



HOW
THE

Star Sisters

CAME
TO

*Whistling
Ridge*

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*For all the girls
with stardust in their veins
and love in their hearts.*

Once upon a time, on a cloudless night sometime between the first day of the world and the last, three stars fell to earth.

As the soil around them smoked and their fire cooled, they woke to find themselves women, with fingers and toes and bone-white hair and skin the color of burnished bronze.

The first star sister stood straight and tall; she wore her humanity with grace and wisdom, for all that she looked like a young woman. (One can never truly be *young*, after all, when one has lived for centuries in the heavens.)

The second star sister was quiet and soft, with a gift for sitting still and seeing the world for what it truly was.

The third star sister woke into her womanhood with laughter on her lips; she was the sort of person who brought a smile to everyone around, her joy so rich and effervescent that it spilled into the very earth she walked on.

The town into which they had fallen was a little one, dotted with apple orchards and held in the arms of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. On the first morning of their human lives, the star sisters came upon a small white house at the edge of an orchard, a cottage with a sweet porch and a scent of starshine and rain about it.

The house was unoccupied, but not empty—each star sister could feel, pulsing within her, something that whispered to them that this cottage had recently been home to someone like them. Perhaps it was the way the starlight shimmered through the big windows at night, or the faint threads of magic that still lingered in the walls.

So the sisters were not surprised when, on the third day of their human lives, they found the book.

It wasn't a remarkable book. It was slim and light, bound in yellow leather the color of a setting sun, the kind of journal you can get for \$19.95 at any office supply store.

But the sisters knew, as soon as they unearthed it in a kitchen drawer, that it was meant for them. When they brushed it with their newly-human fingertips, the notebook glowed just the tiniest bit.

The handwriting inside was both beautiful and tidy, the kind of cursive script that stays neatly inside the lines and is easy to read, even for eyes so recently formed. On the front page was written:

Welcome to Whistling Ridge.

And on the next, once the oldest star sister had turned the page, they read:

I can feel that my light is beginning to fade, and soon it will be time for my sojourn on this earth to come to an end. I do not know who you are, the ones who will come after me; but I know that you will come.

In the book, on page after neatly-written page, was their predecessor's guidance for human life.

Human skin is fragile, she wrote in one section. Wear gloves when working with roses, and try the smaller kitchen knives before you use the larger. That page was streaked with a small, rust-brown smudge.

On another page, she'd written, *All human words are important, but none are so important as these six:*

I am sorry.

I love you.

The star sisters did not read the book all at once. They kept it on the little cherry-wood kitchen table, and thumbed through it idly while they breakfasted or when the evenings grew dark around them.

And slowly, with the help of the book and a considerable measure of trial and error, the star sisters learned to be human.

In those first days of their human life, they chose names. Names are not something a star has much need of; humans may give stars names, but stars view themselves always as one part of the great, blazing whole of the universe, and have no more reason to name one another than humans have reason to name their individual toes.

The oldest star sister chose the name *Agatha*, felt it settle into her skin and wind a thread of humanity around her burning center. *A good woman*, the name meant, and anyone who met Agatha would have agreed that it was fitting.

For the second star sister, the one whose human heart was tender and so open to the world it sometimes hurt within her chest, the name *Ruth* wrapped itself around her like a cloak. *Compassionate friend*.

A name did not come easily to the third star sister. She searched in the high branches of the apple trees and the deep soil of the garden, through the books in the Whistling Ridge library and the songs that played on the old clock radio in her human bedroom. And finally, after weeks had passed, she found a name that twined itself into her, sinking through her veins and knitting itself into her bones:

Marianne.

Beloved.

* * *

As the months, and then the years, passed, the white cottage began to feel more and more like home. Rarely, now, did the star sisters have to turn to the little yellow book to navigate their human lives; advice like *Most despair is born of exhaustion or hunger* or *Neglecting to brush one's hair leads to grief* was nestled deep inside them now, held in their hearts in the way of any human.

The longer they stayed in Whistling Ridge, the further they found themselves needing to travel. They spent long evenings catching fireflies among the trees, whispering the magic back

into them so that they might grant wishes, and then bartered the wishes for an old car that puffed and stuttered but drove serviceably enough to get them wherever they needed to go. (And they learned to drive it, which was harder.) And then, on mornings when they woke with something pulling at their fingertips, tingling in their scalps, they drove away from the white cottage to tend to the world's magic.

Magic, unlike so many facets of being human, was one area in which the star sisters needed no guidance. In the moment of their waking in the orchard, each sister could already feel the golden veins of magic that flowed under the earth; each knew, immediately, how to sink her hands into the soil and touch it, the beating heart of the world.

And each of them could feel the way it called to them when the magic grew too much or too little. Like cooks who know just when to lift the lid on a steaming pot, the star sisters knew when it was right to feed more starlight into the earth, and when it was better to pull some away, letting the extra magic spill into their fiery centers and be soothed.

There were not many words about magic-tending in the yellow book. There didn't need to be.

