



The

LOST
STORY

MEG SHAFFER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WISHING GAME*

"This is the book you've been waiting for."

—RICHARD RUSSO, Pulitzer Prize-winning author
of *Empire Falls* and the North Bath Trilogy

*A
Novel*

BY MEG SHAFFER

The Lost Story

The Wishing Game

• THE •
LOST STORY

A NOVEL



MEG SHAFFER



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The Lost Story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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*To my sister And to everyone
still searching for their
Shanandoah...*

SHANANDOAH



BRIERWOODS BLACK WOLF CAVE

CASTLE MOUNTAINS

MT. STORM

HALFMOON HILL

GREYEAGLE VILLAGE

GRANNY APPLE'S ORCHARD

MOONSTONE PALACE

BIG DARK HOLLOW

GHOST TOWN

SLEEPY CREEK VILLAGE

BEARTOWN VILLAGE

SWEET SPRING FOREST

ANGEL WINDOWS

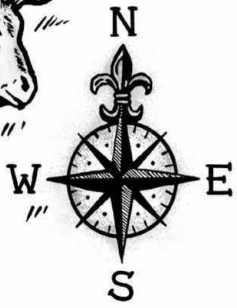
DEVIL'S TEA TABLE

RAVENCLIFF VILLAGE

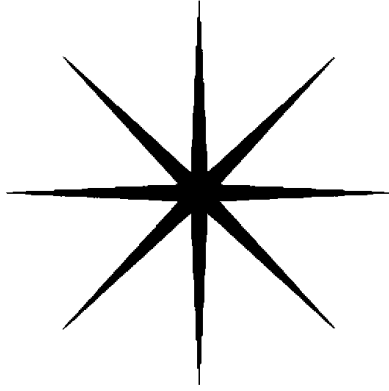
APPLE PIE HILL

BLUESTONE RIVER

PAINTED SEA



Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.
—C. S. LEWIS



PROLOGUE

Fifteen Years Before Our Story Begins

ONCE UPON A TIME in West Virginia, two boys went missing.

They'd been missing since May, vanished during an end-of-school field trip to Red Crow State Forest.

They were gone long enough that people had stopped referring to them as "missing," which implied a temporary state of being, and now simply called them "lost." You looked for missing children. You mourned lost ones.

By that November, the boys' missing posters on the signboard at Red Crow had faded and wrinkled behind the protective plexiglass. When Maggie and Tom noticed the posters while looking for the trail map, they remembered that they'd forgotten all about the lost boys. Because that's how it worked.

First you were missing. Then you were lost.

Then you were forgotten.

Maggie hadn't paid much attention to the story even when it was fresh news. That morning, standing at the signboard while Tom retied his boots, she really looked at the two boys for the first time. One was a blond who seemed incapable of smiling, the other a redhead wearing a shit-eating grin. The class clown and his quiet sidekick, she assumed.

Ralph Stanley Howell, d.o.b. 6/15/92, 5'4, 118 lbs. Caucasian. Blond hair. Blue eyes.

Jeremy Andrew Cox, d.o.b. 5/28/92, 5'6, 129 lbs.

Caucasian. Red hair. Hazel eyes. "They never found those boys?" Tom asked.

"Nope. Probably never will." Maggie was a nurse, and because she'd seen the worst, she knew to assume the worst. If the boys went missing in the Crow, odds were they'd died the first or second night. If they weren't missing but kidnapped as some had theorized...they probably wished they were dead. She didn't say that part out loud to Tom. It was only their fourth date, and she didn't want to spoil the mood.

Holding hands, Maggie and Tom strolled the main trail to a scenic overlook. Below and before them lay the still autumn-lovely woods. Trees upon trees upon trees rising and falling in endless waves, an ocean of forest, and two boys drowned in it.

Before leaving the scenic overlook, Tom took pictures with his digital camera. It was the last day he would have that camera. The police would take it from him, and he'd never get it back.

Two hours and a bucket of sweat later, they reached the Goblin Falls, a small waterfall in a hidden ravine deep in the woods where the air always smelled like moss and cold rain, and the rock formations looked like little men with strangely twisted faces. Maggie squatted next to one of the goblins and made a face while Tom took her picture.

"Nice." He laughed.

“Was I hideous enough?” she asked as she stood up. “Disgusting.”

As he helped her down, a few stones at the top of the ravine skittered over the falls, hitting the water behind her with a sudden slap. Maggie jumped at the sound.

