go to therapy?"

She nodded. "Yes. But maybe not enough. Or perhaps I should join a support group. I can't seem to move forward even though I know I should." She let out a loud sigh as she fidgeted with the tissue in her hands. "I'm not ready in some ways, but at the same time I'm tired of grieving. That sounds awful, but..."

"Feelings are complicated," I said.

She chuckled. "You're right, Ruthie. So right."

I didn't know what else to say. We sat there for a few minutes, listening to the birds—a couple of robins whinnying to each other—and the breeze shushing through the trees around us. It was peaceful but also sad.

"I was visiting my brother's grave," I said suddenly.

"I saw." She didn't ask me about my feelings.

"I'm sad that he died," I said anyway.

"I know you are. Do you feel better for having visited him?"

"Maybe," I said and then corrected myself. "I mean, yes, I do."

JOANNE LEVY

“Good.”

“Hey, Ally,” I said a few minutes later. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“If all rainbows lead to Faravelle, does that include broken rainbows too?”

“Broken rainbows?” she asked.

I nodded.

“What do you mean, Ruthie?” she asked, her voice soft. “What are you *really* asking?”

“It’s stupid,” I said. Because how could I explain? I didn’t even understand what I was trying to find out.

“I bet it’s not,” she said, placing a hand on my arm.

I took a deep breath and then looked up at her. She was waiting patiently, like I had all the time in the world and that was okay.

I told her about the broken rainbow in my room. I’d never told anyone, not even Jenna, but somehow I knew Ally would understand.

When I finished, I knew I’d been right to tell her. “What a wonderful thing you’ve done for your brother,” she said as she pulled me into another hug. “And for yourself. Of course, Ruthie,” she whispered into my ear. “*All* rainbows lead to Faravelle. Even, and maybe especially, the broken ones.”

It was exactly what I’d hoped to hear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The next night Dad and I were sitting on the couch in his living room. We had just finished our dinner of pizza—Dad had said I could pick since it was my birthday week, and no, I wasn't tired of it even though I'd eaten it Thursday night and had the leftovers for lunch on Friday.

Izzy was snuggled up beside me on the couch, her head on my lap. Dad was scrolling through Netflix, trying to find something for us to watch that we could both agree on. So far, it wasn't going all that well.

But it wasn't like I really cared. I'd had so many things whirling around in my head since writing everything down in my notebook a few days earlier. Ally had said that writing about stuff had helped her. I'd *thought* she meant that writing down my thoughts and feelings would *solve* my problems. It hadn't. All it had done was make me think about them more and have even more questions. Until it all bubbled over.

The thing was, now that I'd had a couple of days to think about it, writing about my brother seemed to have made me feel brave enough to visit his grave. And doing *that* had helped

JOANNE LEVY

me unravel my feelings about losing him. So, in a weird way, writing *had* helped. Just...not how I'd thought it would.

It also made me want to ask more questions.

"Hey, Dad?"

He glanced over and then back at the TV as he continued his scroll. "Yeah?"

I opened my mouth. But nothing came out.

Dad took another quick look at me. "What's up, Ruthie?"

"You know what?" I said. "Never mind. I was going to ask you a question, but I changed my mind."

He tilted his head. "You changed your mind because you don't want the answer anymore, or because you think I won't like the question?"

Sometimes it was like he could read my mind. "Um, that second thing."

He turned to me full-on and put down the remote. "Is this about your mom and her pregnancy? Because we can talk about anything that's bothering you. Anything at all, Ruthie."

Okay, so maybe he couldn't read my mind all the time, because that wasn't what I was thinking about. At least, not right then.

"Who bought the gravestone for Benjamin?"

He did a double take. "Oh, that's not at all what I was expecting." He took a big breath through his mouth and swallowed hard before he said, "I did."

"Was it the worst?"

His eyes started to fill up and get pink around his eyelashes. “Losing him was the *very* worst. But yes, arranging everything after was pretty awful too.”

Of course it was. I didn’t know why I’d even asked. “Do you miss him?”

“I do.” He nodded slowly. “I think about him all the time.”

“But...” I looked down and brushed a dog hair off my pants and then lay my hand on Izzy’s neck. She let out a groany sigh of contentment. I suddenly wished I hadn’t brought any of this stuff up. I hated making Dad feel bad. But I still had so many questions.

“Ruthie?”

I ran my hand over the side of Izzy’s face and ear, following the line of her smooth fur. “If you got married and then had more kids, would you forget about him?”

When he didn’t say anything, I looked up. He was just staring at me, blinking, obviously thinking about his answer.

“First of all,” he finally said, “I’m not even really dating, so this is a premature thing to talk about. But I think what you’re *really* asking is whether your mother or I would ever forget about Benjamin. The answer is no. Never. You know I won’t often speak for your mom, but I can in this, when I tell you that for sure she will never forget him. You never, ever have to worry about that, Ruthie.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“There will always be a place in our hearts where he lives. But there is also space for other people. The funny thing

JOANNE LEVY

about your heart,” he said, tapping his chest with a finger, “is that even though it’s contained in your rib cage, there’s an infinite amount of space inside it for the people you love.”

“Okay,” I said, glancing down at Izzy. “What about dogs you love? Is there room for them too?”

Dad chuckled. “Of course. When I said ‘people,’ obviously that includes Izzy. She’s people.”

Izzy opened her eyes when she heard her name. She yawned and jumped down off the couch, then started toward the kitchen, her nails scraping lightly on the tile. A second later we heard her slurping from her water dish.

Dad went on. “But what I mean is, love isn’t a thing you only have so much of. You don’t love me less because you have Izzy in your life, do you?”

I pretended to think about it, making us both laugh. “No, I guess not.”

“Exactly. So there will always be room in our hearts for Benjamin, and that will never go away or be taken up by something or someone else. But there’s also plenty of room for more people to love.”

“Like a baby.”

He nodded. “Yes, like a baby.”

“And maybe a new wife?” I said.

Dad’s left eyebrow went up suspiciously. “Ruthie.”

Izzy returned then, licking water droplets off her muzzle. She was about to jump back on the couch when she looked up at me. I reached out to stroke her ear, but as I did, she wobbled.

That was weird.

“Izzy? Are you okay?”

I shifted forward just as Izzy collapsed to the floor.

“Izzy!” I jumped up. “DAD! What is happening?” I dropped to my knees beside Izzy’s head, afraid to even touch her face. She was panting, her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth.

“I don’t know,” Dad said as he kneeled down beside me. “Maybe she’s having a seizure. Izzy? Izzy?”

“Is she dying?”

Dad didn’t answer. “Stay here. Don’t touch her, Ruthie,” he said as he stood up and then disappeared.

Izzy was looking at me for help, her eyes wide so I could see the white parts. “I don’t know what to do. Oh, Izzy. I don’t know what to do. Please...” My words dissolved into sobs.

“Maybe a seizure? She’s panting but hasn’t moved,” Dad was saying. I glanced up. He was on his cell phone, coming toward us from the kitchen. “I can’t tell. No, I’m sorry, I don’t...Yes, okay. I’m going to bring her to the clinic right now.”

He kneeled down again beside me. “I’m going to pass you to my daughter. Izzy’s her dog.”

He held the phone out toward me. I shook my head at it. I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t talk to the vet. I could barely breathe.

“Ruthie,” Dad said gently. “I can’t pick up Izzy and hold the phone at the same time. Please be brave. It’s for Izzy. I just need to put on my shoes and grab my keys.”

JOANNE LEVY

I took as deep a breath as I could and grabbed the phone. “Hello?”

Dad kissed my forehead and then disappeared into the kitchen.

“Hi, is that Ruthie?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” I said, now crying even more. “Izzy’s my dog. And she collapsed and now she’s not moving. Is she going to die?”