As the star sisters traveled further from Whistling Ridge, they slowly came to know the country around them as well as they did the white cottage—the dark, wet magic of the swamplands in the south; the bite of the snow in the north; the fierce red rock of the high mountains in the west.

With every place that came to feel a part of them, their hearts grew less star-like and more human.

And so it was inevitable, perhaps, that one day, one of the star sisters would fall in love.

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It happened first to the middle sister. *Ruth. Compassionate friend.* From their first days on earth, it had been Ruth who had worn her womanhood most vulnerably, Ruth whose skin ached with the weight of being human.

The three star sisters had driven all the way to Montana, chasing a thread of magic gone wispy and dull somewhere in the craggy mountains and deep blue lakes of big sky country. It was on the second day that Ruth realized how she'd never breathed so deep as she did under those Montana skies; never felt the sizzle of the world's magic so strongly, never felt the human blood in her veins more keenly.

And it was on the third day that the star sisters stayed in a bed and breakfast next door to a farm tucked into the greenest valley that Ruth had ever seen, with a slate-grey farmhouse plopped in the middle of the rolling fields like a postcard, only better. When the farmer brought fresh milk—warm and frothing with cream, smelling of butter and sunlight—to the B&B the next morning, he tipped his rancher hat at the guests and introduced himself as Andy.

And deep in the part of her that still held the wisdom of the universe, Ruth knew in that moment that she wouldn't be going back to Whistling Ridge.

All the star sisters shed tears when Agatha and Marianne left Montana. Each of them remembered the words from the yellow book, *Tears can be frightening, but trying to stop them is worse.* But their grief was different than it might have been if they had been fully human, for they knew that no distance could ever separate them; that they would always be part of the same whole, as surely as they had been when they were only lights in the sky.

The white cottage in Whistling Ridge seemed bigger when Agatha and Marianne reached it again. The quality of the quiet was different, without Ruth's presence. The yellow book had warned them: *Just as human skin is fragile, human hearts are fragile, too—but even they can mend in time.*

And in time, they found that it was true.

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Marianne was the second sister to be pulled away from Whistling Ridge. Years after Ruth found a home in Montana, there was a knock on the door of the white cottage, and Marianne opened it to see a young man with ruffled brown hair and kind eyes.

“Sorry,” he said before anything else, a trait that no longer surprised Marianne, who had learned that humans apologized for many things that she found mysterious. (*Humans often move through the world as though their presence is an accident*, the yellow book said, and Marianne had found that to be true.)

“My name is Daniel Bloom,” the young man continued. “I’m a travel journalist—I’m here to do a profile on Whistling Ridge and its apple orchards, and I’m afraid my tire blew just outside. Is there any chance I could borrow your phone to call for help?”

Marianne invited him in. And when he smiled at her, a smile as crooked and ruffled as his hair, she felt something deep inside her spark to life.

Daniel stayed with the star sisters, even after his tire had been repaired and his article submitted. They put him in Ruth’s old room, and it felt right, having the house full again. He and Marianne stayed up late into the night talking; she loved the way his laugh echoed richly across the walls of the white cottage, the way his caramel-colored eyes danced when he looked at her.

It didn’t take long for Agatha to realize what Daniel’s presence meant. And when he and Marianne traded in his old car for a ramshackle RV, so that she could better reach all the parts of the world whose magic needed tending, Agatha hugged them both and then let them go.

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For awhile, as the years slid by, Agatha thought perhaps there was something wrong with her. She met many men, and many women, and yet none of them kindled in her the same kind of flame that she’d seen awake in both her sisters.

Instead, with each year that passed, Agatha felt her roots sinking more deeply into the soil of Whistling Ridge—as though the town itself, with its apple trees and mountains and the stars that wheeled overhead at night, was her soulmate. And though she missed her sisters, and often felt inside herself for the golden thread that connected them across the distances, Agatha found herself feeling more and more content. The white cottage began to seem like an extension of her own bones; the wind that whistled through the trees in the winter, like her own breath.

And slowly the people of the town, too, seemed to become a part of her. When her neighbor Harriet brought jugs of fresh-pressed cider so sweet Agatha could feel it tingling in her fingers, they sat and talked for hours by the fire, and when Harriet left Agatha knew she'd found a friend. When Amar Sidana handed her a free cone of ice cream to get her opinion on the new flavor, Agatha knew the new pharmacist, his wife, and his young sons would be imprinted in her heart forever.

Eventually, Agatha came to understand that her human heart was different than her sisters' were—that her heart beat not for one person, but for the place around her. Perhaps, she thought sometimes, it was because she was the one who held on the most to the memory of her first life; perhaps something inside her still yearned for the interconnectedness, the sense of belonging to the whole universe.

Her universe was smaller now, but Agatha knew that she and Whistling Ridge would be tied together for as long as her mortal life might last.

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Once upon a time, on a cloudless night sometime between the first day of the world and the last, three stars fell to earth.

And in finding the love that made the silvery blood inside each of them flow faster, the star sisters at last learned what it truly meant to be human.