“Damn,” Tom said, holding her tight as he looked up and around. “You all right?”

“Yeah. Fine. Can I see the pictures?”

He gave her the camera, and she clicked through the photos. The first was a close-up of her and the rock goblin. The second was a wider shot of the falls. And the third was...

Maggie narrowed her eyes at the display screen.

“What?” Tom asked.

She showed him the picture on the camera’s display screen. The falls behind her. The rocky cliff rising ten feet above her. And something else.

The shadow of a man.

They scanned the cliff again but saw nothing. The Goblin Falls were off-trail, but people knew about them and hiked to them all the time. Just another hiker. That was all.

Still, when Tom said they should head back, Maggie said she was ready. She put her jacket back on, then her backpack. She bent to pick up her water bottle, and that’s when she saw them coming down the hill.

She stood up at once and froze in place, hand up to warn Tom not to speak or move. “What’s wrong?” he whispered. She pointed. Under her breath, Maggie said, “It’s them.” And it was them, the lost boys.

One boy stood upright, mostly. The other boy was slung over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry. They were shirtless, wearing pants six inches too short but no socks or shoes. Bare feet in the forest in November?

The standing boy struggled under the weight of the other boy. Sweat-damp red hair hung across his face. The boy on his shoulders had blond hair that hung loose and long.

Tom started forward, but Maggie grabbed his arm to stop him. Why? She didn’t know. Instinct. Fear. The uncanny feeling that they’d crossed the border into a story they didn’t belong in...

The one with the red hair met her eyes. Serious eyes. Older-than-his-years eyes. Carefully, he made his way down the narrow game trail, then walked right past them as if they weren’t there, carrying the other boy to the bank of the falls. He went down on one knee and gently eased the other boy onto the soft earth in the lone patch of sunlight.

When Tom opened his mouth, Maggie shook her head. The boy with red hair had an animal’s quiet readiness about him. One wrong word, and he might bolt like a deer, take flight like an eagle, vanish like a ghost.

The eyes of the other boy were open, but he was clearly confused, dazed. Head injury? They stood a few feet away from the boys, watching them warily.

“Can you get a signal on your cell?” she whispered.

He opened his flip phone, then shook his head no.

The blond one on the ground let out a groan. Before she could stop him, Tom rushed to them, knelt, and reached out toward the boy on the ground.

It happened so fast, fast as a cobra striking. The red-haired boy struck out with his arm and caught Tom by the wrist.

Tom froze. Maggie gasped. Her heart hammered in her chest so hard she thought she might faint. She ran to Tom's side.

"Jeremy." She said it sharply, trying to break the spell.

Because it was Jeremy, of course. Jeremy Cox, whose name or face she would never forget again. And if he was Jeremy, the other boy was Ralph Howell.

Jeremy looked at her.

"It's all right, Jeremy," she said. "I'm a nurse." He still had Tom's wrist trapped like a vise.

"You," he said to her, stern as a four-star general. "Not him." She nodded.

Jeremy released Tom's wrist.

"Run for help," she told Tom. "Right now. Go!"

He didn't argue. He seemed relieved to get away from this moment that asked more of him than he had to give.

In her backpack, Maggie kept a small first aid kit, a flashlight, and her stethoscope. She checked Ralph's pupils, breathing, heart rate, and temperature. All good. All strong.

"Help me roll him," she said. They rolled Ralph onto his side so she could check his back for injuries. Damp leaves stuck to his skin. She peeled them off one by one, revealing long, narrow scars. Deep animal scratches? A run-in with barbed wire?

She touched the scars. They were older wounds, long healed. Gently, she laid him onto his back again.

"Where did you go?" she asked Jeremy.

He looked at the boy on the ground, then at her, and his one-word answer was frightening enough that she asked him nothing more.

"Far."

Then Jeremy, who had been so eerily calm until that moment, wept. Relief? Happiness? No. He and Ralph had just been found. Why did he cry like something unbearably precious had been lost?

Then the EMTs arrived and pushed Maggie out of the story.

She watched from a distance as the first responders did their work. Jeremy, who had stopped crying by then, refused a stretcher, so he walked out of the forest at Ralph's side. Maggie and Tom followed them, like the final members of a religious procession.

By the time they reached the parking lot, the cavalry had arrived. A dozen cop cars. A dozen fire trucks. Four ambulances for two boys. Everyone wanted to see this show.