“Ruthie,” the woman said in a gentle but stern voice. “I need you to calm down, okay? Your dad is going to have to lift Izzy up so you can bring her to the clinic. Once she gets here, we’ll do some tests to find out what happened and see what we can do. But I need you to be calm and brave. I know you’re scared, but please be brave for Izzy. Can you do that?”

“O-o-o-okay,” I said. “I’ll be Darylinda.”

“Good girl. Stay on the phone with me so I can get some information from you, okay?”

I tried to answer her questions about Izzy—how old she was, what kind of dog she was, her regular vet’s name, whether she’d ever had issues with balance or seizures, if she had her shots.

Dad returned and very gently slid his arms under Izzy, being super careful with her. She’d been panting, but when he picked her up, she whined.

It broke my heart into a million pieces. “Please be okay, please be okay. I love you so much, Izzy,” I said to my best friend in the world.

“Ruthie?” Dad said, jutting his chin toward the front of the house. I jumped up and ran ahead to open the front door

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

so he could carry her out. I slid my feet into my shoes and then ran past him to open up the back door of his car. He lay her gently on the back seat. She yipped.

I couldn't stop sobbing as I climbed in the other side and buckled in beside her, afraid to even touch her but not wanting to leave her side. I would always be by her side.

Dad closed the car door and dug his keys out of his pocket before he got in the front seat.

As he started up the car, he glanced in the mirror at me. He was crying too.

"Will she be okay?" I asked, my voice a gurgle of tears and snot.

"I don't know, Ruthie," he said as he reversed out of our driveway. "I just don't know."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Spoiler alert: Izzy wasn't okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I woke up in my regular bed at home.

Dad had called Mom when we got to the emergency vet clinic, and she'd rushed over. After everything happened and there was nothing else to do, she'd brought me home. I barely remembered getting out of the car and stumbling to bed, exhausted and heartbroken, but I must have because here I was in my unicorn pajamas.

I could tell it was still early, even though it was already light in my room. There was a robin singing outside my window—*doodle-y-dee-doodle-y-doo*—but the house was quiet. My room was quiet. Way too quiet.

My throat was scratchy and dry. My eyes burned.

The night before came rushing back in a reel of terrible memory videos.

How Izzy had collapsed in front of my eyes. How we'd taken her to the emergency vet, who said she had a terrible kind of cancer that grew quickly and often didn't have symptoms.

And the worst part: There was no hope she would ever get better. The vet had told us how Izzy would just get sicker

JOANNE LEVY

and sicker. That she'd be confused, not understanding what was happening to her. And that the best and kindest thing to do would be to say goodbye and put her to sleep.

Except that putting her to sleep really meant making her die.

I rolled over and looked at the spot where she normally slept. The side of my bed that was now painfully empty. Never again would I wake up to the sound of her soft snores and tiny dream barks. Never again would she kick me in the middle of the night. Never again would she nudge me awake in the morning with her wet nose. Never again would we gallop like unicorns through the forest.

Isabella, my most joyful unicorn, was gone.

I rolled back over so I wouldn't have to see her empty spot anymore and cried myself back to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY

A while later I was still in bed, my back to the door. I wasn't sleeping, though. My pillow was soaked with tears as I replayed the night before over and over.

That's when Mom came in.

"Ruthie?" she said softly before she sat on my bed, making it dip toward her. Her hand landed on my shoulder. "I know you're upset, but think you can go to school today?"

Seriously? "No."

"You sure? Maybe it would take your mind off—"

I turned toward her, fresh tears leaking out of my eyes. "Are you kidding me right now, Mom? Look at me. My best friend in the world just died. I can't even think of getting on the bus and going to school."

I'd have to explain my tears. I'd have to tell Jenna. I would tell her eventually, of course, and she would be devastated—she loved Izzy too—but not today. I could barely even say it out loud yet.

I realized in that moment that maybe this was the whole point of having funerals.

"If she'd been a person," I continued, "we'd be at a funeral or sitting shiva or something, so no, I can't go to school today."

JOANNE LEVY

“You’re right, of course.” She gathered me into her arms. “I’m so sorry, Ruthie.”

I could tell by how tightly she was hugging me that she probably understood my sadness. Which made me feel better. But also worse at the same time, because then it made me think of Benjamin. *Duh. Of course* Mom knew about grief.

She pulled back out of the hug after a few minutes. “Another mental health day, then?”

I nodded. “Yes, please.”

“Okay.” She reached for a tissue from the box on my nightstand and handed it to me. “Why don’t you grab a shower and clean up while I make us a giant stack of chocolate-banana pancakes?”

Chocolate-banana pancakes were normally my favorite, but I hardly felt like eating. It was nice that she was trying, though.

“And then I can tell you about the plans for the house.”

I wiped my eyes with the tissue, but they were so raw that it made them hurt more. Then I realized what she’d just said. “What?”

“The contractor was here on Saturday,” she reminded me. “We’re waiting on the final estimate, but he had some great ideas.”

“So we’re not moving?”

She shook her head. “Doesn’t look like we’ll need to.”

“Okay,” I said. I supposed it was a good thing that we weren’t moving, but I didn’t exactly care in that second.

“I know this isn’t what you’re thinking about right now,” she said, reading my mind. “But we’re going to build you a whole new room on the back of the house.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Wait, what? “You mean this won’t be my room anymore?” I asked.

Mom smiled and shook her head. “No. Isn’t that great news? We’re going to add two bedrooms and a bathroom to the back of the house, so you’ll get a brand-new room, the boys will each have their own room, and this will be the new baby’s room.”

The new baby’s room. This room that already had been a baby’s room. Until it wasn’t. And then it had become mine and Izzy’s.

The baby was gone. Now Izzy was gone.

My eyes darted to the broken rainbow, but it was covered up by the desk.

“What if I don’t want a new room? What if I want to stay in this one?”

Mom’s smile faded into a look of confusion. “You don’t want a new, bigger room? One that you can decorate however you like, with a bigger closet?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“But why? You’ll get a new room, and then we’ll redecorate this one for the baby and then—Ruthie? *Ruthie?* What’s the matter?”

I’d dropped my chin to my chest and begun to cry again. I already missed Izzy more than anything, and now this? They were going to paint over the broken rainbow and erase Benjamin completely.

“Ruthie?” Mom said, pulling me into another hug. For a long time I sobbed on her shoulder.

JOANNE LEVY

“Ruthie,” she said again a few minutes later, pulling out of the hug and staring down at me. “Talk to me, please.”

How could I explain? How could I make her understand if she didn’t get it already?

With a sigh, I threw off my covers and got out of bed.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked.

“I have to show you something.”

She turned to watch as I pushed the desk out of the way, exposing the rainbow.

Then she got up off my bed and came closer. “What is that?”

“It’s Benjamin’s broken rainbow.”

For a very long moment we both stood there, staring at it.

Then Mom took a stuttering breath. “Oh, Ruthie,” she said through her own snotty tears. “That’s...I had no idea.”

“And you’re going to paint over him, and it’ll be like he never existed.”

She stepped toward me and pulled me to her. “Ruthie, Benjamin will always be in our hearts. No matter what happens, he will always have existed. I will never, *ever* forget Benjamin. Just like you won’t. Just like you’ll never forget Izzy. We don’t forget the ones we lose.”

Dad had said the same thing. But did it even matter? Benjamin was gone. Izzy was gone. Mom was pregnant, and who knew what would happen with that?

It just felt like so much. Why did everything have to be so sad all the time?

Mom’s stomach rumbled, practically right in my face.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

It would have been funny if it hadn't been the worst morning.

She pulled away from me and pressed her hand to her belly. "Come on," she said. "I need to get some food in me. This baby is hungry. Go take that shower, and I'll start on the pancakes. We can talk about everything over breakfast, okay?"

I didn't want to talk about it. I wanted to crawl back into bed and stay there all day. Or maybe forever. Maybe if I stayed in bed, no more sad things would happen. Was that what Mom had thought after Benjamin died? Was what I was feeling depression?

