

# HEALING RUBY

A NOVEL

Jennifer H. Westall

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*To my grandmother, Ruby*



*And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love.  
But the greatest of these is love.*

—1 Corinthians 13:13



## PROLOGUE

I never meant to hurt anyone. It was the last thing I ever wanted to do, but in moments that pass by quicker than lightning, things just happened. That seemed to be the story of my life. Things happened before I could stop them, before I even understood what was happening. Sometimes it was my eagerness that got me into trouble—like when I'd have to help Mother with canning all the vegetables, but all I could think about was getting out of that hot kitchen, sneaking down to the creek, and burying myself in the cold water. But most times, what got me in trouble was just plain anger.

Like the time when I was ten, and Henry was harassing me again, and I was sick of him that day. I never understood what was so much fun about picking on girls, but that seemed to be the favorite pastime of both my brothers. Seemed to me that teenage boys could find plenty else to occupy their time with, and it would make me madder than a hornet. Maybe that was why they did it.

We weren't poor back then, back before stock crashes and poverty stole the life out of folks. But we weren't like the Doyles either—we didn't have a housekeeper to clean up after us—and since I was the only girl, I got stuck with washing the dishes after dinner every Sunday while the boys got to run off to do heaven knows what with heaven knows

who. Henry should've just left me alone. But he never could pass up a chance to needle me, and he slapped my behind as he dropped his plate into the washtub. I must've gotten madder than I ever had before, cause I don't exactly remember deciding to do it, but the next thing I knew, the knife in my hand went sailing through the air and landed in Henry's neck.

What happened after that's still a blur. I was as horrified as Henry was, and we both stood there staring at each other in shock. I couldn't even remember throwing that knife across the room. But there he stood a few feet away from me, a trickle of blood running down his neck and seeping into the collar of his Sunday shirt. I remember thinking that Mother would have a time getting that stain out on the washboard. She'd complain about her knuckles getting raw.

Henry pulled the knife out, and blood shot out of him. It hit Mother's tablecloth, the white one with the lace around the bottom that Grandma Kellum had made for a wedding present. It hit the wall and the door-frame where Henry stood. He stared at it kind of wide-eyed for a moment. Then just as Daddy came back in the room, Henry sank to the floor.

Something lit a fire under my feet, and I was beside him in a second. Like I said, it all seemed to happen in a haze of confusion and regret, but I remember the dark red liquid spreading through the dishtowel in my hands as I pressed down on Henry's neck. I remember Daddy rushing over, calling for Mother and hollering at Henry that he'd be all right. I remember the look on Daddy's face when he yelled at James to go for Dr. Fisher—his skin pale, his eyes wide and accusing. I'd only seen him look scared once before—the night little Charlie died from the Spanish flu—and it about did me in to think I'd be responsible for him losing another son.

Mother came beside me, shoving me out of the way. Her hands were strong and quick; she moved my dishrag away and looked at Henry's wound, never once grimacing. She put a clean cloth over it and grabbed



my hands, pressing them down on Henry's neck and looking at me with blazing eyes that shot right through me.

"Press hard. Don't move." Then she stood and pulled Daddy up with her. "Abner, it's bad. Real bad."

Henry's eyes drifted slowly to look up at me, and I wondered what he was thinking. I hated for him to be mad at me. As much as I hated his picking on me, I loved him fierce—almost as much as Daddy. Henry could make you smile in a second, no matter what had you in a mess. I loved both my brothers, but he was the one that really knew me, the one who liked playing with me. I couldn't stand the thought that I'd hurt him.

"Henry?" I whispered. "You all right?"

At that moment I heard the panic in Mother's voice as it got louder. "I know it's been a long time, but can't you remember how—"

"No," Daddy bellowed. "I can't do that. I never could, and you know it."

"But you were there!" she yelled. "You saw everything!" Mother never raised her voice, so I had no idea what to think. Daddy looked taken aback too. He glared at her, then down at Henry, and then he looked at her again. This time the fear seemed more like anger.

"Listen here, even if I knew how, I wouldn't bring that blasphemy into my house!"

