



RUBY REDFORT

CATCH YOUR DEATH



LAUREN CHILD

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CLARICE BEAN*



Don't miss the previous Ruby Redfort adventures:

Ruby Redfort *Look Into My Eyes*

Ruby Redfort *Take Your Last Breath*

LAUREN CHILD first introduced the character of Ruby Redfort in her three award-winning, best-selling CLARICE BEAN novels. Since then she has been inundated with letters from fans asking for the RUBY REDFORT books. And it must have worked, because this is number three in the series.

Lauren is also the creator of the **CHARLIE AND LOLA** books, as well as Associate Producer on the TV show of the same name. Her books have won many prizes, including the Smarties Prize (four times), the Kate Greenaway Medal, and the Red House Children's Book Award.

The RUBY REDFORT series features codes and puzzles created with the help of super-geek consultant Marcus du Sautoy, Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University and all-round genius.

TRIP
READY

BY

LAUREN CHILD

FOUR

CATCH YOUR DEATH



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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For **Peps**

“Smell is one of the most powerful triggers of the human memory.

An odor is a portal to the past, instantly transporting the smeller back to some long-forgotten time. The conscious mind might be unaware of the memory, but, just as smelling salts can rouse a person from a dead faint, so smell rouses the subconscious and awakens the dormant memory.”

DR. DAVIDSON WALTER F. MACKINTOSH,
PHD, CBE, *Ulwin University, cowriter of the*
highly regarded textbook Nasal Passages

The Abandoned One

THE GIRL OPENED HER EYES AND BLINKED UP AT THE SKY. From where she lay, curled on the pine-needle floor, she could see pure blue, vivid behind a latticework of black branches. Sensing that she was alone, the girl sat up and looked around. She listened for footsteps, voices, but heard no human sound at all, just the hot lazy birds and insects buzzing and zithering. The picnic things were still laid out and a chain of ants was busy deconstructing the leftovers. She picked up the novel that lay where her father had sat, *The Abandoned One — A Thriller*, and she began to read.

But an hour later and almost halfway through, her parents still had not returned. Had there been some emergency? Was her father looking for help? Her mother waving at passing planes? Had they both been devoured by bears or some other wild thing—some terrible beast that lurked in the faraway forest? Or had they simply forgotten her, left her here? Her four-year-old imagination began to run wild, egged on by the pages of the book.

She calmed herself and took deep breaths, inhaling the forest aroma. The scent of the pine was a comfort, reassuring and familiar, and her common sense drifted back to her. She was aware that the most likely explanation was probably the actual one: her parents had gone to the river to fetch water and had gotten sidetracked.

She waited, stayed exactly where she was, remembering this was the advice given by the yellow survival manual that sat on top of her father's bureau. But time ticked on and night began to fall and no one came back. She stood up and pushed her feet into her boots, tying them carefully, doubling the knot so they would not come undone.

She pulled on her red waterproof raincoat with its sensible hood, just in case the weather broke—in the wilderness you could never be sure. She took the winding path down to where the river must certainly be, and as she walked she breathed deeply, filling her tiny lungs with pure forest air. And as she inhaled she smelled a smell so delicious, so like perfume, she couldn't help but follow where her nose wanted to lead her.

She left the path and twisted through the dark trees and the tangles of briars and fallen branches, and came to a place where the moon could reach if only the clouds would let it. Ahead of her was deathly dark, and so it was with great caution that she stepped into black. As she did so, she felt her coat snag on

something sharp; she pulled, but it pulled back—the tiny girl was now caged in thorns.

Trapped.

She sensed something ahead of her, quite near. Something alive, something dangerous, something bad. The clouds moved, the moon shone, and the girl gasped. For barely three feet away, staring at her with the palest blue eyes and the sharpest glistening teeth, was a wolf.

The girl stood very still, watching the beast, its gaze fixed upon her. She waited; she closed her eyes to block it out. Her heart was beating fast and her breathing was shallow and unsteady. She listened to the creature and heard the same sound, the same panic, the child and the wolf both locked in fear.

Slowly, the girl began to unpick herself from the brambles, pulling the thorns one by one from her legs, twisting out of her little hooded coat until it was all the briars could claim. She stepped out of the thicket and saw what held the wolf; it was trapped in an ugly mouth of iron teeth. Her four-year-old instinct took hold: it told her to free the desperate wild thing and so, picking up a rock, she struck the trap over and over until it gave, and the bleeding paw of the wolf was released.

For a moment the beast looked at the girl, its eyes in hers, hers in its, and for just a second they knew each other's thoughts.

