

Hope Girl

Wendy Dunham



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Cover by Writely Designed

Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-6495-1 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6496-8 (eBook)

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Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 / BP-JH / 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my children,
and to anyone who turns the pages of this book,
I wish you hope.*

* * *

Acknowledgments

I'm ever grateful to Barb Sherrill, Peggy Wright, and all the wonderful staff at Harvest House. Thank you for bringing River's story to life.

And to my amazing agent, Ruth Samsel of William K. Jensen Literary Agency, thank you for taking me under your wing.



Prologue

My name is River Starling, and I've been alive for almost thirteen years. All my life I've been told that I was adopted, and then six months later (when I was two), my adoptive parents abandoned me. That's when my grandmother took me in.

If there's one word that describes her, it's eccentric (odd, bizarre, and deviating from normal forms of behavior). One time she saved seven hundred Berry Burst Drink Mix labels just to get a free glass pitcher in the mail. But aside from being eccentric, she has a big heart. She also waddles when she walks (that's because she had polio when she was little). But we love each other. She calls me "Sugar Pie," and I call her "Gram." Everyone else calls her Mrs. Nuthatch.

I thought we were doing just fine living in Pennsylvania, when one day (about five weeks ago), Gram said she "heard the wind" and that we needed to follow it. That's when we packed everything and moved to Birdsong, West Virginia.

My first day at Birdsong Middle School wasn't like I expected. Right away I was assigned to a school project with a kid named William (eventually I called him Billy). He dressed different than others, and his right arm hung at his side like a dead trout on a fishing rope. At the time I didn't know it was because his arm got injured at birth. I thought for sure he was the class dork. It didn't take long for me and Billy to become best friends.

Billy's family (the Whippoorwills) became like my family. His dad's a pastor, and his mom loved me like her own. She didn't need

another kid since she already had seven—Billy, Nathan, Daniel, Bethany, Hannah, Rebecca, and Forrest (I call them the little Whippoorwills).

Billy and I made a birding place for our school project (which is a nature park that attracts birds). We built it along the banks of the Meadowlark River. We planted flowers and hung birdfeeders and bird houses. Billy's Uncle Jay, who's a photographer, came all the way from Kentucky to help us take pictures for our presentation. He let me call him Uncle Jay too.

Billy said Uncle Jay used to be married and that he and his wife had a little girl. The sad thing is she was abducted—stolen right out from under his nose. After that, his wife left him. But even after twelve years, Billy said Uncle Jay still carries a picture of his wife and daughter in his wallet—a picture he took the day she was stolen.

One day when Billy and I were working at the birding place, Robert Killdeer, the town bully, came by and started bothering us. I didn't know him, but Billy did. He's the kid who threw the rock through the church's stained glass window and made Billy promise not to tell. One time Robert even brought his BB gun to the birding place and killed a whole bunch of birds...even a bluebird, Billy's favorite.

Then one afternoon, when the school year was almost over, Billy asked me to go to the birding place with him. But I did something with Gram instead, so Billy went alone. That was when Robert Killdeer showed up and pushed Billy over the riverbank. If I'd gone with Billy, I could have saved him.

After Billy died, Uncle Jay showed me and Gram the picture he's carried in his wallet all these years. I took one look at his little girl and couldn't believe it. She looked exactly like the picture of me that Gram keeps on her dresser—the picture she took the day I was adopted. In both pictures the little girls are wearing a white and yellow checkered dress and a silver necklace with a dangling heart

charm. They even had the same brown curly hair. When I realized what that meant, I got real dizzy, then everything went blank. The next thing I knew, Uncle Jay (who I now call Dad) was sitting beside me, holding a cold cloth on my head.

* * * * *

Almost Perfect

Monday July 4, 1983

7:30 a.m.

Dear Diary,

Yesterday I met my dad. Most kids don't have to wait twelve years for that to happen. But I did. And for me, that's basically a lifetime (considering I'm almost thirteen).

I thought meeting my parents would be dramatic, kind of like in the movies— with music playing in the background, they see me from a distance and run to me. My dad lifts me up and twirls me around. Then he turns to my mom (who I haven't met) and says to her, "Isn't she beautiful?"

My mom places her hand on my cheek and answers him, "More than I could have imagined." She pulls me close to her chest and says, "I can't believe we finally found you, River—we've waited such a long time."

But it was nothing like that. There was no music, my dad didn't pick me up or twirl me, and I haven't a clue where to find my mom. The only thing that happened was I fainted, which is probably normal when someone finds out their best friend's uncle just happens to be their dad.

But because all I've ever wanted was my real parents, meeting my dad (no matter how it happened) was like a dream come true. Maybe good things really do come to those who wait.

Gram thinks so. She says good things in life take a long time and compares it to having a baby. A mother has to wait

nine whole months for her baby to finish baking, but when it's finally done, it pops out all pink and perfect, smelling like a puff of baby powder and feeling softer than love.

But I've waited a lot longer than nine months, so it's only fair to think my life should be perfect by now. And it will be as soon as I meet my mom and the three of us are a family again.