Maggie watched silently, Tom at her side, as EMTs loaded Ralph Howell into the ambulance, Jeremy climbing in behind him.

Tom said, “He almost snapped my wrist. How does a kid lost in the woods for six months get that strong?” He rubbed his wrist and eyed Jeremy, who should have been a skeleton, but instead, he and Ralph looked muscular and well fed, not the boys in their missing photos but young men now.

Maggie didn’t answer. She was still reeling, trying to make sense of her last moments in the woods alone with the boys. Before the EMTs and forest rangers arrived, Maggie sat and listened as Jeremy spoke under his breath to Ralph in a language she had never heard before and never would again. His words were like the sound of dry leaves rustling and skittering on the breeze through an autumn wood. And whatever he said, she knew that if she understood the words, she would understand one of the deep secrets of the world, a secret the world needed to keep.

When he stopped speaking, a red bird landed on a branch above their heads. Cardinal red but not a cardinal. A red crow, though there was no such thing as red crows, even in Red Crow.

She looked at Jeremy. He raised his finger to his lips.

Surely she’d imagined it. She’d been swept up in the moment, half-crazed with adrenaline. No red crows. No magic words. A good story, yes, but not a fairy tale. They didn’t have fairy tales in West Virginia. They were lucky to have a Target.

Then again, why not here? Why did France and Germany and all those places get to have fairy tales but not West Virginia? Wild West Virginia. Wonderful West Virginia. Beautiful and dangerous and dark and strange West Virginia. Why didn’t they get to have magic here, where the hills rolled like ocean waves and the morning mist was as thick as the silence of a family keeping secrets? If fairies were in the world, they couldn’t find a better place than the Crow to tell their tales...

Maggie never saw the boys again after that day. It wasn’t her story, and neither is this one, but she never forgot the moment when the universe allowed her to brush her fingertips along the spider-lace edges of a true-blue fairy tale.

Boys vanishing into the woods, then magically reappearing after everyone thought they were dead...if that’s not a fairy-tale ending, what is?

It actually wasn’t a fairy-tale ending. It was, in fact, only the beginning.

STORYTELLER CORNER

A Recipe for a Fairy Tale



HELLO . THIS IS YO UR STO RYTELLER. You may already be wondering why I’m intruding onto the story like this, which is a fair question. But this is a fairy tale and fairy tales play by their own rules. I wanted you to be aware of these rules so we could all, pun

intended, be on the same page. First, what is a fairy tale? A wise and kind teacher I once knew worked up her own recipe. It went something like this...

Mrs. Adler's Recipe for a Fairy Tale

For any fairy tale worth its salt, you will need most, if not all, of the following ingredients...

- : One princess in some sort of trouble and/or distress.*
- : One magician. If a magician is unavailable, you may substitute a wizard*
- : and/or wise woman. Basically, anyone with magic powers who knows more than they're willing to tell. One hero, the more unlikely, the better.*
- One to three villains worth fighting (and don't skimp on the evil deeds).*
- A member of a royal family disguised as a nobody. A pinch of unusual animals.*

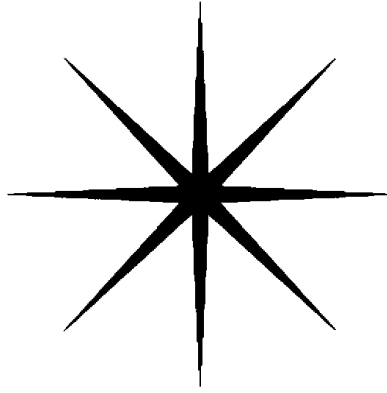
Place all ingredients into a world that is not our own, mix well, and let it rise. You'll know you've created a good fairy tale if your story ends happily ever after for the heroes and badly for the villains.

You may have noticed "The Storyteller" isn't listed in the recipe, but I am there, I promise you. We'll play Rumpelstiltskin's game, and I'll let you guess my name.

Oh, for this story, you should also know about the rule of three. In fairy tales, things are always coming in threes—three bears, three wishes, three clicks of your heels to get back home.

And fairy tales also begin with "Once upon a time..." and end with "They all lived happily ever after." And of course, fairy tales are fiction. Always.

Well, except for this one.



CHAPTER ONE

Our Story Now Begins

THE DRIVE FROM Emilie Wendell's house in Milton, Ohio, to Bernheim Forest outside Louisville took a good two and a half hours. She'd wanted to make it in two hours and fifteen minutes, but accident traffic caused a bottleneck on I-65 south. She prayed the taping would be delayed. These things never started on time, right?