In the distance a voice called out, two voices. “Ruby, Ruby! Where are you?”

The wolf held her gaze just a second longer. Its beautiful eyes, crystal blue and ringed with violet, gleamed; then it turned and melted into the darkness of the forest.

And the wolf, like a wisp of smoke, was gone.

An Ordinary Kid

WHEN RUBY WAS SIX, she was entered by the Junior Chess Club, known as the Pawns, in a local city tournament. Game one, she found herself drawn against Mr. Karocovsky. Not the opponent anyone would wish to be sitting opposite for their very first public game, at least not unless that person wanted to get home early so they could watch *Tiny Toons*. Mr. Karocovsky had been a big champion in his heyday and had played chess against many famous Russians. Now he was an old man with a sharp brain. Not as sharp as it had been, but he was still a grandmaster and the best chess player in the state.

Ruby looked at him across the table. He had a nice face; his eyes, watery and gray, looked like they might have seen the woes of the world. This man knew what it was to yearn for something and struggle to get it.

She could see what he was going to do ten moves ahead. She lost the game skillfully. Mr. Karocovsky was very generous

about his win; he smiled kindly, shook her hand, and thanked her for being such a challenging opponent. He was a gracious winner, a good sport.

Seventeen-year-old Kaspar Peterson smirked. He wasn't surprised she'd lost. He didn't see there was any way this squirt of a six-year-old girl was going to win against a champion. She wasn't going to win against anyone. Ruby Redfort challenged Kaspar to a game. He casually accepted.

She beat him in five easy moves. He was an ungracious loser, a bad sport.

Ruby had been reluctant to beat old Mr. Karocovsky; she had no such qualms about thrashing Kaspar Peterson.

Some several years later . . .

CHAPTER 1

A Positive Mental Attitude

THE ONLY THING TO FEAR IS THE BLUE ALASKAN WOLF, which, by the way, doesn't exist."

These words were spoken by Samuel Colt, a former special agent turned environmentalist. Now he had taken up work as a Spectrum survival trainer. He was a tall, well-built man, getting on in years, but still in good shape. The kind of guy you wanted to have on your side, the kind of guy you would be relieved to have show up, and the kind of guy you would hope to see standing on the horizon if you found yourself lost — unless, of course, he was the reason you had tried to get lost in the first place. If so, your heart might sink more than a little.

Colt had a large gray mustache and shoulder-length hair. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and clothes that gave him the look of a trapper — he wouldn't have looked out of place had he traveled back in time a hundred years. He had seen it all and survived it all, and he knew what he was talking about. There was nothing

unfriendly about Sam Colt, a little straight talking perhaps, but never cruel.

“Cruelty has no place in the wilderness. You sometimes need to be single-minded, tough as an old lasso, but you don’t gotta be cruel.” He believed in that. “You don’t kill unless you have to, and if you have to you make it quick.”

“Blue wolves you don’t gotta concern yourselves with,” he continued. “But regular wolves? Be prepared for those fellas. My best advice: avoid them. You don’t seek ’em out, you don’t feed ’em, you don’t pet ’em, you don’t look ’em in the eye. That goes double for bears; bears are a whole lot more trouble than wolves, and wolves are trouble enough.”

“Who’s going to be dumb enough to feed a bear or a wolf?” whispered trainee Lowe.

“You’d be surprised,” said Colt.

Samuel Colt, among all his other fine attributes, had very acute hearing, and trainee Lowe was somewhat taken aback.

“You don’t clean up after a meal, that’s feeding. You’re leaving a trail from him to you and, I assure you, you don’t want to do that.”

“But what if you do run into a pack of wolves?” asked trainee Dury. “What then?”

Today was a theory day, and the trainees were indoors,

taking notes and asking questions. There was a lot of studying to do, though Colt's job was mainly to teach the practical stuff. He preferred that: being outdoors was natural — inside, not so good.

Sam Colt scratched his head and sighed. "If you should find yourself in this predicament, then there are a few ways you might handle things." He scanned the trainees to see who might know. "Redfort? Give me two pieces of good advice."

Ruby leaned back in her chair. "If you're able to, you wanna get up a tree pretty darned fast, but don't count on the wolves leaving you to enjoy the view; they've been known to sit it out, waiting for people to come down. Crocodiles behave the same way, though if you have a wolf on your tail then you're unlikely to have a crocodile after you, so I guess you can check that worry off your list." She paused before adding, "Only run for it if you're certain you're gonna reach that tree before the wolf reaches you. Running gets it all charged up — brings out the hunting instinct."