Daddy bent over Henry and lifted him into his arms. He carried him into their bedroom and laid Henry across the bed. Mother followed with her shoulders bent forward like she was ready to tackle Daddy. He turned to her and caught her before she could lay into him.

"Now, Lizzy, there ain't nothing I can do. Not like you's wanting right now. James'll fetch Dr. Fisher, and you and I are gonna do everything we can. The Lord'll take care a Henry. Now stop fretting over something I can't control, and do what you can for him."

Mother looked like she might fall over, but then her whole body stiffened. She went to Henry's head and checked the rags. Then she knelt

beside the bed and started praying. Daddy turned to me, and right then I saw that he knew I'd done this. My stomach turned, and I thought I might lose my lunch right there.

"Ruby," he said. "How'd this happen?"

I couldn't take him looking at me like that, like he didn't even know who I was. All I could do was turn and run. So I did. I ran out the door and into the woods as far as my legs would carry me. I tripped and fell a couple of times, but it was the third fall that finally did me in. I had nothing left inside me. All I could do was lay on the ground, my tears mixing with the dirt and leaves, praying God would forgive me and let Henry live. I promised I'd never lose my temper again, and I'd do everything in my power to keep the people I loved from pain. I promised Him that I'd do anything He ever wanted from me...ever. He just couldn't take Henry.

Sometimes I still remember that day in a dream, and I wonder how much of it really happened, and how much of my memory my dreams have changed. It's hard to know. Now, when I remember that day, it's not the memory of Henry lying on the floor, or Mother scrubbing up blood for hours, or even the relief I felt when Henry was all right that my mind sits on. Instead, I think about all the ruckus going on around us that day, about all the promises I made to God to save Henry, and not even realizing that Daddy was already sick.

## CHAPTER ONE

The world stopped turning for a lot of folks in October of 1929, but not for me. I heard Daddy and Mother talking about the stock market diving and times getting hard, and it sounded serious enough, but life in the rural parts of northern Alabama had been tough for some time. It didn't make much difference for us, even well into the next year. I kept getting up every morning to the same breakfast of ham, eggs, and biscuits and gravy; a regular day of school; and an afternoon of chores. Besides, Daddy said maybe this mess would wake the rest of the country up to what the farmers already knew. Life is precarious.

It was about the fall of '30, when I was thirteen, I started to notice that Daddy didn't look right. He owned the cotton gin in Hanceville, Alabama, a nice little town down the road a piece from Cullman, and he'd been coming home from work earlier and earlier with his whole body sagging off the bones. Even with the ginning season winding down, he seemed more tired than he should have. He'd eat half the amount of supper he used to, and after dinner he'd sit back in his chair by the fire and doze off just after dark. Mother would come along and help him to bed, and seeing him look so weak started to worry me.

But morning would come again, and he'd have a fire lit, the cow milked, and his Bible read before I even thought about leaving the warmth of my bed. I'd sit at his feet in front of the fire and ask him what he was reading. By that time I was too big to sit in his lap, but he'd reach down with his big leathery hand and pet my hair while he read out loud. I'd listen to his deep voice and imagine God himself was speaking to me.

By the end of November, I noticed some more differences. He didn't play with me anymore, didn't rough house or play ball in the yard with my brothers, and one morning when I got up, Mother was the one coming in the door with the milk pail while Daddy's snores still rattled around in their bedroom. When I asked if Daddy was all right, she nodded and went about her business in the kitchen.

I didn't know what else to do, so I took over frying the bacon so Mother could concentrate on making biscuits. We didn't say much at first, which wasn't altogether unusual for us. The only talking we managed in the mornings was complaining or commanding. I guess it wouldn't be hard to figure out which of us did the complaining, and which one did the commanding.

But that morning, I didn't complain. Mother looked especially tired, and her eyes were red around the edges. I took up the last of the bacon and put it on the table as James and Henry came trudging in from the barn smelling like they'd wallowed around with the pigs instead of feeding them. I pinched my nose and shook my head at them.

"Ya'll aren't going out in public smelling like that are you?"