I had no idea. But what I did know was that I didn't want to talk about it.

"All right," was all I said out loud as I grabbed my bathrobe and started toward the bathroom.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Mom had appointments and errands that she said she couldn't reschedule, so after breakfast she offered to take me to my grandmother's for the day. I didn't really want to go, but it was that or go with Mom on her errands (which included her therapy appointment) or let her take me to school.

I tried to convince her I was old enough to stay home on my own, but she said she didn't want me to be alone today and that it was not negotiable. That meant I would not win an argument. And I was too heartsick to bother trying.

So off I went to Bubby's. After she buzzed me into her building and I rode the elevator up to her floor, I didn't even have to knock on her door. She was already standing in her open doorway, waiting for me to come down the hall.

Once I got there, she put her arms around me and pulled me into hug. "I'm so sorry about Izzy." I was glad Mom had told her what had happened so I didn't have to. It was bad enough thinking about it. "You must be devastated," she said into my hair before she let me go.

Devastated was the closest word to how I felt. But it still wasn't enough. What word means "devastated times a million"?

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

My throat too tight to speak, I nodded and followed her inside.

“Come, sit,” she said as she led me into the kitchen. Her place always smelled nice, like lavender with a hint of last night’s dinner, but today it smelled extra good, like there was something sweet and cinnamony in the oven.

I sat at one of the two chairs at her kitchen table. The table was completely covered with food—a plate of sliced bagels, a veggie and fruit tray, dishes of egg salad, tuna salad and cream cheese, and my favorite, a platter of her homemade Jewish cookies: rugelach, hamantaschen and mandelbrot.

“Is this all for me?” I asked.

She laughed as she glanced at all the food. But when she looked back at me and saw I wasn’t joking, she frowned. “Pardon?”

“Are we doing a shiva for Izzy?”

Because of what had happened with Benjamin, I knew that after someone dies, there’s a reception and then the seven days of sitting shiva—the official mourning period—where people come to pay their respects at someone’s house. There’s always food too. After Benjamin had died, Grandma Carol and Grandpa Phil had held the reception after the funeral at their house. We all ate and then sat around being sad.

“Oh,” Bubby said, her face serious now. “I’m sorry, Ruthie, but no. This is for my Monday mah-jongg game. The ladies will be here soon. Your mom didn’t think you’d mind. I guess she didn’t tell you.”

No, she hadn’t. I didn’t feel like being around anyone—although it was probably still better than going with Mom to therapy and then shopping.

JOANNE LEVY

“Oh, okay,” I said, feeling deflated. “Do people even do shiva for dogs?” Because I sure felt like sitting around being sad.

“Not that I’ve ever heard,” Bubby said as she got a carton of milk out of the fridge. She poured some into her blender and added chocolate syrup. Then she stopped what she was doing and turned toward me. “Although I don’t know why not.”

I shrugged. I was a kid. What did I know?

She pressed the button on the blender, making it whirl loudly as it mixed up the chocolate milk. Once it was done, she poured it into a glass, the froth bubbling right up to the rim, and put it on the table in front of me. I liked that she didn’t even ask but just made it for me, knowing it was my favorite.

“Thank you,” I said, taking a sip.

“You’re welcome,” she said, pouring the rest into her coffee mug. She drank and then looked at me with a curious expression. “Should we have a little service for Izzy? Would you like that?”

“Really?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said. “She was part of the family, wasn’t she?”

“Yes, she was.” I jumped up and threw my arms around Bubby. Because while I was devastated and sad and felt like my heart had been ground up inside my grandmother’s old blender, Izzy deserved a service.

The best service, for the best dog ever.



I'd forgotten that Ally was in Bubby's mah-jongg group. But when I saw her come into the condo, along with three other women I didn't know, I burst into tears.

Again. Because that was my life now. Crying basically nonstop until I almost puked.

Ally gave me one of her flower-scented hugs and told me how sorry she was about Izzy. I figured Bubby had texted to tell her and her friends. It was weird having them know already—especially the ladies I'd never met before—but also a relief.

I wished she could have told Jenna, too, because I was dreading having to tell her. But I would have to eventually, no matter how hard it was going to be. I couldn't believe it had only been four days since I'd seen her. It felt like forever. I wondered if she was worried about me. Mom had called the school to tell them I wouldn't be there today, but Jenna wouldn't know why.

A few minutes after the women arrived, Bubby told her friends that before their game, we were going to have a small memorial for Izzy. It felt weird and a little silly having a spontaneous funeral service in my grandmother's living room. But no one was laughing as I got up and stood in front of them, tissues clutched tightly in my hand.

None of them seemed to mind when it took me forever to sort out how to even start. I wondered if any of them had ever given eulogies.

I glanced at Ally. She was looking at me with a sad but encouraging expression, like she knew what I was feeling. Maybe she had done a eulogy at her husband's funeral. I sort

JOANNE LEVY

of wished I'd asked her so I would know what to say. But then I thought about Izzy and how she would have leaned against my leg and let me rub her ear while I spoke. She would think it was more important that I said something from my heart than exactly perfect words.

It was extra sad that I really could have used that encouragement from her to help with this speech.

Oh, Izzy, I already miss you so much.

I took a deep breath, swallowed past the giant lump in my throat and began. "Hi. Um, so thanks for letting me do this, and I don't have a speech prepared or anything because I didn't really know we were going to do this, and Izzy only died last night and it was all unexpected and we had to... but..." I stopped and took two really deep inhales. I was already crying, obviously, but if I waited for the weeping to stop, I'd never get the words out, and Izzy deserved her service. I'd have to do it as best I could through my tears. The ladies didn't seem to mind anyway.

"So I don't know what you're supposed to say at a funeral because I've never even been to one in real life—we had one for my brother, but it wasn't the kind with speeches since no one got to know him—but I want to talk about how great Izzy was. She was the best dog ever. We were best friends from the second she came home with me. She was supposed to be a service dog, but she flunked out of service-dog training because she was distracted too easily and liked to find things."

I stopped to wipe my tears before continuing. "I think she got distracted a lot because she loved the world and everything

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

about it. She loved sniffing things on our walks, she loved retrieving balls, running and playing with her friends Tank and Scout, but most of all..." I swallowed, wiped my eyes with my tissues and took a breath before I could go on.

"But most of all, she loved me and being my best friend. She loved our walks, she loved when we played Unicorns of Faravelle Forest, and she loved even just curling up with me on the couch to watch movies. She also loved lying beside me in bed when I read. Sometimes I'd even read to her and she listened, especially when she heard her name. And I loved her. More than anything. More than I thought I could love a dog."

I sniffled into the tissue. "I loved her even though she farted a lot and kicked me in bed and sometimes snored and left dog hair everywhere." I laughed even as I was crying. "I will miss every single thing about her, and she was the best dog and best friend I could ever have asked for, and now she's gone but I will never forget her. Okay, so thanks."

It was a good thing I was done speaking, because I'd started sobbing so hard, I wouldn't have been able to continue.

Bubby stood up to give me another hug and guided me over to the sofa, where we sat together. She tucked me into her side, which made me feel like a baby but was comforting at the same time.

"Ruthie," Ally said softly. "May I say a few words about Izzy?"

I sniffled. "Yes, please."

Ally got up and stood in the spot I'd been in a moment before. She gave me a half smile and took a deep breath before she began. Maybe, like me, she wasn't sure what to say.

JOANNE LEVY

I was about to tell her just to speak from her heart when finally she began. “I didn’t know Izzy for very long or all that well, but what I did know of her, I loved very much.” She chuckled. “That dog was so lovable, you couldn’t *not* love her. She was sweet and happy and had a love of life that anyone could see. She was excellent at finding things, like lost notebooks, which this author really appreciated.”

That made me smile, despite my tears.