For weeks, she'd been internet-stalking Jeremy Cox, hoping and praying he'd somehow end up near her house. Then finally, that morning, she'd woken up to a Google alert in her email. A documentary TV show called *Whereabouts Unknown* would be doing a taping at Bernheim that day—special guest, the famed missing persons investigator Jeremy Cox. She'd thrown on yesterday's clothes—red leggings, a T-shirt, and a hoodie—stuffed her feet into her boots, and ran out of the house.

Two and a half hours of frantic driving was a small price to pay for the chance to meet with Jeremy Cox in person. As soon as she arrived, she parked, grabbed her backpack, and then jogged down the path to the visitor's center.

The day was October 10, and the weather was cloudy and cold. Cold for Kentucky anyway. Even so, she was sweating by the time she reached the outdoor stage. She found two park employees putting chairs back into stacks. A flyer printed on neon orange paper advertised Jeremy Cox's safety talk. It seemed to be over already.

"Did I miss the show?" she asked one of the employees, embarrassed by her breathless voice. "I'm supposed to meet with Jeremy Cox," she added, so it wouldn't sound like she was some creepy fangirl but someone who had an appointment.

An older woman pointed down a trail. "The talk's over, but they're doing the taping near the pond by Little Nis." "Right, Little Nis." Emilie thanked the woman and ran down the trail.

She found the pond and walked around the bend until she spotted the first of the Forest Giants. She'd read about the famous art installation but wasn't prepared for the sheer size of them. Twenty feet tall or more. Impressive in photos but jaw-dropping in person. There were three of them, she knew, a family of enormous trolls. This was Little Nis, the son. Somewhere in the park was his pregnant mother troll and his sister.

Emilie and her mom had planned to see them, but they'd never made the time. And then, of course, there was no more time to make.

She pushed thoughts of her mom out of her head. Emilie had never been great at focusing, but today, she would do it. She had to.

And there he was. Jeremy Cox. He stood on a footbridge with his back to the pond. He looked just like all his pictures online. He had rust-red hair, a perfectly groomed beard, and was dressed like a hip young rock climber. Gray fitted long-sleeved T-shirt. Canvas cargo pants, the kind made for climbing. Brown hiking boots, well worn, she noted. A TV crew of three surrounded Jeremy while a woman with a pitch-perfect NPR voice asked him questions he'd probably been asked a billion times before.

INTERVIEWER: So, Jeremy, why only girls? You have this incredible skill, but only use it to help find missing girls.

JEREMY: Girls and women.

INTERVIEWER: Right. But why just them? No boys at all?

JEREMY: Women get lost differently than men, who get lost differently than small children, who get lost differently than the elderly. A lot of psychology goes into it. It makes sense to specialize.

INTERVIEWER: In ten years, you've found fifty missing women and girls and recovered fourteen bodies. That's an astounding level of success for one person. And all over the world too.

Emilie listened while the woman ticked off some of the countries where Jeremy had tracked and found missing people. A toddler who'd wandered off the family farm in Brazil. The girlfriend of a billionaire who'd disappeared on vacation in St. Barts. A French hiker with a broken leg trapped in a ravine in Greece.

Even in countries he'd never stepped foot in before, in harsh climates, in unforgiving landscapes, Jeremy Cox had an uncanny knack for finding the lost, dead or alive.

INTERVIEWER: Do you always find your man? I mean, your woman? Your girl?

JEREMY: Not always.

INTERVIEWER: No?

JEREMY: There's still one out there I'm looking for.

INTERVIEWER: But only one? Unbelievable. What's your secret?

JEREMY: There's no magic to it. I've been on the other end of a search party. Most people in search-and-rescue haven't. I know what it's like to be lost. And I'm very, very lucky.

INTERVIEWER: Let's say I'm lost in a wooded area like this. What should I do to aid in my own rescue?

JEREMY: Even in thick forest terrain, someone lost can travel about two miles per hour. In two hours, that's a four-mile radius, making for a possible search area of over fifty square miles. That's why we tell people to stay put and let someone find them. Unfortunately, studies have shown about sixty-five percent of lost people in that situation don't stay put.

INTERVIEWER: Why is that?

JEREMY: Denial.

INTERVIEWER: Denial?