Colt nodded. "That's correct."

Ruby knew all this from the many books she had read over the years. She had written up some of these survival tips, the ones she considered particularly useful, in a pea-green notebook. Most of them she now knew by heart and, as Colt went through the various dos and don'ts of outdoor survival, Ruby found herself mentally replaying what she had learned.

SURVIVAL SUGGESTIONS:

Dealing with Dangerous Wildlife

WOLVES

SURVIVAL RULE 1:

Keep a clean camp. *Wolves have an exceptional sense of smell: they can smell prey from up to 1.75 miles.*

SURVIVAL RULE 2:

Keep a fire burning. *Wolves don't like fire.*

SURVIVAL RULE 3:

Do not run. *Unless you are sure you can run at over thirty miles an hour (no one has yet).*

SURVIVAL RULE 4:

Stick with the group. *Wolves are less likely to attack if you are in a large group than if you are alone, so don't wander off by yourself.*

“There are many theories about these creatures,” Colt continued. “Some say, in places where they’ve been aggressively hunted, wolves remain wary of man, preferring to avoid any human interaction at all. Others say that the wolf is a ruthless

predator and will attack if it gets any opportunity. Either way, it don't matter. My advice is the same: keep away from wolves, and try to make sure they keep away from you."

Ruby was thinking back to her own wolf encounter a long time ago on Wolf Paw Mountain: she had not followed any kind of advice, but had done the very worst thing as far as the textbooks were concerned, yet she had lived to tell the tale—how, she had no idea.

Unlike the other trainee agents, Ruby Redfort was not sleeping over at Mountain Ranch Camp. This was due to the fact that, unlike them, she was still attending junior high. This made her task a little more complicated than anyone else's: she was still expected to make it to class each school day, get her homework in on time, and show up every afternoon for survival school.

To make it more complicated still, no one, not the school, not her family or friends were supposed to know that she had been recruited by the secret agency known to only a few insiders (and a handful of evil geniuses) as Spectrum.

The division Ruby worked for, Spectrum 8, was run by LB, a woman who took no nonsense and no prisoners. She was not someone who tolerated mistakes or stupidity, and mistakes as far as LB was concerned were stupidity. For this reason, it was to Ruby's credit that, even though she had made more than one

or two errors in her short Spectrum life, she was still an agent who had lived to tell the tale (had there been someone she was authorized to tell it to).

It wasn't easy, but Ruby Redfort wasn't going to complain about it—all she had ever wanted was to work for a secret agency, not just as a code breaker, but as a field agent, out there facing danger and experiencing adventure. She had a lot of tests to take before this dream would become a reality, and she was determined not to blow it.

So, every day, Ruby left school, dropping by her home before heading to a secret location where she would get picked up by a Spectrum agency helicopter and dropped at the mountain camp. Every evening the helicopter would take her home again.

That night, after she had got home and changed back into her regular clothes, jeans and T-shirt (this one bearing the words ***trust me, I'm a doctor***), Ruby went downstairs to the kitchen to grab some dinner.

Her mother frowned a little when she caught sight of the T-shirt, but decided to let it go. "Your hair looks nice, honey," she said.

"How was school?" asked her father.

Ruby shrugged. "Oh, you know, schooly."

“Did the *Evening Bark* arrive yet?” asked Brant.

“I don’t know. I didn’t notice,” said Ruby.

“I’ll go see,” he said. Brant Redfort went to the front step to pick up the evening newspaper, the *Twinford Hound* (the Redforts always referred to it as the *Evening Bark* because it tended to be full of loud and sensational news).

Brant walked into the kitchen, reading the paper, his brow a little furrowed.

“Bad news?” asked Sabina.

“Warning of forest fires,” sighed Brant. “The mountains and canyons are tinder dry, and unless we get some rain the chances of the forests going up in flames are high.”

“Oh, dear,” said Sabina, “I don’t like the sound of that, not one little bit.”

Brant’s face brightened. “Hey, honey, you’re going to like the sound of this.”

“Oh, yes?” said Sabina, sitting up in her chair as if she needed to really concentrate.

“Melrose Dorff is having a launch.”

“Oh, fabulous!” exclaimed Sabina. “What are they launching?”

“The Lost Perfume of Marie Antoinette 1770,” said Brant. “It’s French.”

“Oh, French. I like the sound of that!”

“Didn’t I tell you that you would? Not that a whole gallon of perfume could smell better than you do,” he said, sniffing Sabina’s neck.