“Ruthie,” Ally continued, speaking right to me, “Izzy really *did* love life. And the one thing I know with all my heart is that she very much loved you. I believe she was joyful *because* of you. While you didn’t have her for very long, I believe she lived a full life, and these last years you were together were her best because of you. I know your life is better for having had her in it, even for a shorter time than you would have hoped for. I think you know that.”

My heart was broken. It hurt so, so much to not have Izzy by my side. But even still, Ally was right. I wouldn’t have traded having Izzy for these three years for anything, even if it meant my heart wouldn’t be broken.

Ally had said before that grief was a different form of love. If I didn’t love Izzy so much, I wouldn’t feel so heartsick. I hated being so sad, but I’d hate even more not ever having had Izzy in my life.

When I nodded, she went on. “I know you have lost your best friend, and it is terrible right now, but she would want you to carry her joy with you. The joy you created together. I hope you always remember that and always keep that joy with you.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

Ally's words made me feel a tiny bit better. I was still devastated. I couldn't imagine not being devastated. But I liked hearing that Izzy had been loved by more than just me. And that other people too now knew that she was the best dog ever.



Once Ally was done speaking, the other ladies expressed their condolences, which was nice. Then Bubby put the coffee on to brew and made me another glass of chocolate milk before we all sat down to eat.

Maybe it was because of all the crying, but I wasn't that hungry, even though it was lunchtime. I did have two baby carrots and half a bagel smeared with some cream cheese. Once the ladies started in on the cookies, I took a rugelach, but I was one bite in when I realized I didn't feel like finishing it. I did, but mostly to be polite.

After lunch we cleared the table and the ladies set up their mah-jongg trays. The tile game was only for four people, but there were five of them, so for each match one of the ladies rotated out.

I had no idea how to play, but the tiles were kind of like cards in that they all had numbers and suits on them—not the same suits as cards, though. Instead of spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs, they had Chinese letters, bamboo sticks, flowers and circles. The tiles were like thick dominoes made of yellowish plastic, and they clicked and clacked when the

JOANNE LEVY

ladies mixed them in the center of the table and then lined them up on their trays.

For a while I stood behind my grandmother's chair and watched how they all collected and slid tiles back and forth and around the table, trying to make up patterns. But after a while, when I realized I'd never figure out the game just by watching, I started to get bored.

"Can I play with your phone?" I asked Bubby.

She passed it over, and I took it to the couch in the living room. I sat down with it beside Mrs. Kaufman, whose turn it was to rotate out. She was scrolling through her own phone, but she stopped to reach over and give my arm a squeeze. "How you doing, Ruthie?"

It wasn't a real question, though, because before I could answer, she'd returned to her scrolling.

I looked down at Bubby's phone to open up the Angry Birds app and saw that the selfie of the two of us from my birthday was pinned to the phone's home screen. We looked cute smushed up together. My eyes were a bit wide and freaked out in the photo, but it had been taken just when I'd seen Ally arrive and still thought she was plotting to kill the mayor.

Plot to kill the mayor? Ugh. What had I been thinking?

With a sigh, I opened up Angry Birds and got lost in the game for a while.

It must have been a long while, because suddenly Ally was sitting down beside me. Mrs. Kaufman had rotated back in.

"You okay?" Ally asked. But when *she* asked, it *was* a real question.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“No, but thank you for asking,” I answered.

“I understand,” she said.

“I know.” I exhaled loudly. “I’m already tired of crying.”

“I understand that too,” she said. She put her arm around my shoulders. We sat there for a while not saying anything. In my head, I replayed the little service. I sort of wished I’d gotten Bubby to tape it, but I probably wouldn’t forget what I’d said. I knew for sure I’d never forget what Ally had said. It had been so nice and heartfelt. Izzy would have loved it.

But then one of the things Ally had said about Izzy jumped into my head and made me think. “Ally?”

Her eyebrows went up. “Yes?”

“When you said before—during the service, I mean—that I’ve lost my best friend but that I should carry her joy forward with me. The joy we made together. That I should do that stuff because she’d want me to live my best life even if she isn’t around anymore?”

“Yes, Ruthie,” she said, pulling me close. “Exactly that.”

“Well...” I cleared my throat. “Do *you* carry your husband’s joy with you?”

When she didn’t say anything, I looked up. She was blinking at me. I could tell she was playing video memories in her head. Maybe they included her sitting on the bench, staring at the grave.

“Don’t you think,” I went on softly, not wanting the other ladies to hear. “Don’t you think he would want you to keep writing the unicorn books because that was *your* joy that you created together?”

JOANNE LEVY

Her eyes widened a little, so I hurried to add, “And I’m not just asking because I’m desperate for the next one. I mean, I am, but it’s not because of that. What you said made me think that he would want you to.” I shrugged.

“Oh, Ruthie.” She sighed. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right.”

“Actually,” I said, “you’re the one who said it, so *you’re* right.”

She laughed. “Okay, we can share credit on this one. How’s that?”

“Okay.”

She smiled. “But it’s very true. Mark would absolutely want me to carry on writing. He’s probably out there somewhere saying”—she deepened her voice—“Alexis Roth, you get your butt back to work. Quit moping around. We have kids who need our books!”

“You do,” I said, nodding enthusiastically. “You really do!”

“I know,” Ally said. “It’s just...it’s hard. But I think I am getting closer. Therapy is helping. Time is too. And, of course, talking with smart friends who remind me that what I say applies to me also helps.”

She was giving me that laser-focused look again, the one that told me she was talking about me when she said “smart friends.”

“I think...” She paused. “I think I need to stop going to the cemetery so much. Maybe once or twice a week. It’s not healthy to go every day. Mark wouldn’t want me to spend so much time there.”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“I guess I won’t be going much at all anymore,” I said, thinking how I would never get to walk Izzy ever again. “I guess to visit my brother’s grave sometimes, but...”

“I’m sorry,” Ally said. “I didn’t mean to remind you.”

“It’s okay,” I said, even though it wasn’t. But it wasn’t her fault. “It just happened last night, so...”

“It’s fresh.” She nodded. “Of course, you’re feeling very raw right now and like you can’t even imagine a time when you won’t be.”

I nodded. It was like she was right inside my head.

“It *will* get better, Ruthie. But grief has a way of jumping out at you sometimes when you’re not expecting it. Like, you’ll see a commercial on TV for dog food that reminds you of her, or maybe a friend gets a new puppy, or even just your feelings bubble up with no warning. It hurts to see that life goes on without the one you’ve lost, but it does. It *will* start to hurt less. I promise you that, Ruthie.”

She was right about how much it hurt.

But maybe she was also right that it would someday hurt less.

Bit by bit.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I had thought I'd have until the next day to explain to Jenna what had happened, but when Mom and I pulled into the driveway later that afternoon, she was sitting on our porch stairs. Her backpack was beside her, and she'd obviously come straight from the bus.

A weight settled in my chest at having to tell the story.

"You okay, Ruthie?" Mom asked, concern in her voice. Actually, she'd sounded concerned all day. Especially when she'd picked me up and suggested Orange Julius and I'd said no thanks. It was partly because I was still sad, but also because halfway through the afternoon I'd given in and had three rugelach and two hamantaschen (mandelbrot are delicious but dry, so I'd skipped them).

"Yeah," I lied. "She's probably here with homework. I'll have to tell her about Izzy. Better to get it over with, I guess."

Mom turned off the car and then reached over to give my arm an encouraging squeeze. "All right. I'll leave you to it. Brad's working on a project out in the garage, so I thought we'd order in Thai tonight. Okay with you?"

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

She was trying really hard—Thai was my second favorite after pizza. I didn't want to hurt her feelings by telling her I didn't really care, so I gave her the best smile I could manage and said "Sure" before I got out of the car.

"Hey," I said to Jenna as I sat down beside her, sort of hoping she could read my mind so I wouldn't have to tell her what had happened.

