

BOOK  
GOLD



# Missing May



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Rylant



 SCHOLASTIC

## CHAPTER 1

WHEN MAY DIED, Ob came back to the trailer, got out of his good suit and into his regular clothes, then went and sat in the Chevy for the rest of the night. That old car had been parked out by the doghouse for as long as I could remember, and the weeds had grown up all around it so you didn't even notice it unless you looked, and for years I couldn't understand why Ob didn't just get rid of the awful thing. Until I saw him sitting in it after the funeral. Then I knew that even though nobody in the world figured that old car had any good purpose, Ob knew there was some real reason to let it sit. And when May died, he figured out what it was.

I never saw two people love each other so much. Sometimes the tears would just come over me, looking at the two of them, even six years back when I first got here and was too young to be thinking about love. But I guess I must have had a deep part of me thinking about it, hoping to see it all along, because the first time I saw Ob help May braid her long yellow hair, sitting in the kitchen one night, it was all I could do not to go to the woods and cry forever from happiness.

I know I must have been loved like that, even if I can't remember it. I must have; otherwise, how could I even recognize love when I saw it that night between Ob and May? Before she died, I know my mother must have loved to comb my shiny hair and rub that Johnson's baby lotion up and down my arms and wrap me up and hold and hold me all night long. She must have known she wasn't going to live and she must have held me longer than any other mother might, so I'd have enough love in me to know what love was when I saw it or felt it again.

When she died and all her brothers and sisters passed me from house to house, nobody ever wanting to take care of me for long, I still had that lesson in love deep inside

me and I didn't grow mean or hateful when nobody cared enough to make me their own little girl. My poor mother had left me enough love to go on until somebody did come along who'd want me.

Then Uncle Ob and Aunt May from West Virginia visited, and they knew an angel when they saw her and they took me on home.

Home was, still is, a rusty old trailer stuck on the face of a mountain in Deep Water, in the heart of Fayette County. It looked to me, the first time, like a toy that God had been playing with and accidentally dropped out of heaven. Down and down and down it came and landed, thunk, on this mountain, sort of cockeyed and shaky and grateful to be all in one piece. Well, sort of one piece. Not counting that part in the back where the aluminum's peeling off, or the one missing window, or the front steps that are sinking.

That first night in it with Ob and May was as close to paradise as I may ever come in my life. Paradise because these two old people — who never dreamed they'd be bringing a little girl back from their visit with the relatives in Ohio — started, from the minute we pulled up in Ob's

old Valiant, to turn their rusty, falling-down place into a house just meant for a child. May started talking about where they'd hang the swing as soon as she hoisted herself out of the front seat (May was a big woman), and Ob was designing a tree house in his head before he even got the car shut off. I was still so sick to my stomach from traveling all those curvy West Virginia roads that all I could do was swallow and nod, swallow and nod. Try to smile without puking.

But when we got inside the trailer, it became plain to me at once that they didn't need to do any great changing to make a little girl happy. First thing I saw when May switched on the light were those shelves and shelves — seemed every wall was covered with them — of whirligigs. I knew what they were right off even though they weren't like any whirligigs I'd ever seen. Back in Ohio people had them hooked to their fences or stuck out in their gardens to scare off the birds. And they'd be mostly the same everywhere: a roadrunner whose legs spun in the wind, or maybe a chicken or a duck. Cartoon characters were popular — Garfield was in a lot of gardens with his arms whirling like crazy in the breeze.

I'd seen plenty of whirligigs, but never any like Ob's. Ob was an artist — I could tell that the minute I saw them — though *artist* isn't the word I could have used back then, so young. None of Ob's whirligigs were farm animals or cartoon characters. They were *The Mysteries*. That's what Ob told me, and I knew just what he was talking about. One whirligig was meant to be a thunderstorm and it was so like one, black and gray, beautiful and frightening. Another was Ob's idea of heaven, and I thought his angels just might come off that thing and fly around that house trailer any minute, so golden and light were they. There was Fire and Love and Dreams and Death. Even one called May, which had more little spinning parts than any of the rest of the whirligigs, and these parts all white — her Spirit, he said. They were grounded to a branch from an oak tree and this, he said, was her Power.

I stood there before those shelves, watching these wonders begin to spin as May turned on the fan overhead, and I felt like a magical little girl, a chosen little girl, like Alice who has fallen into Wonderland. This feeling has yet to leave me.

And as if the whirligigs weren't enough, May turned me to the kitchen, where she pulled open all the cabinet doors, plus the refrigerator, and she said, "Summer, whatever you like you can have and whatever you like that isn't here Uncle Ob will go down to Ellet's Grocery and get you. We want you to eat, honey."

Back in Ohio, where I'd been treated like a homework assignment somebody was always having to do, eating was never a joy of any kind. Every house I had ever lived in was so particular about its food, and especially when the food involved me. There's no good way to explain this. But I felt like one of those little mice who has to figure out the right button to push before its food will drop down into the cup. Caged and begging. That's how I felt sometimes.

My eyes went over May's wildly colorful cabinets, and I was free again. I saw Oreos and Ruffles and big bags of Snickers. Those little cardboard boxes of juice that I had always, just once, wanted to try. I saw fat bags of marshmallows and cans of SpaghettiOs and a little plastic bear full of honey. There were real glass bottles of Coke looking cold as ice in the refrigerator and a great big half of

a watermelon taking up space. And, best of all, a carton of real chocolate milk that said Hershey's.

Whirligigs of Fire and Dreams, glistening Coke bottles, and chocolate milk cartons to greet me. I was six years old and I had come home.



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