“Oh, brother!” muttered Ruby.

Brant continued reading: *“Madame Swann, perfumer to the rich and tasteful, famous for her discerning nose, has brought her recreation of Queen Marie Antoinette’s exclusive perfume from Paris to the West Coast. Let Them Smell Roses, the Lost Perfume of Marie Antoinette 1770, will be launched at a fabulous soiree where attendees will also be able to view some of the ill-fated queen’s most precious jewelry. An exciting announcement will be made that night — it will be strictly an invitation-only event.”*

Sabina looked forlorn and then puzzled. “But why haven’t we been invited?” she said. “I mean, we usually are.”

This was an understatement: the Redforts always were.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m sure there’ll be a logical explanation. Maybe they haven’t mailed the invitations yet.”

“I hope you’re right, Brant. I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t get invited to this particular launch party.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

After she had wolfed down her supper, she went back up to her room. She was eager to do more reading before she turned in for the night. She had been studying hard for the past

weeks—reading everything she could, absorbing it, digesting it and living by it.

What she didn't know was that it was precisely this rigid adherence to the facts she had learned and the rules she had made that was going to lead to her downfall.

CHAPTER 2

The Whole Foraging Deal

ON DAY SEVEN, Sam Colt began by talking about basic survival skills.

He hunkered down and motioned for them to gather around.

“Anyone want to tell me the two most important things needed in order to survive out in the wild . . . other than water?”

They had spent the first week mastering the skill of locating water, how to ensure the water was safe, and how to make water when there was none.

“Fire and shelter,” said Ruby.

“Correct again, Redfort. Fire is your friend, except when it gets out of control. You have a responsibility never to let your fire get away from you. Forest fires you can’t always prevent, but you can ensure your campfire doesn’t cause one.”

Ruby didn’t need reminding about this warning.

It was:

SURVIVAL SUGGESTIONS:

Basic Skills

FIRE

SURVIVAL RULE 1:

Only build a fire in a place where you can keep it contained.

“Once you’ve found the right place to *build* your fire,” Colt went on, “and once you’ve secured the surrounding area, tinder is what you’ll be needing next. Basically, you wanna find stuff that burns real easy and real quick. Tree bark, dried grass, paper—even cotton from your clothing if you’re desperate—all make good tinder. Or you could crush up pinecones or birds’ nests. Next on the list is kindling, then slow-burning fuel, meaning logs. Once you have all your materials lined up and ready, all you gotta do is set fire to ’em. . . . Easier said than done.”

He smiled and walked toward the door. “Since making fire is just about the most important skill you need, you better get practicing.”

The trainees all followed Sam Colt outside and spent the rest of that day trying to make a spark. As Colt had warned, it

was “easier said than done.” All in all, it took about a week to master fire.

Day fourteen, after school, and Ruby was sitting in the kitchen of the Green-Wood House, the Redforts’ stylish, modern Twinford home, making herself a little snack. The toaster pinged, and up popped her two slices of toast: both were the bearers of unhappy news. Unlike most people’s toasters, Ruby Redfort’s doubled as a fax machine and was capable of delivering important messages from Spectrum when you had just sat down to eat a delicious snack.

Ruby picked up the toast. The message was grilled into one side.

The first piece said:

foraging: one hour from now.

The other said:

Don’t spoil your appetite.

Ruby had been waiting for this day to arrive with a particular sort of dread. Having done some reading up on foraging, she

couldn't say it really appealed to her. She looked at the clock: she still had forty minutes before she needed to head off, still time to ask Mrs. Digby's expert advice on the subject.

Mrs. Digby had been with the Redfort family since before Ruby was born, and with Ruby's mother's family forever or thereabouts.

"I know all there is to know about mushrooms and toadstools, which ones will kill you and which won't," Mrs. Digby said.

"You know a whole lot about the wild, Mrs. Digby, that's for darn sure."

"The Digbys have always lived off the land and have always had it hard. We had it hard when we sailed over on the *Mayflower*, and we've had it hard ever since. Years and years of hardship and years of living off the free stuff that nature provided, no matter how disgusting, which it's not unreasonable to say since it certainly can be at times."

"Just how poor were you, Mrs. Digby?" Ruby asked this question not because she didn't know the answer, but because the housekeeper enjoyed telling her.

"Not a bean to rub against another bean. Which is why we had to forage. Mostly it was a cornucopia of goodness, but occasionally it was enough to turn a sailor's stomach."