Mom retrieved the giant Tupperware full of leftover cookies out of the back seat and walked up to us. "Hi, Jenna," she said as she pulled the lid off the container. "Cookies?"

"Oh," Jenna said, her eyes lighting up. "Yes, please."

She took one of each and thanked my mom as she started in on the hamantaschen. I picked out a single rugelach. "Thanks, Mom."

She put the lid back on the Tupperware and went up the porch stairs, putting a hand on my shoulder as she walked by. It was the tiniest thing, but it felt good. Then she disappeared into the house, the screen door banging behind her.

"Is your mom okay?" Jenna whispered before she took another bite of her cookie.

What a weird question. I glanced over my shoulder toward the door. "Yeah."

"And the baby?"

Oh, right. I hadn't even thought about that with all the Izzy drama. "Yeah, she's fine."

Jenna chewed and swallowed. "Were you at the doctor's or something?"

JOANNE LEVY

“No,” I said. “I’m not sick.” My voice was a squeak.

“Ruthie? You’re acting weird. Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

I filled my lungs and turned toward her. “Izzy...last night at my dad’s, she...and it was cancer...and we had to...” Tears gushed out of my eyes, and my throat closed up so I almost couldn’t get the words out. “Jenna...she’s gone. Izzy’s gone.”

Jenna’s hand froze on the way to putting the last bit of cookie in her open mouth. Her eyes widened in shock. “She’s gone? Like...?”

“Gone, gone.”

She stared at me for a long, long time. But it must have sunk in because her eyes filled with tears and then, so suddenly that it made me startle, she grabbed me and hugged me hard. “Oh no, Ruthie. Oh no. Poor Izzy. Poor you. Oh, I’m so sorry.” She repeated it over and over into my ear as we cried and hugged for a very long time.

After that I wiped my eyes on my sleeve, suddenly feeling weird and awkward.

“Are you okay?” she asked, taking a small bite of cookie.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m just really sad.”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“How was *your* weekend?” I asked, suddenly desperate to change the subject.

She told me all about Niagara Falls, but it wasn’t like I was really listening.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The screen door slammed behind me and I pushed the wood door closed too, just in case Jenna decided she wanted some more cookies or invited herself for dinner or something.

I leaned back against the door, catching my breath. I loved my best human friend, of course, but this day. This day was so hard.

Then I heard whispering and the scrape of the kitchen chairs on the tile floor. Somehow I knew it was about to get harder.

Christopher and Matthew appeared in the doorway.

I braced myself, so not in the mood for them. “What?”

“Your dad was here before,” Chris said, shoving his fingers through his hair, making it stand up. “He brought your bag. It’s in your room.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“And...” Chris paused to take a deep breath. “We heard what happened to Izzy. We just wanted to say we’re sorry.”

“What happened to her is the worst,” Matt said, frowning. He was more upset than I’d expected him to be. They’d never given me any reason to think they even liked Izzy. “She was a nice dog.”

JOANNE LEVY

“She was *the best* dog,” I corrected.

“We cleaned up the backyard when we got home from school,” Chris said, “so you don’t have to.”

Really? “You did?”

They nodded.

“Because your dad told you to?” I asked.

“No,” Matt said. “Because we knew you’d be sad.”

Oh. So that was unexpected. “Thanks, Matt.”

“It was his idea,” he said, nodding his head toward his brother.

It was legit the nicest thing they’d ever done for me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“And we wanted...” Matt glanced at his brother before he looked back at me. “And we also wanted to say we’re sorry for not being good brothers to you. Our parents getting together and then us moving here, even part-time, was a lot for all of us but...” He broke off.

“But,” Chris said, taking a step closer, “we’ve always had each other. And we sort of forgot that you lost your brother. That must have been really hard and...anyway, after what happened with Izzy, we realized that you might be...anyway, we just wanted you to know that we’re really sorry and we’ll be better brothers to you.”

“You’re not my brothers, you’re my *step*brothers,” I pointed out.

“No,” Matt said fiercely. “We’re your brothers. We want to be your brothers.”

I looked at them sideways. “Is this a joke?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

They both shook their heads. Matt even crossed his heart.

“No joke,” Chris said. “We’ve been selfish jerks. We’re family, and we should act like it. And we’re really sorry about Izzy.”

Matt nodded.

“Thanks,” I said, because I believed them.

“Can I give my sister a hug?” Matt asked.

Sister. Not *stepsister*, just sister.

“Ugh, fine!” I said with a big eye roll. But then I let my brother hug me.

And then the other one too. I didn’t want to get my hopes up, but maybe things would be better from here on.



My backpack was on my bed just as Chris had said. I opened the zipper and pulled out my notebook. When I saw the picture on the front, I suddenly wished I’d never bought it. But at the same time, I was glad I had it. I wanted to hug it to my chest and also toss it out the window.

Ugh. Feelings are stupid.

Tracing my finger over the picture on the front, I whispered, “I’m so sorry, Izzy.”

I opened it to the first page, seeing all the things she’d found. Everything that she had joyfully discovered. She loved finding things so much.

Grabbing my purple pen with the unicorn topper on it, I added one final thing to the bottom of the list of stuff she’d found:

JOANNE LEVY

- My heart.

And now I'd lost her.

Oh, Izzy.

I turned the page, only to be confronted by all the feelings I'd written down. Including how I'd wished Izzy would never die because I would be so lonely.

Why had I written that? Could I have known? Or had I just worried that exactly this would happen and now here I was, heartbroken, just as I'd feared?

Izzy was gone, and it hurt *so* much.

I looked away from the pages, slamming the notebook closed and getting ready to whip it across the room, but something on the wall caught my eye.

The rainbow was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I jumped up off my bed and pushed the desk aside. Benjamin's broken rainbow was now a blank piece of wall covered in a big blotch of dull white paint.

I'd shown my mom the broken rainbow and she'd erased it. Just like she was going to erase Benjamin!

Tears of anger streamed down my face as I stormed out of my room.

She was in the kitchen, the menu for the Thai place on the table in front of her. "Hey, Ruthie, do you want pad Thai or—what's wrong?"

"How could you?!" I demanded. "How could you paint over Benjamin's rainbow?!"

She stood up. "Ruthie, wait," she said, coming over and trying to grab my arm.

I yanked it out of her grasp and stepped back. "Don't! How could you erase him?! How could you do that?!"

Her eyebrows lowered into a frown, and she pursed her lips.

She was getting angry, but I didn't care. "Didn't he mean anything to you?"

JOANNE LEVY

She closed her eyes for a second as she breathed in deeply. When she opened them, she looked at me sternly. “Ruthie, calm down. I didn’t erase anything. Can you—”

“But it’s gone!”

“Come with me,” she said, reaching for my arm again. I twisted away. “Ruthie,” she barked, losing her patience. But then she lowered her voice. “Please, just come with me out to the garage, will you?”

“Why?”

“Just come with me.” She sighed. “It’s not what you think. Come, I’ll show you.”

I had no choice but to follow her out the back door, across the path and to the garage, which was Stepbrad’s workshop. When we got close, I could hear music, and when Mom opened the door, it came flooding out. Some old-timey stuff that he liked to sing along with while he did his wood-working. Normally I thought it was cute that he did workshop karaoke, but not today.

“Brad!” Mom yelled. “Can you turn the music off for a second?”

The singing stopped. He swiped at his phone on the counter, the music cutting out abruptly. He turned toward us, his smile disappearing when he saw my face. He glanced over his shoulder and then stepped to the side, hiding something behind him. “Oh hey, Ruthie.”

“Did you paint over my rainbow?!” I blurted out.

He did a double take and then looked at my mom in alarm. “What?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“You’d better show her,” Mom said.

“They’re not done,” Stepbrad said.

Show me what? What aren’t done?

Mom gestured toward me.

Stepbrad nodded. “Come here, Ruthie,” he said softly, pointing at something on his workbench.