Signed,

River

The floor outside my bedroom door squeaks (my signal Gram's waddling toward my room), so I shove my diary under my mattress, pull the sheet over my head, and pretend like I'm sleeping.

My door bursts open. "Morning, Sugar Pie. You didn't forget about the celebration today, did you? Elizabeth said they invited the whole extended Whippoorwill family...around seventy-five or so. That's a lot of kinfolk." Gram waddles to my window and pulls back the blinds. "Would you look at that sun a-shining?" She presses her nose against the screen and takes a good, long sniff. "Smells like the fourth!" she says. "So why don't you put on that star-spangled sundress of yours—the one with those red, white, and blue ruffles? You always look so cute in that." Then she leaves, still talking, "And come have breakfast. I've got eggs and bacon on the stove, just about done."

I roll over and study the calendar hanging by my bed. It's July

fourth, Independence Day (and the reason I smell baked beans). Every Fourth of July, Gram bakes beans for some picnic we've been invited to. This year it's the Whippoorwills'. They're having it at the birding place. But for as much as Gram likes making beans, she hardly eats any. She says her old tank has enough propane.

My calendar's theme is kittens, and each month a different kitten is pictured. July's is a fluffy white one sitting in a picnic basket. I grab my pen and write 19 in the space for today (that stands for nineteen days since Billy died). Next to that I write a 2 (that means it's the second day since I met my dad).

But I should clarify that. Technically I met my parents the second I was born, and I lived with them until the day I was stolen (but since I was only eighteen months when that happened, I don't remember them). So when I say I met my dad for the first time yesterday, that's basically the truth.

I slide my clothes back and forth in my closet until I find that sundress. The tag says size 7/8. I don't think Gram realizes how much I've grown. I put on a pair of jean shorts and a T-shirt instead.

Another thing Gram doesn't seem to realize is that I have a lot more things to worry about than to celebrate.



Gram's in the kitchen with bits of scrambled egg and bacon grease splattered across her. We sit at the table and eat but don't say much.

Gram looks up. "You're quiet this morning, Sugar Pie. Cat got your tongue?"

I shake my head. "Just thinking."

"Well, there's plenty to think about, especially with all that happened yesterday. I still can't believe Uncle Jay carried that picture of you in his wallet for nearly twelve years, searching for you the whole while. Then come to find out you've been right under his nose for

the past month.” Gram shakes her head. “The wind has surely blown something good to you this time.”

I shrug my shoulders. “I suppose.”

Gram stops chewing and cocks her head. “What do you mean, ‘I suppose?’”

“First of all,” I remind her, “Uncle Jay’s my best friend’s uncle, and Billy’s not here anymore. And second, I called him ‘Uncle Jay’ too. So how can I call him ‘Dad’ all of a sudden? Should I start now or wait until it might start feeling normal?”

“Well, Sugar Pie, that’s up to you. But like they say, when you find yourself standing at the edge of a pool, there’s no sense wasting time dipping your big toe when you can crack a cannonball and sink your whole kit and caboodle.”

“Like who says, Gram? You’re the only one who does.”

“Well that don’t matter none, Sugar Pie. It’s the principle of the matter. Sometimes you just gotta do the thing you’re hesitating ’bout.”

I raise my eyebrows at Gram and swallow the last of my juice. “I promised Mrs. Whippoorwill I’d help set up for the picnic. Do you mind if I leave?”

“Go ahead, Sugar Pie.” Then without warning, Gram jumps off her chair and hollers, “Whoa, hold on! You can’t leave till you’ve seen my beans! Take a look!”

I open the oven door. “They look delicious.”

Gram grins ear to ear. “I wove sixteen bacon strips back and forth across the top so they look just like a checkerboard.” Then she scratches her head. “But come to think of it, they’re gonna go fast. Maybe I should make another batch.”

“Good idea.” I open the screen door to leave but stop. “I almost forgot—Mrs. Whippoorwill needs another pitcher for the lemonade. I told her she could probably use yours.”

Gram’s eyes get wide. “You did? My special Berry Burst pitcher?”
I nod.

While Gram ties a double knot in her apron string, she asks, “And what did Elizabeth say?”

“She said that’d be nice.”

Gram fiddles with her hair until she’s got a knot in that too. “Well, with all those relatives coming, it sounds like she needs it. So as long as it don’t get broken, I think that’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, Gram.” I slide the stool over to the cupboard.

“Hold on, Sugar Pie. I’ll get it. I’ve got more years handling glassware than you can count on your toes.”

“I’ll be careful, Gram. Besides, your balance isn’t good, so you shouldn’t be climbing on a stool.”

Gram lets out a *humph*. “Oh, I suppose you’re right.”

I climb up, get her pitcher, and hand it to her.

“Look at that,” she says. “It’s as shiny as ever.” She sets it on the table.

“Why’d you put it down, Gram? I’m leaving now.”

“Then let me wrap it in a towel or two to keep it safe.” Gram gets a stack of towels, wraps them around her pitcher, and carefully puts it in a bag. “There,” she says, placing it in my arms like she were handing me a newborn.

I give Gram a smooch, then head down Meadowlark Lane to the Whippoorwills’ place.