James tugged a strand of my hair—they'd both learned not to swat my rear—and grabbed a biscuit off the stove. "What? Poor lil' Ruby worried we'll embarrass her in front a her friends?"

Henry laughed with him. "Maybe it's you that don't smell good, Rubes. C'mere and let's see."

I wasn't about to get near either one of them. "I don't want to smell like some pig. You better wash up before you eat."

I looked over at Mother as she set the rest of the food on the table, expecting some support. After all, she was the one who insisted everyone get clean before they touched the food. But she didn't say anything. In fact, she looked like she was off in another world.

There was a muffled thud from the bedroom, which I figured was Daddy's feet hitting the floor. James and Henry must have too, cause they sobered up right quick. They headed out the back door, and next thing I heard was the sloshing of water against their faces. I waited for Daddy to come on out and eat, but he never did. A couple of minutes passed, and I heard the bed squeak. Mother put four plates on the table and slid through the bedroom door, closing it behind her.

I crossed the dog run that separated the main house from the bedroom I shared with my brothers. I went to my side to gather my school things. Then I returned to the kitchen and put a biscuit and some honey in a lunch pail to take with me. With no one around, I sneaked in an extra bit of honey. As I sat down to breakfast, Mother came out of the bedroom, and the boys came in the back door. We all sat around kind of quiet at first, and it felt like ghosts were sitting at the table with us or something. Finally James spoke up.

"Daddy's supposed to meet with Mr. Scott at the gin today. Does he want me to handle it?"

"No," Mother said. "He's determined to make it. But you'll need to take over some work around here today, so come on back as soon as you finish whatever your daddy wants done at the gin. The wood pile needs plenty more wood."

"Yes, ma'am."

And that was it. Daddy never came out to wish me a good day, and somehow I knew not to disturb him.

When Henry and I got home from school that afternoon, Dr. Fisher was talking with Mother in the living room. Just the sight of him sent a shiver down my spine and the memory of Charlie's last night on this

earth through my mind. I felt my breath catch, but then his large, white mustache lifted into a smile. Surely he wouldn't be smiling if something serious was wrong with Daddy, so it set me at ease, and I smiled back.

"Hi there, Miss Ruby," he said, tipping his hat. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of butterscotch. I grabbed it from his hand, trying not to seem too eager. He turned to Henry and shook his hand like a man while he pat him on the back.

"Henry! How's the basketball team shaping up? Ya'll ready for the game tonight?"

"Yes, sir. Them boys from Cullman won't know what hit 'em."

Henry smiled and walked over to Mother, kissing her on the cheek. She held onto him longer than usual, and it looked like she might cry. That sent my stomach knotting up. I looked at Dr. Fisher again. Maybe I'd been wrong. But before I could figure anything out, Mother started throwing out her usual orders.

"Ya'll get started on your chores if you expect to make it to the game tonight. Ruby, I need you to finish up the floors for me while I speak with Dr. Fisher outside."

"Yes, ma'am."

I put my things in my room then went to the kitchen where the mop waited for me. As I worked my way across the floor toward the table, I could see Mother and Dr. Fisher talking on the porch through the window. Mother put her palms to her eyes and shook her head. I worked my way a little closer to the window where I could make out some of Dr. Fisher's words—something about Daddy's feet getting worse and how she'd have to convince him to eat better. Mother threw her hands out to the side and groaned.

"We've tried everything you suggested. I don't know what else to do."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "I know it's tough, but it's time to face the reality that he's going to lose that foot. Maybe both of them."

Mother turned away from me, so I couldn't hear what she was saying. I pushed my ear closer to the window.

"What are you doing?" The deep voice startled me, and I whipped around to find Daddy leaning his huge frame against one of the chairs at the table, his dark eyebrows pinched together into that look that usually meant I was in big trouble.

"I was just cleaning," I said.

"Cleaning, huh? Since when do you clean windows with your ears?"

He gave me the look a bit longer, but then he sighed and pulled out the chair. He fell into it like his own body weighed more than he could handle; then he slapped his thigh.

"C'mere."

I thought for a second I was about to get a whipping, and he must have seen my eyes widen cause he let out one of his big laughs and scratched his beard.