I walked over to it and gasped when I saw what he’d made. There was the rainbow. Just as it had been on my wall, with my own printing on it, but framed in a beautiful wood shadow box. I looked from it to Stepbrad. “You did this? You made this for me?”

“It was your mom’s idea,” he said, smiling at Mom before he looked back at me and went on. “We wanted not just to save it for you but also to give it the frame it deserved. This way you can hang it wherever you like, and you’ll have it forever. Also, maybe you’ll be more open to moving into one of the new rooms that will be built just for you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s...it’s perfect.”

Brad nodded. “Then we can redecorate for the baby.”

Oh right. The baby.

“Ruthie,” Mom said, “I would never, ever forget or try to erase Benjamin.” She pulled me into her side. “I told you that, and I meant it.”

I wiped at my eyes. “It’s...it’s really beautiful, Stepbrad. Thank you. And I’m sorry I yelled at you. Both of you.” I looked up at Mom.

She gave me a squeeze. “That’s not all.”

“It’s not finished yet. I still have to paint it,” Stepbrad said as he turned toward his counter and started fiddling with

JOANNE LEVY

something. “Have you heard about the Rainbow Bridge?” he asked over his shoulder.

I shook my head, but I liked that whatever he was talking about had a rainbow in it.

“There’s a poem,” Stepbrad went on, “that says when we lose our beloved pets, they go to the Rainbow Bridge, a place where there are other pets to play with in the sunshine. Where there is no cancer or pain. And where they wait for us. So I thought it would be a nice memento to make a plaque for you.”

He held up a wood picture that had Izzy’s name on it and a big rainbow. On the bottom, underneath her name, were two cut-out rectangles, and looped through those was—I gasped when I saw it—Izzy’s purple collar with her tags on it.

The lump in my throat wouldn’t let me talk.

“Your dad brought her collar over,” Mom said. “We thought you’d want to keep it.”

I nodded.

It was perfect. It was the worst. I loved it and hated it.

What was I going to do without her?

Just like that, the dam broke. Everything was suddenly too much. I wanted to scream and fall onto the floor and crawl into bed and never get out. I wanted to die. Whatever it took to stop everything crashing in on me all at once.

Everything was too much.

I began to sob. Hard. Sounds came out of me that I didn’t even recognize but couldn’t stop. It was like my heart was turning inside out.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I'd never cried so hard. Even when they'd told me Benjamin had died.

This was so much more. This was everything—Izzy, worrying about the baby, my mom, Benjamin and other things that I couldn't even identify.

Everything.

Everything.

Everything was whirling around and around, faster and faster, until I felt dizzy with it.

"Ruthie, Ruthie May," Mom said, pulling me into her arms. But it didn't help. No matter how tightly she held me, it wasn't enough.

I needed...I didn't know what I needed. I couldn't even say what I was feeling—so much more than just sadness. Helplessness. Grief. Despair.

"I can't," I sobbed into Mom's shirt, barely able to breathe but doing my best to get the words out. "I just can't. Mom, I need help. I don't want to lie in bed. Please help me," I said over and over.

She was crying too, her body shuddering even as she held me up. "We'll get you help, Ruthie," she said, pressing her chin to the top of my head and holding me tight. "Whatever it takes. Of course we will. We'll get through this. We'll get you what you need, I promise. I won't let you down this time. I promise, honey, I promise."

She'd said before that life offered no promises.

But I did believe hers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Three months later...

“Are you excited to go back to school soon?” Ally asked.

It was a Monday morning in August, and we were on one of our weekly bird walks through the woods. I still went out with Mom most Monday afternoons, but I didn’t mind going for two birding walks in a day. Anyway, Mom was pretty tired these days and couldn’t always walk very far.

The sun was shining, but it hadn’t gotten really hot yet, which is why Ally and I went early. The birds were out and singing, and the park smelled of grass and cedar trees. Ally was getting really good at identifying birds by their songs, and she’d even gotten her own binoculars so I didn’t have to lend her mine when I saw an interesting bird up in the trees. Before, by the time I’d gotten the strap over my head and handed them over, whatever bird we’d been looking at would be gone.

Sometimes we went as far as the cemetery, sometimes we didn’t—it usually depended on whether I wanted to visit Benjamin’s grave. I didn’t always, but that didn’t mean I’d forgotten him. I had the cool shadow box Stepbrad had made for

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

me. It was hanging on the wall in my room beside Izzy's rainbow plaque. I was still in the old room while the builders were working on the addition at the back of the house. But I'd get to move soon, once my brand-new room was finished and painted.

"Excited to go back? Well, sort of," I said. "I'm looking forward to seeing Jenna and my other friends every day. But I guess you and I won't be able to spend Monday mornings together after school starts." Which was maybe the one thing I wasn't looking forward to.

Ally gave me a sad smile. "I'll miss that."

"Maybe we can walk on Saturday mornings," I suggested. "Jenna's moms signed her up for swimming lessons, and with Izzy gone, I haven't been playing in the park as much."

"If you don't mind spending your Saturday mornings with me, and don't expect me to gallop around like a unicorn, I would love that, Ruthie." She beamed a smile at me.

I laughed. "Since you made up the unicorns, I think it's up to you if you want to act them out," I said. "But there will always be birds. And I wouldn't mind spending my Saturday mornings with you. Not one bit."

The week after Izzy died, Ally had invited me to go for a walk with her. She'd said she needed to get some exercise and had been thinking of taking up bird-watching, so would I mind showing her what it was all about.

It had felt weird at first. Like, I should have been excited to go for a walk with my very favorite author of all time, but what would we talk about? Was she really interested in bird-watching? Didn't she have any of her own friends who were bird-watchers?

JOANNE LEVY

But of course I'd said yes—and we'd gone for a walk every Monday since. It had only been weird that first time. And even then only for a few minutes. Ally was really nice to talk to, and it wasn't like talking to my parents. Or even my grandparents. She was more like a friend who knew cool stuff. We talked about nothing and everything. And I taught her about birds.

She was even writing down the birds we saw in her notebook, so maybe she really was into it.

On our first walk, I'd told her about my meltdown in the garage and how Mom and Stepbrad had taken me to talk to Dr. Singh the next day. And how we'd scheduled regular meetings after that. Ally had given me a hug and told me she was proud of me.

When I'd asked her if she wanted to know what I'd talked about with Dr. Singh, she'd said that therapy was private, so only if I wanted to tell her. I told her some things but not everything.

Sometimes Ally asked me questions about my family, like how my mom was feeling and how *I* was feeling about the baby.

"It's so complicated," I told her one Monday. "Mom is getting bigger, and she never pukes anymore, and they're so excited and making plans and buying furniture. She's really happy."

"But you're still worried."

I nodded. "I wish I wasn't, but..."

"You're protecting yourself," Ally said. "After what happened last time, you don't want to be hurt again."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“Yeah,” I said. I’d talked about it in therapy too, so I knew Ally was right. “Sometimes I forget and do get excited and wonder what the baby will be like. It’ll be so weird.”

She laughed. “*Weird* is a good word for it. Having a baby in the house is a real adjustment. But you’ll love it. You’ll see. Having a sibling will remind you what love is and fill a little piece of the hole Izzy and Benjamin left in you.”

“I guess. I wrote more about it in my journal. I did a poem too.”

The same journal I’d started before, with the picture of Izzy on it. But now that Dr. Singh had taught me how to deal with my feelings and not see the notebook as just a list of awful things, it was better.

“A poem? Really?” Ally asked.

“Yes,” I said. “And it’s terrible. But that’s okay.”

She grinned at me. “I know all about terrible poems. But honestly, I’m so glad you’re journaling.” She gave me a side hug and then told me about her week and how she was looking forward to her mah-jongg game at my grandmother’s that afternoon.

It was like that every week. It was like a different kind of therapy, just walking and hunting for birds while talking with someone I could trust who also trusted me.