Mrs. Digby was an excellent cook (though not a fashionable

one), and she knew how to rustle up a supper fit for a president from “a dried-up onion and a pile of leaves,” if that’s all the ingredients there were.

“Never turn your nose up at an edible mushroom. They might look like pixie furniture, but I’ve always told you, Ruby: eat your mushrooms and you won’t go far wrong. Full of protein is what they are. That’s why all these vegetarian types go cuckoo for ’em.”

Ruby checked her book. “You’re not wrong. It says here, mushrooms are rich in most vitamins, especially B and C, and they contain nearly all the major minerals, particularly potassium and phosphorus.”

Mrs. Digby was a little surprised and, in her own words, tickled that Ruby was taking an interest in the theory of food and cookery, though she would have been more tickled if Ruby would take on the practical side too.

“Since you’re so interested in cooking all of a sudden, how about you take over stirring this pot,” said Mrs. Digby, “while I read the funnies for five minutes?”

Ruby checked her watch. Still thirty-nine minutes before she had to be at the helipad. She rolled her eyes and got stirring.

Back at camp, some hours later, Ruby was busy trying to concoct a stew out of some unappealing roots and some ugly-looking

fungi. Colt assured her none of it was poisonous; it was important to get this right since if you got it wrong you might wind up as extinct as the Blue Alaskan wolf.

“I hope you all have understood the need to be getting *au fait* with roots and berries and wild growing things,” said Colt. “Things you might not ordinarily want to put under your nose, let alone on your tongue.”

Ruby wriggled slightly in her seat; for all her research, one of her least favorite things about survival training was the whole eating deal. She wasn’t particularly crazy about chowing down on roots and foliage, nor did she like the idea of resorting to grubs when desperation struck. During the hours of training, she longed for CheeseOs and Slush-pops, but what she yearned for more than anything was her banana milk, hard to find in the wild.

Today she had spent several hours foraging and several more trying to work out what to do with this unappetizing harvest. Now that the meal was as cooked as it was ever going to be, she closed her eyes and raised her fork to her mouth.

“Redfort, I’m guessing you don’t know the difference between a toadstool and a mushroom, or perhaps you’re done with surviving?” The voice was one Ruby recognized from her dive training in Hawaii.

“Holbrook, if you’re trying to get your hands on my chow, you’re outta luck, buster.”

“You call that supper, Redfort? I’d sooner boil up my socks than chow down on what you’ve cooked up.”

“I’m sure they’d taste good ’n’ cheesy,” said Ruby.

Despite the way they spoke to each other, they actually got on like a forest fire.

Ruby didn’t poison herself with her stew, though she couldn’t help feeling that Holbrook’s socks indeed might have been less disgusting. Even the cube of Hubble-Yum she spent the next hour chewing on couldn’t quite eradicate the taste.

She was relieved when the helicopter dropped her off late that night and she could raid Mrs. Digby’s kitchen. She found a tray of fresh-baked cookies with a note from the housekeeper that read: *hands off, kid.*

The following day’s challenge was to build a shelter. Colt spent the morning trying to impress upon his recruits just how important it was to keep warm and dry when out in the wilderness.

“You get yourself soaked to the skin, and cold as an iced-up river, and you’re exposing yourself to all kinds of trouble. You need to build a shelter and get dry. The act of building the shelter will keep you warm. You don’t get warm and dry and you’re nigh

on likely to get sick, and if you get sick in the wilds that makes you vulnerable, and when you're vulnerable you have a pretty fair chance of dying."

His manner was gruff, no frills, which didn't matter because survival didn't require frills.

"Knives, flashlights, matches, they're all frills," was something Colt might say.

Holbrook and Ruby teamed up for shelter-building. They also worked together on canoe-hollowing. Both disciplines took a lot of concentration — not just energy, but skill. Once they were done, they took the new canoe out on the lake to see if it would float. It did.

"You know what, Redfort? I take my hat off to you — you're not the sap I thought you were gonna be," said Holbrook, laughing.

"I guess that's lucky, Holbrook, because you're a deal more feeble than I'd expected, and I hadn't expected much."

This was when Holbrook decided to roll the canoe and dunk them both in the lake. It rolled without any trouble, and though Ruby was kind of mad at him for getting the better of her, she couldn't help being sort of proud that this incredible boat had been created with her own two hands — with the help of Holbrook of course; she had to concede that.

Ruby Redfort had always been sure of her mental abilities, but had not realized she could turn her hand to other more practical skills. Right now, sitting soaked through in her hand-carved canoe, she felt like the world was her oyster.

It was a good feeling. But not one that was going to last.