"C'mon," he said. "You ain't in trouble, baby girl."

"*Aren't*," I said, trying to hide my grin. "And I'm not a little girl anymore."

He continued to smile, but he looked at me different, like he was remembering me instead of seeing me. "Just like your mother. Can't let a man talk like he wants to. But I guess you're right. You *aren't* a little girl anymore. So how about taking a seat and talking with me like a grown up?"

I slid onto the bench nearest me and waited for him to say something. We must have sat like that for a full minute. I laced my hands together on top of the table and looked out the window.

"So how was school today?" he asked.

"Good."

"You staying out of trouble?"

"Best I can."

He nodded toward the window and the front porch where I could still barely hear the voices of Mother and Dr. Fisher. "Don't go worrying yourself over things you can't control, Ruby."

I looked at him then, looked deep into those blue eyes that made me laugh nearly every day. “Daddy, are you sick?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to lose your foot?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to die?”

He leaned forward and put his hand over mine—they were still laced together on the table and were beginning to sweat. “Ruby, don’t nobody know what God’s plans may hold. I can’t tell you when my time’s been appointed. But no matter what happens, you can trust God to take care of you.”

I guessed that was supposed to make me feel better, but all I could think about was that he didn’t really answer my question. Then Mother came through the door and went straight to the stove without a word. She checked the fire in it’s belly then stirred the great big pot on top. She wiped her hands on her apron and let out a long sigh that seemed to deflate her and slump her shoulders. Daddy stood and walked over behind her, limping on his right leg. He put his hands on Mother’s shoulders and gave them a gentle squeeze.

She turned around and pointed a finger up at his face. “Abner Graves, I don’t know what I’m going to do with you. I’ve told you time and time again about watching what you eat.”

He grabbed her finger and smiled. “And I have. We done the best we can. The rest is up to God.”

“How in God’s name are we supposed to pay for surgery?”

“Don’t worry, Lizzy. It’ll all be fine. It was a fine cotton season, and next year’s gonna be even better. Don’t worry about the money.”

He pulled her into his chest and wrapped his arms around her back. She relaxed in his embrace, but then she noticed me watching them and turned back to the stove. I jumped up and grabbed the mop from the bucket, trying to rid my mind of the fear swirling around the edges. I



focused all my thoughts on finishing my chores as quickly as possible so I could go to the game.

Basketball was just catching on in the more rural areas of Alabama, but our school in Hanceville had a pretty good team. We figured it was a good season if we beat Cullman more times than they beat us. That fall, we'd gotten beaten pretty bad in football, so everybody in the town was counting on the basketball team to lift our spirits. I liked it better than football. For one thing, I could play basketball. James and Henry had taught me how to shoot on a basket they'd nailed to the side of our barn. Even Daddy had helped me some, and I was pretty good too. But he drew the line there. When the boys had friends over, and they started playing real games, Daddy would insist I go help Mother in the house. But I sneaked out a few times, and I showed those boys that a girl can give as good as she gets if you give her half a chance.

We got to the gym early on account of Henry being on the team. James was already there waiting on us in the parking lot with a couple of his friends, including Emma Rae Calhoun. She was a senior, and she was sweet on James. He didn't say so, but I could tell he was sweet on her too. He'd walk her for ice cream after church a couple of Sundays every month, and he made sure he was extra clean on those days.

He came over to us as we got to the front door. He put a hand on Daddy's shoulder, and his eyebrows mashed together till his face turned almost identical to Daddy's.

"You feeling all right?"

"I'm fine son." Daddy pushed out his chest.

James didn't look convinced. "If you ain't feeling right, you need to stay home and rest. I can get Henry home. Besides, we'll want to go out with some friends afterward anyhow."

Daddy stopped walking and gave James that same look he'd given me at the table earlier, and James knew it as well as I did. Then Daddy looked over at the hopeful expression on Henry's face and frowned.

"Said I'm fine. Now you go on with your friends. Henry'll come home with us."

Henry's face fell, and James nodded before turning away. Daddy took a few more steps and called over his shoulder as we reached the door. "Make sure you're home at a decent hour. I'll need you to start mending that fence early tomorrow."