As if sensing Emilie's stare, Jeremy glanced at her. They were only twenty feet apart, close enough that she knew he was looking at her, searching her face. His brow furrowed as if he was trying to place her, but then he turned back to the woman interviewing him.

JEREMY: Nobody wants to admit they're lost.

The interviewer laughed. She turned to the director. "That's good," she said, sounding like a completely different, almost normal person. "Good line to end on." "Are we finished?" Jeremy asked. He had the slightest hint of an English accent. "One more," she said, then turned her NPR voice back on.

INTERVIEWER: If Ralph Howell were lost out there again, would you make an exception to your "girls only" rule and try to find him?

Emilie watched as Jeremy Cox's jaw set and his eyes turned to granite. They would get an answer from the Forest Giants before getting one out of him.

"You were right," Jeremy said, glancing her way again. "That was a good line to end on."

While the camera guy was getting some footage of Little Nis and the surrounding woods, the woman interviewing Jeremy took him aside and whispered something. An apology, maybe? Was the topic of Ralph Howell forbidden or something?

Whatever they were talking about, it was over in minutes. An assistant even younger than Emilie helped Jeremy remove his mic pack from his shirt and jacket.

Jeremy shook a few hands, waved a quick goodbye to the crew, and started down the trail back toward the visitor's center. Emilie jogged after him.

"Hello?" she said as she caught up to him.

"Hey," he said and kept walking, but he slowed down a beat, which she appreciated.

"I'm not with the show." Her breath was short and fast, but she pasted on a smile and pretended she wasn't about to pass out from overstimulation. "My name's Emilie. You're Jeremy Cox, right?"

"Usually," he said. "What's up?"

"Can I talk to you for a second? I won't bring up Ralph Howell, swear."

He glanced at her, the ghost of a smile on his lips. His eyes were alive now, not glazed over like they'd seemed during the interview.

Jeremy shrugged. “Thanks. He’s a private person. I ask people to leave him alone. They just can’t.” Nodding, she said, “Right, right. Stevie and Lindsey all over again.”

He looked at her. “Who?”

She’d jogged in front of him and then stopped, which forced him to stop. She unzipped her hoodie to reveal her T-shirt underneath—a vintage Fleetwood Mac concert shirt, the one with the penguins and the baseball sleeves.

“Stevie Nicks. Lindsey Buckingham. Everybody wants to get the band back together.”

“Nice shirt,” he said. He had hazel eyes, like a summer forest—evergreen trees, rich earth, golden sunlight—and they lit up when he smiled or even almost smiled. She had a feeling there was a very different Jeremy Cox underneath the stone-faced TV persona.

“Thanks. Stevie Nicks is my lady and savior.”

His eyebrows slightly lifted. “She’s a little before your time, isn’t she?”

“Stevie Nicks transcends space and time,” she said. “Was that weird? I talk too much when I’m nervous. Or just in general. Can you say something weird so I’ll feel less awkward?”

“I’ve had impure thoughts about Ann Wilson,” he offered. She snorted a laugh. She’d been right. The true Jeremy Cox had peeked out from behind the façade, and she already liked the guy.

“Ann Wilson from *Heart*? No, that’s not weird. Awesome, but not weird.”

“I tried,” he said, and though he sounded apologetic, she could tell he was trying not to laugh at her.

“Anyway, thanks for letting me talk to you. I promise I won’t take up much of your time, Mr. Cox.”

“Call me Jeremy. You said you’re Emilie?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I’m down from Ohio. We used to be neighbors. I mean Ohio and West Virginia, not, like, you and me personally.”

“Are you going to tell me who’s missing, or do you want me to guess?” The question was abrupt, but she didn’t mind. She wanted to get this over with too.

“My half sister. Kidnapped.”

“Recently?”

“Twenty years ago. If it means anything to you, she was from West Virginia too.”

Clearly, it did mean something to him. “Anything for a fellow Mountaineer. Let’s find somewhere to talk.”

They decided to walk and talk along the trail that led to the other Forest Giants. It was an easy trail, and she was finally able to catch her breath. “You ever been here before?” she asked Jeremy.

“Never,” he said. “Bit small for people to get lost in. You can hear the highway.”

Had he been in search-and-rescue so long that he judged forests not by their beauty but by how easy or hard it was to get lost in them?

“I almost came here this summer,” she said, pausing to study Little Elena, the daughter of the giant troll family. The figure sat on the ground, playing with a large stone like a toy race car. “Mom and I had this thing we did. Whenever someone died, we’d go into the