CHAPTER 3

The Ways of the Wild

RUBY HAD BEEN OUT AT MOUNTAIN RANCH CAMP on and off, traveling back and forth, for approximately a month, and her survival skills were coming along. She and Holbrook passed all their practical tests without a hint of trouble.

Ruby was determined to excel, and in a few short weeks had become as knowledgeable as Holbrook, and he was no slouch. She felt satisfied that she knew the theory of survival, back to front and top to bottom. She was competitive and she was a hard worker. But no matter how much work she put in, Sam Colt would always say the same thing: *“Redfort, you’re getting stuck on detail and it’s making you miss the big picture.”*

Skills that involved patience were not a problem for Ruby Redfort: patience was a virtue she had been born with. She could contentedly sit and wait for single drips of rainwater to fill a drinking glass if that was what it took. She could build a shelter that was really pretty comfortable and light a fire within

about ten minutes. With all these tasks, she understood the need for patience and perseverance. This determined attitude was of great benefit to her, since patience and perseverance were pretty essential virtues when it came to the tasks of survival.

Strength wasn't a big problem either; sure, she wasn't as strong as some of her co-trainees — she was, after all, only thirteen — but what she might have lacked in sheer brute strength she made up for in technique, learning how to move heavy logs and branches, rocks, and earth by rolling, balancing, pivoting. All this theory she stored in her head, confident she had the information squirreled away for that time when it might save her life.

However, as good as Ruby was at these practical tasks, and although she had read and stored about as much knowledge as any survivalist, she couldn't seem to convince Sam Colt that she was able to tune herself into the wild itself.

"There are some things that ain't in any book, Redfort." He paused. "It's like my pal, Bradley Baker, used to say: 'Sometimes the best way to think about a problem is to not think about it.'"

Talking to any outsider about Spectrum was strictly forbidden, but despite this hard and fast rule there was one person who did know about Ruby's double life, and his name was Clancy Crew.

Clancy was Ruby's closest friend and most loyal ally; he could sniff out a secret at a hundred paces and it had taken him no time at all to discover something was up and even less time to get Ruby to spill the beans.

Ruby had broken a pretty big Spectrum rule here; Spectrum rule number one being **KEEP IT ZIPPED**. But on the other hand, telling Clancy Crew she was an undercover agent was like confessing to a priest or a doctor: the information would go no further. Clancy Crew never, *ever* told: he was like a human vault. Dangle Clancy over a river full of piranhas and he would never say a single word; every last finger would have disappeared before he even began to open his mouth.

Ruby wished she could talk to Clancy at length about what her trainer considered a gap in her ability. But Clancy was away with his father on some lengthy ambassadorial tour, and so they had only managed a few snatched phone conversations. It wasn't enough time to go into any detail, to really explain to Clancy how she felt, how puzzled she was that her trainer thought she was in some way lacking in understanding. In any case, it wasn't easy to explain anything on the phone and they mainly ended up discussing how mad Clancy was at his ambassador dad for getting him all dressed up in stupid blazers and ridiculous polished loafers.

“What next?” Clancy would whine. “Little tartan bow ties?”

On this, the final week of training, Ruby dialed Clancy’s number and hoped he would be there to pick up. She had just gotten home from school and was expected to dine with her parents and their friends the Humberts before being helicoptered back out to the training camp: it made for a long day.

“So how’s it going, Rube?” Clancy asked from his hotel room in Washington.

“OK. I think I’m doing pretty well. I mean, I know stuff, it’s just I don’t seem to know stuff,” she replied.

“I think I know what you mean,” said Clancy, who did know what she meant: he was sharp at picking up on things that weren’t clear.

“I just don’t know how to fix it,” she said. “I mean, my instructor says things to me like, ‘You need to throw away the handbook, Redfort.’ But why? Why do I wanna throw away the handbook?”

“I think he’s talking about instinct, Rube. You gotta know the rules and then you gotta forget the rules, you know?”

“No,” said Ruby.

It didn’t make any sense: she had spent thirteen years assembling a little book of life rules, a sort of guide to navigate

her way through each and every day, so why would she ignore them now, just when her very survival was being put to the test?

Ruby thought about this as she traveled back to camp that evening.

It was true. She really didn't understand what Clancy was trying to explain or what Samuel Colt was trying to tell her. The previous day Colt had sat her down and tried again to make her understand.

"You gotta learn to use your instincts," he said.

"I use my instincts," countered Ruby.