"Yes sir," James said.

We walked into the gym, and Henry headed straight for the court where some of the other boys on the team were already shooting around. Daddy and Mother took up their same spot as always, close to the floor near the middle of the court. The Doyles came in right after us, and they nodded at Mother and Daddy. They sat a few feet away. Their daughter, Mary, sat down behind them and glanced around. I smiled, and she managed a polite wave of her hand. Nothing that seemed particularly inviting. Mary was in my class, but she didn't look like any eighth grader I'd ever seen, maybe cause she'd started school later than most. She was always so well put together, with hair that shone like everything when the sun hit it. She'd already caught the attention of a few high school boys, but not any that had the guts to talk to her in front of her parents. But then again, I didn't know too many regular people that spoke to the Doyles.

Mother leaned toward me and nudged my side. "Why don't you go say hello to some of your friends?"

"I'll go later." I'd long ago lost hope of getting Mother to understand my preference for solitude. I was a bean pole of a girl, with little interest in clothes or talking about boys. I spent most of my free time at school reading or daydreaming about the adventures I'd go on as soon as I was old enough to get out of this town. It wasn't the best way to go about making friends, and the few times Mother had forced me into socializing, I'd only embarrassed myself.

But Mother was not one to give up easily. "At least make an effort to be friendly, Ruby. Your Daddy and I expect you to be polite."

I looked over at Daddy knowing he wouldn't care one way or the other if I said hello to girls I was barely acquainted with. He was already engrossed in watching Henry and the other boys go through some practice plays. I sighed and pushed myself off the bleacher, ignoring Mother's satisfied smile. Mary already had a few more girls around her, so I knew this would be awkward. But if I got it over with quickly, maybe Mother would leave me alone the rest of the game. I put on a smile and climbed the three bleachers to the group of girls. Evelyn Brachman and Judy Carr went to Cullman, so I only knew them by reputation, but Era Calhoun was a ninth grader at Hanceville, and Emma Rae's younger sister. All were from wealthier families in the county, and even though most of their parents seemed friendly enough with mine, they'd never seemed interested in being friends with me. I guess I couldn't say I'd shown much interest in them either, if I was being fair about it anyway.

"Hello," I managed. I forced my hands behind my back so I wouldn't fidget with them.

Mary said hi, and so did Era, but the other two looked around like they were wondering who might be looking at them. I didn't want to cause any of us any more embarrassment than necessary, but there was my mother to appease.

"Mind if I join y'all for a few minutes?"

Mary was the only one that really looked at me, and I was keenly aware of how plain I must seem to her. "Why sure, Ruby. Come sit by me."

I had to admit, she seemed downright genuine about it. I decided to give it a shot, and maybe the other girls would warm up to me. As I took a seat the game started, so I did my best to follow along with the girls' conversation while keeping up with the game. Before long they started going on and on about how handsome the players were. Henry made a nice shot near the goal, and we all stood to cheer. I couldn't hide my shock when Judy leaned toward me and spoke.

"Henry's your brother, right Ruby?" she said.

I nodded and she exchanged giggles with Era. I thought I remembered Henry walking with Era a couple of times when James would walk Emma Rae for ice cream. I hated the way the girls acted around both my brothers. It was all giggles and batting eyelashes, and complete nonsense if you asked me.

Mr. Doyle started pacing along the edge of the court. He'd be hollering soon. His youngest son, Matthew, was a senior on the team, and Mr. Doyle was constantly yelling during the games. He did it during football and baseball too, so we'd all gotten pretty used to it. Mary's face flushed a slight shade of pink, so I wondered if she was as used to it as the rest of us.

"What's Matthew planning on doing after graduation?" I asked.

She sighed and shook her head. "That's all anybody in our house can talk about these days. Daddy insists that he goes to college and learn about business, but Matthew just wants to play ball."

"Basketball?"

"Basketball, baseball, football; you name it. But Daddy says he's dreaming."

He ran down the court with such intensity in his eyes and balance in his body. He changed direction on a dime. He was tall and lean, with large muscled shoulders. I remembered watching him play football and baseball too. He was gifted. How could his daddy not see that?