But on this particular Monday, it was going a little differently.

“Sooo, Ruthieeee,” she said, drawing out the words as I was trying to spot a house wren that I’d heard trilling high up in the trees.

JOANNE LEVY

Her tone was kind of hesitant, making me pull the binoculars away from my face so I could look at her. It wasn't like her to hesitate about anything. "Yes?"

She screwed up her face into a frown. "I can't believe I'm so nervous asking you this."

"*You're* nervous? To ask *me* something?!" That made *me* nervous. What could she be worried about asking me?

"Yes. Grown-ups can get nervous sometimes, you know," she said and clucked her tongue, but I could tell she was joking by her smile. "So...you know I've been writing furiously all summer."

"Of course I do!" I nodded, excited because she was working on book eight!

Jenna and I had dropped the idea of writing a unicorns book ourselves, although I still hoped that someday I would write my own book—something Ally had said I would be good at, thanks to my writer brain. She'd also promised she'd help me with it when I was ready. But when I had confessed to Ally that we'd tried, she'd told me she had started writing about the Faravelle world again. Not that I knew anything about the storyline. She'd said it was a big secret until it was done. Still.

So. Excited.

"Is it ready? Will I be able to read it before school starts?" I asked and then held my breath. *Please say yes, please say yes.*

She laughed. "Not quite. Publishing takes a very long time. But since it's been a while, and my wonderful fans, like you, have been waiting so long, they're going to fast-track it. It's scheduled to come out in May."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I squealed. “My birthday’s in May! Maybe it’ll come out *on* my birthday!” I said—then realized what that meant. It was only August! “But that’s forever from now. How am I supposed to wait that long?”

She gave me a smile. “Well, maybe I can get you an advance copy.”

I almost choked on my excitement. “Really? You would do that for me?”

Her smile disappeared, and she looked nervous again. What did *that* mean?

“So here’s the thing, Ruthie. I hope you don’t mind, but the title of the book—wait, you have to promise you won’t tell anyone, because it’s an absolute secret. Not even Jenna can know.” She looked at me expectantly.

“Of course, it’s our secret,” I said, my heart pounding in excitement because Lexi Marks was going to tell me—and *only* me—her new book’s title!

“Good girl. Well, it’s...it’s going to be called *The Broken Rainbow*.”

I stopped walking. *What?*

Too much was going on in my head to walk straight. Then I realized we were nearly at the gates of the cemetery. Had she brought us here on purpose? What was happening?

She turned toward me.

“Here’s the part I’m nervous about,” she said. “Wait. Come, let’s go sit down on our bench.”

She led me into the cemetery and down the path. We sat down and she faced me, looking very serious. “It’s...Ruthie,

JOANNE LEVY

I need to back up and explain. You know that after Mark died, I struggled with writing. I tried a few different things, including that terrible attempt at a mystery. Part of why I turned away from the unicorn books was grief and my not feeling all that creative. But when I really thought about it, I realized another part was that I felt like I couldn't or maybe *shouldn't* write the books without him."

"Okay," I said. I understood that.

"Well, Ruthie," she said, looking into my eyes, "*you* inspired me to start again. *You* reminded me that Mark would have wanted me to continue on. And how brave you've been since you lost Izzy, going to therapy. I know you've been helping more around the house for your family. You're such an inspiration to me in so many different ways."

Was she serious? *I* was an inspiration to *her*? That didn't make any sense. I frowned at her. "I don't feel very brave," I said. "I'm scared of so many things and...I have to go to therapy."

She shook her head and gave my hand a squeeze. "You are brave and strong because you realized you needed help. Needing help is not a weakness. Going to therapy does not make you weak. Your mom is going so she can be strong for you and the baby. I'm going to get stronger after losing Mark."

"Sheesh," I said, laughing. "Is *everyone* in therapy?"

She smirked and booped my nose. "Maybe the world would be an easier place for people if everyone was. But do you see what I'm saying, Ruthie?"

"Maybe?"

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

“You reminded me why I write. Who I write *for*. And I thought that kids like you—smart, strong, brave, empathetic kids—could use a book to help them sort out some difficult things in their lives.”

“What do you mean?”

“In book eight”—she dropped her gaze and paused for a long moment before she looked up and straight into my eyes—“Isabella dies.”

“What?” I shrieked. And then realized I’d just shrieked in a cemetery, which was probably wrong. “Sorry,” I added. *But seriously?*

“It’s fine,” she said with a wave. “And I’m sorry too, Ruthie. I knew you’d be upset, but I want you to know that it was a difficult decision for me. Killing off beloved characters is not easy for writers, trust me. Just because they’re not real doesn’t mean they aren’t real to us. But I knew that to make the book what it needed to be, Darylinda, and Sarabettina, and even Gertabeth needed to learn about grief the hard way.”

I swallowed, trying to make sense of what she was saying. “But it’s *your* story—you can make anything happen! Why would you make Isabella die? Don’t you love her?”

“Ruthie, I love her as much as you do. She’s very, very real to me, and she’s been in my life for a very long time. A big part of me didn’t want to. Believe me, if I could write stories where everyone is happy and all the unicorns do is frolic in the woods, that would be lovely. But life isn’t like that. In life, people die. Bad things happen. Life can be very unfair, as you know firsthand.”

JOANNE LEVY

“So why would you put that in the book?” I asked, now totally bawling because book eight was going to be awful. The thing I’d been looking forward to more than anything would be the worst. In fact, I was suddenly sure I’d never even read it. How could I, knowing that Isabella would be dead at the end?

“Because, Ruthie,” she said, her own eyes filling with tears, “kids deserve to read about difficult things. Pretending nothing bad ever happens in real life isn’t doing them a service. Reading about those difficult things in books can show kids that what they’re thinking and feeling isn’t wrong. That feelings can be overwhelming and complicated but there is help out there for them. That they can get through it and come out the other side even stronger. Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” I said, but it didn’t really.

She sighed. “I know it seems unfair, but it’s what’s best for the book and what I need it to do. And it’s what I think is best for my readers, you included.”

If she really knew what was best for me, she would never, ever kill off Isabella.

“And now you understand why I was nervous to tell you this.”

“Yes,” I said. “Because you knew I’d hate it.”

She laughed. “Well, I knew you’d hate the idea, but I truly hope you don’t hate the book.”

Whatever. I just hoped she didn’t expect me to read it.

“All I ask,” she said, “is that you give it a chance. Try to reserve judgment until after you read it. Can you do that for me?”

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

I stared up at her. She was looking at me hopefully. She was my favorite writer in the world. How could I say no to her? I wanted to. I'd lived through my Isabella dying, and it felt like too much to have to live through unicorn Isabella's death too.

But I also felt like maybe I owed it to her—and to Izzy's memory—to give it a try. And maybe—I hated to even admit it to myself in my own head—maybe I was the tiniest bit curious.

“Is this book going to break my heart?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said without even a millisecond of hesitation. “It absolutely will break your heart. Just like it broke mine to write it.”

Her face was so serious, I knew she was telling me the truth.

“But Ruthie?”

“Yeah?”

“While it *will* break your heart,” she said, “I am sure it will also put it back together again.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Nine months later...

the
**BROKEN
RAINBOW**

THE UNICORNS OF FARAVELLE FOREST

BOOK EIGHT

by **LEXI
MARKS**

*For Ruthie,
the real Darylinda,
who taught me that all rainbows
—even the broken ones—
really do lead to Faravelle.*

JOANNE LEVY

The entire audience in the bookstore applauded. But no one applauded louder or longer than me. There were giant tears of pride in my eyes because, oh my goodness, Lexi Marks, aka Alexis Roth, aka *my friend* Ally, had just finished reading chapter one of *The Broken Rainbow*. Which, obviously, was a literary masterpiece.