"No, you don't. You approach things like you're reading a book of rules, like there's one way. But out in the wild stuff changes a lot and everything can't always be fixed the way you wanna fix it." Sam Colt looked at her, his eyes barely visible under the wide brim of his hat. "I've been around a long time, and if there's one thing that nature's taught me, it's to never kid yourself that you're in charge."

Again she stared at him like this made no sense at all.

"Don't meet nature head-on; walk alongside. Don't try and control stuff; just go with what you got. It's all about adapting to circumstances. Circumstances change, you change with 'em." He looked at her hard, trying to discern whether she had the faintest

idea what he was talking about. “You can have your plans B, C, and D, but they ain’t no good to you if nature decides otherwise.”

Colt wasn’t wrong about this; in fact, just six months ago, two Spectrum agents had perished after their tent had blown away in a blizzard, and Colt couldn’t help wondering why two highly trained professionals had relied on something so flimsy out in such dangerous terrain where the elements ruled.

He lived day by day, hour to hour. “You can try to predict what might happen next, but don’t imagine it’s gonna come out that way just because you thought you’d like it to.” *The only certainty is there is no certainty* was a sort of Samuel Colt mantra and his rule one, two, and three: the rule he lived by.

The rule Ruby lived by was not unrelated. **RULE 1: YOU CAN NEVER BE COMPLETELY SURE WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT.** So why did she find this all so difficult? For the first time in her life, Ruby was failing. And she didn’t like it one bit.

CHAPTER 4

The Mission

AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS OF INTENSIVE TRAINING, camp was finally at an end; next would come the test. Sam Colt spent the last day preparing the recruits.

“You’ll all be on your own here, and you’ll have to navigate the terrain and take on the environmental challenges alone — that’s alongside any challenges set by Spectrum. Base camp is in woodland, but you have to determine the exact location. You reach there, you clock in, mission over. Your task is to make it by sunup on the third day.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m not looking to scare anyone here. Quite the contrary. But the law of survival is pretty basic: you gotta believe in your ability to stay alive.” Samuel Colt had a pared-down approach to life, and he was tough as winter earth. He firmly believed that all you need to survive is a positive mental attitude.

He looked at all their faces, some a little wary, even anxious, some confident, others like poker players, betraying nothing.

“Unpredictable encounters with wild animals aside, your chances are good so long as you hold on to this.” He tapped his head. “And I don’t mean physically, though of course that helps. You gotta believe death ain’t an option. Survival means getting out alive. And getting out alive means that on the most basic level you succeeded.”

Everyone went home that night and tried to get as much sleep as they could, aware that for the next few days sleep might not be found so easily.

The next day the trainees were each issued their mission briefing, handed their survival packs, and offered a last chance to back out.

No one backed out.

A Spectrum agent, one Ruby didn’t recognize, had appeared from nowhere and was now handing out brown envelopes containing their instructions. Ruby pulled the tag that ran down the side of the envelope and pulled out the brown paper contained inside.

On it was written a code.

ÚŸÖLWÌ LÈÐÐR ÐpÈÖŸß ÒìLHÈ† RÇÈpñì KÖÚñWñ
ñÄR†Rñ ÌÈxxxx.

ñÖÈ†Ö ÈRH†Ð§ ÌÈÖÈH ††ÄMìÖ ñÚñÖÚŸ LìWLÈÈ
§ÄñÇRÄ Hxxxxx.

KMÄÈŸÚ RÖŸÄWÖ †ÈH†ñÇ RÄHÚÈ§ ñÈññÄÐ LR†§ÚÈ
ÄRHÖ§È ÖREMEH †ÄRRÇÖ Lxxxxx.

Ì§WMÈH †RHÖ§È §ÖÄ§ÇR ÈH†VRE ÌRñÄÐÈ È†H†R†
ÌÖ†Ä§p Ö†xxxx. *

KMÈÄÚŸ ÖRŸÄWÖ †ÈH†Öñ §ÈÐÇVR ÈìRñÄÐ §ÇRÖ§† Ìxxxxx.

LWKÄÐñ WÖÈÄ§M †RìÚLñ †ÚŸÖRÈ ÄñßÐÈŸ ÖÈH†ÄÈ
ÄWLR†L £xxxxx.

ñ£ÐìÄÐ ÌÐHñÈñ ÄÇÈÖñÄ ÐpLÄÐÐ È†ìÚL ñ†ÚŸÖR ÇÄÈHÈH
†ñÖLWÐ ÖÄÐGÈÈ Ðxxxxx.

Ö†ñÇÈì ñÚñÖÖ£ †ÖÖ†§ß ÄÈMÇÄp.