Down below us, Mr. Doyle paced behind the wall of the cage, barking and clapping. He was every bit as intense as Matthew, and it seemed to me he'd be supporting his dreams. But Mr. Doyle owned several businesses in both Hanceville and Cullman, and his older sons were already working for him. Maybe expectations were a lot heavier than dreams.

I started to turn back to Mary to try to keep up the conversation, but right then it seemed like the entire gym gasped. My gaze shot to Daddy, expecting to see him laid out on the floor, but he was standing next to Mother looking all worried at the court. My next thought was for Henry, and I found him in the crowd of players gathering underneath the

basket furthest away from us. One of the players waved Coach Rayburn over, his face stricken with worry. I tried to get a glimpse, but then Mr. Doyle ran across the gym. Mary and I both stood at the same time, and I saw him then. Matthew was lying on the floor unconscious.

Coach Rayburn and Mr. Doyle slapped his face a few times and finally got him to come around. They lifted him off the floor and put his arms around their shoulders, then talked for a minute before they started moving toward the exit. About ten feet from the door, Matthew started coughing so bad they had to stop, and I heard another gasp from some people nearby. I tried to look closer to see what was happening, but I couldn't see anything from up in the stands. Mary and her mother hustled toward the exit too, so I followed them through the crowd opening up to let them by.

As we got to the door, the men moved Matthew the rest of the way out of the exit, and from what I could see, I thought he might have passed out again. Mary and Mrs. Doyle followed along behind them, clinging to each other like they might fall over if they let go. My heart thudded in my ears, and I wished I could comfort Mary. But they were gone in a matter of seconds, and I had no idea what to do.

I searched for Mother and Daddy in the crowd. Maybe they'd know something. As I looked around, I saw what had made those people gasp the second time. All across the floor where Mr. Doyle and Coach Rayburn had stopped with Matthew, was a large splattering of blood nearly as black as tar.

The ride home in the car was quiet, and it about drove me mad. I kept waiting on Daddy or Mother to ask Henry what happened, but they didn't say anything. Mother stared out the window, her mouth moving silently. Beside me, Henry chewed on his thumbnail, and behind the wheel, Daddy stared intently at the road ahead. I felt like my seat might explode underneath me if someone didn't say something soon.

"Mother, what was wrong with Matthew tonight?" I finally asked.

Her mouth stopped moving, and her eyes closed. But she didn't answer.

"Daddy?" I said. "Do you know? Henry? Did he get hit in the mouth or something?"

Henry dropped his hand and looked at me kind of strange. "Naw, he didn't get hit by nobody. Just dropped like a sack a flour. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. He was coughing as he left, and I saw blood on the floor."

At that a little whimper escaped Mother. "Poor Francine," she said. "She already lost her sister and a nephew this year with T.B. Now her son."

"Now, Lizzy, don't go getting upset," Daddy said. "We don't know that's what it is."

Mother shook her head. "I know," she mumbled. "I've seen enough of it to know."

Daddy gritted his teeth, and I tried to remember what I knew about tuberculosis. I thought one of Mother's brothers may have died from it when I was small, but I couldn't remember much. All I knew was that anyone I'd heard of having it had died from it. I didn't know Matthew as anyone other than Mary's big brother and one of Henry's friends at school, but he'd always seemed strong and kind. He didn't make a big deal about himself, even though he was about the most well-liked boy in school and the best athlete by far. He made good grades too. I'd never heard of him getting in any sort of trouble. Seemed like such a shame.

"Henry?" I asked quietly. I didn't want to worry Mother any more than she was already.

He looked over at me and sighed, but it didn't seem like the kind that was angry. Just tired. "Yeah?"

"Will Matthew die?"

He plopped a large hand on top of my hair and grinned, which settled my stomach. "I'm sure he'll be all right. They'll take him to the fancy doctors down in Birmingham and fix him right up."

If Henry was sure he'd be all right, then surely it was true. The Doyles could afford expensive doctors and hospitals and all manner of treatment. If anyone in the world could survive T.B. it was Matthew Doyle.