And the best part? She'd started by reading out the dedication that she'd written to me. *Me!* She'd even asked me to stand up so everyone could applaud for *me*, the person who she said had inspired the book! She'd actually said that if it weren't for me, the book wouldn't even exist!

What a day it was turning out to be. Best day ever!

"Thank you so much for coming," Ally said, beaming a big smile out at the crowd. "Just give me a minute to get my Sharpies ready, and I'll be happy to sign your books. But don't forget," and now she shouted, "all rainbows—"

"Lead to Faravelle!" the crowd roared.

The bookstore employee got up and explained about the signing line and where to buy the book first and blah, blah, blah. I'd already tuned out. Mostly because, of course, I had the book in my arms, hugged tightly to my chest.

"That was so good," Jenna said. "I can't wait to read the rest." She stared at the cover of her copy. "I can't believe it's finally here."

"Get ready to bawl your eyes out," I warned her.

She frowned at me. "Stop rubbing it in that you got to read it first."

I shrugged. "I was the inspiration. Of course I got to read it before it came out."

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

But the advance version was just white printer paper bound together to look like one of Dad's boring business reports. I'd actually only finished it that morning.

I'd turned the last page and sobbed into my tissue for a very long time. The book was heartbreakingly sad but perfectly hopeful too. Ally had been right that it would break my heart and then put it back together again. I hadn't really believed her and had been really scared to read it, but she'd asked me to give it a chance.

I was so glad I had. I couldn't imagine a more perfect book. Yes, Isabella died in it. But so much other amazing stuff happened. And Ally had confided, when she gave it to me the previous Saturday during our walk, that she was working on book nine.

I'd wanted to turn right back to the beginning and read book eight all over again, but there wasn't time. I knew I was going to the party at the bookstore and would read it again anyway after I got my real copy and Ally had autographed it.

I hugged the amazingly beautiful and meaningful hard-cover to my chest and turned toward my grandmother. She was in the chair on the other side of me, holding my baby sister, Iris, on her lap.

"Blooga!" Iris said and blew a very wet raspberry. She was only five months old, so she didn't say actual words yet, but she was cute as anything in her purple overalls and rainbow shirt that she'd worn especially for the occasion (because I'd picked it out).

Even now, five months after Mom had given birth to her (exactly on her due date, healthy and perfect in every way),

JOANNE LEVY

when I looked at her I almost burst into tears. Dr. Singh had said that was my overflow of love that just needed somewhere to go. I liked that. It also made me understand more why Mom had wanted Iris in the first place. Just like Dad had said—she had so much love to give, and it needed somewhere to go. Now it went to Iris.

And really, the kid was adorable. Even Chris and Matt agreed and sometimes argued with me over who got to hold her. I did let them hold her if she was about due for a diaper change, though.

I stuck out my finger, and Iris grabbed it and bounced up and down. “Blooga! Blooga!”

I laughed and then looked at Bubby. “Thanks for bringing us today.”

“Happy to.” She gave me a huge smile as she bounced Iris on her lap. “I get some grandma time with my favorite girls, and your mom and Brad get an afternoon to themselves.”

She turned her smile toward the front. Ally was sitting at the table, smiling and chatting with all the kids that had lined up to meet her and have her sign their books. “And I get to see my friend finally returning to what she loves. I’m so happy for her. Thank you for helping her find her joy again, Ruthie.”

“I still don’t understand why you never told me before my birthday that you knew her,” I said, thinking about the message in my signed copy of book seven that, for the longest time, I’d thought was a fake.

She shrugged. “She and Mark never told anyone her true identity at the beginning, when they weren’t sure the

books would find an audience or sell past the first one. And then, when the books took off, she still didn't want anyone to know—she liked the mystery. Plus, I didn't want to spoil the magic for you.”

“Yes,” I said with a straight face. “Because meeting the best and most famous author on the planet ever *wouldn't* be magical.”

Bubby rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. Anyway, it all worked out, didn't it?”

I looked at Iris, then over at my friend Ally, who was rocking being a famous author.

Like she'd heard us talking about her, she glanced up and caught my eye. She smiled and winked at me.

I waved back at her as I thought about my own life. I had a new sister and two brothers and a mom and dad and stepdad—a big family who I loved and who loved me. I had started writing a book of my own, with the help of my famous author friend. I was in therapy and felt good and knew what to do when I didn't. I had a brand-new room that I'd decorated exactly how I wanted—in purple, with my two special memorials hung on the wall near my unicorn bookshelf.

I still missed Izzy more than anything and thought about her all the time. But now I could think about her and how fun and goofy she was without getting super upset. I could be grateful for the three years I'd had with her, knowing I wouldn't have traded them for anything. The love for her in my heart had definitely gotten bigger than the grief. Bit by bit, it had happened.

JOANNE LEVY

Mom had said maybe soon we could talk about getting a new dog, but our house was pretty full and noisy, and I wasn't ready. Someday I would be, but not yet. Dr. Singh said it was really smart that I was being so thoughtful about it.

I leaned over and gave Iris a kiss on the nose before I smiled up at my grandmother. "Yes, Bubby, everything has worked out exactly as it was meant to. All rainbows brought me right here."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Here I am again in the privileged position of thanking all the amazing, supportive and all-around wonderful people who helped me with the book you hold in your hands. One of my favorite things about being an author is watching the stuff I make up in my head turn into a real thing, and that is not something I do on my own. It takes a lot of people worthy of much gratitude.

This book is a love letter to authors and the kids who adore them. I began as a reader of fiction many moons ago, but meeting Judy Blume as an adult was just as exciting and terrifying as I'm sure it would have been had I been twelve and not decades older.

I've seen both sides of fans reading their favorite authors' books and what that connection looks like and how meaningful it can be. In the earlier days of my writing career, that was thanks to a couple of my favorite authors, who I also get to call friends: Lisa McMann and Marissa Meyer, the women to whom I dedicated this book. Without your faith that I would be careful with your fans' sometimes very tender hearts, this book probably wouldn't exist, so thank you for trusting me.

JOANNE LEVY

For helping me figure out the plot and reading early drafts, thanks to Sarah Aronson and Tziporah Cohen. Your help was invaluable, and I appreciate your input and encouragement. Thanks to Maureen McGowan and Adrienne Kress for your title help. Titles are hard but are easier when you can talk them out with friends.

Thank you to Dr. Sophie Farrell for your fact-checking and, more important, for keeping our freeloaders happy and healthy.

Much gratitude to Sarah Howden for taking on this project and for sharing my vision for it. Your input and suggestions are always right on, and I appreciate your hard work in taking this book to the next level and beyond.

Big thanks again to Andrew and Ruth for the ongoing support for all that came before this, my seventh book with Orca.

To the rest of the Orca team who worked diligently to make this book error-free and beautiful and who then launched it out in the world: Susan, Troy, Renée, Vivian, Brock and Kaedra, thank you.

Thanks again to Hilary McMahon and Bridgette Kam for all the agenty things that happen behind the scenes.

Much thanks and love to my black Lab, Zoe, who the character of Izzy was based on. From her velvety ears that begged to be rubbed to her soulful brown eyes, her loud snores and even her grossest farts that always seemed to confuse her, everything about her was endearing and lovable. Sweet, endlessly tolerant and always joyful, she truly was the best dog ever.

ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND

And, of course, last but not never, ever least, the biggest thank-you to my supportive and amazing husband, Deke, who always makes himself available for plot assistance, random rants, picture-taking, food-smoking and everything else an author and partner could ever ask for. I am forever your biggest fan.







JOANNE LEVY

is the

bestselling author of a number of books for young people, including *The Sun Will Come Out*, *Bird Brain*, *Let It Glow* (co-written with Marissa Meyer) and the award-winning *Sorry For Your Loss*, which was nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award and won the Canadian Jewish Literature Award. She lives in Clinton, Ontario, with her husband and a small menagerie of furred and feathered freeloaders.