ÖÇÇKLñ Ìxxxxx; ÌÖMñ§ §ÈLÇÐ† MÖpÈxx.

ÄRWGìñ ñxxxxx: £ìÚŸÖÈ ÄRp†§Ð †ÈÖìÚR GL†ñ§ÈH †RHÖ§È
ÚŸÖLWÌ LVHÄÈÄ £ÐÈìLñ ÌÚŸÖRì ÖMñ§§

* ÈH†RHÖ §ÈLWìL ÈßR†RÐ ÈÈñÚÖ† ÈH†ñÇR ÄHŸß†È
ÄRÖHññ Ä†ÈGxx.

Ruby looked at it, frowning, for a few seconds. Then she smiled. Whoever had created the code had divided the message into six-letter chunks to make it seem more complicated than it was, but she soon saw what she was dealing with.

The clue was the frequency of certain letters.

In English, *E*s and *T*s appear a great deal more often than most other letters, and *Z*s and *Q*s are comparatively rare. Ruby surmised this was a substitution cipher. Therefore, whatever symbol was taking the place of *E* would come up most often, followed by *T*, then *O*, then *A*. The clumps of *X*s she figured were just there to confuse, so she ignored them.

She began substituting the most common letters, and soon saw familiar groups, like *E*, *H*, and *T* and *U*, *Y*, and *O*. She paused for a moment; the substitution gave her the right letters, but no recognizable words:

UYOLWI LEBDPR DPEOYB OILHET RCEPNI KOUNWN NARTRN
IEXXXX.

NOEHTO ERHTDS IEFOEH TTAMIO NUNOUY LIWLEE SANCRA
HXXXXX.

KMAEYU ROYAWO TEHTNC RAHUES NENNAD LRSTUE
ARHOSE ORFMEH TARRCO LXXXXX.

ISWMEH TRHOSE SOASCR EHTVRE IRNADE ETHTRT IOTASP
OTXXXX. *

KMEAUY ORYAWO TEHTON SEDCVR EIRNAD SCROST
IXXXXX.

LWKADN WOEASM TRIULN TUYORE ANBDEY OEHTAE
AWLRTL FXXXXX.

NFDIAD IDHNEN ACEONA DPLADD ETIUL NTUYOR CAEHEH
TNOLWD OADGEE DXXXXX.

OTNCEI NUNOOF TOOTSB AEMCAP.

OCCKLN IXXXXX; IOMNIS SELCDT MOPEXX.

ARWGIN NXXXXX: FIUYOE ARPTSD TEOIUR GLTNSEH
TRHOSE UYOLWI LVHAEA FDEILN IUYORI OMNISS.

* EHTRHO SELWIL EBRTRD EENUOT EHTNCR AHYBTE AROHNN
ATEGXX.

Then she looked again. The clue now was the repeating strings, like *NCRAH*, which had to mean *RANCH*, and *RHOSE*, which had to be *HORSE*.

Conclusion:

What she had in front of her was an anagram.

Ruby smiled as she decoded the mission instructions in less than one easy minute.

You will be dropped by helicopter in
unknown terrain.

On the other side of the mountain you will see a ranch.

Make your way to the ranch unseen and rustle a horse from
the corral.

Swim the horse across the river and tether it to a post.*

Make your way to the second river and cross it.

Walk downstream until you are beyond the waterfall.

Find a hidden canoe and paddle it until you reach the
woodland edge.

Continue on foot to base camp.

Clock in; mission completed.

Warning: if you are spotted rustling the horse, you will have
failed in your mission.

* The horse will be returned to the ranch by another agent.

Ruby was the first to decode her message and as a result had gained time credit before she had even begun. Once everyone was ready to go, one hour and forty-five minutes later (Trainee Lowe was terrible at codes), Ruby lined up with the others and was handed her backpack.

“Check your bag,” shouted the agent to the group, “and make sure you take care of it. One: it’s all you got and two: it contains some pretty costly Spectrum equipment.”

The backpack contained:

Socks

Long underwear

Gloves

Scarf

Waterproof pants and jacket

Penknife

Small cooking can

Energy bars (5)

Canteen of water

Binoculars

Map

Homemade compass

A micro-parachute

Once she had checked through her supplies and was all set, Ruby walked over to Sam Colt.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll remember everything you taught me. I got it all here in my head.”

Colt looked at her, his eyes full of concern.

“In your head is no good,” he said. “Your gut is where you gotta keep it.”

Ruby Redfort: Catch Your Death

Lauren Child

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