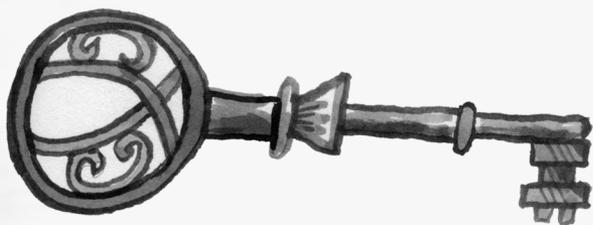


NATALIE LLOYD

the **KEY** *to*
EXTRAORDINARY



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Summary: Twelve-year old orphan Emma Casey lives by a haunted graveyard in her Tennessee town, giving tours, and helping her brother and Granny Blue with the family bakery, and waiting for the destiny dream of her ancestors—but when it comes it shows her only a key, and she finds that she must solve a ghostly mystery that has haunted her town for generations.

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CHAPTER ONE

It is a known fact that the most extraordinary moments in a person's life come disguised as ordinary days.

It is a known fact for me, at least.

Because that morning started out mostly the same as all mornings before: I woke up to an ache in my chest, the smell of chocolate, and the sound of the ghost making a racket in the kitchen.

Now, I'm not the sort to dwell on doom and sorrow. Life is too short for that. But I should at least try to describe the ache briefly:

It's not the kind that comes from eating tacos too late at night.

It's the kind that comes from being left behind.

I think my heart knows I should be filling it with new memories, new jokes, and wondrous adventures with the one person I loved most of all. But that person is gone now.

And so, my heart has a giant hole in it. I call it the Big Empty.

I squeezed my eyes shut and reminded myself of these affirmations:

Tonight you could have your Destiny Dream.

Never doubt your starry aim.

I repeated those words while I tugged my mud boots on over my jeans, and again when I zipped up my favorite hoodie. Early summer had settled into the mountains, but the air was still chilly first thing in the morning. I didn't feel cold, though. I felt energized. Just the prospect of my Destiny Dream rattled my brain to such a degree that I fixed my sideways braid on the wrong side of my head. I'm not superstitious about most things, but I knew the day would go badly if I wore my braid on the wrong side.

Finally, I snatched up my messenger bag and zoomed down the stairs to see what the ghost was up to.

Since there's no sense in scaring a ghost who might whirl around and scare me in turn, I decided to declare myself.

"It's Emma!" I called out as I stepped into the darkness of the Boneyard Cafe.

My family's bakery, the Boneyard Cafe, takes up the whole bottom floor of our house, which is perched on the edge of a famous cemetery, hence the cafe's creepastical name. Currently, Granny Blue is doing her best to keep the Boneyard running, as business hasn't been too great lately.

“I’m back here,” yelled a voice that, unfortunately, belonged to my big brother, Topher, and not one of the dearly departed. I’d never actually seen the ghost in our kitchen; I’d only heard it banging around. But due to my home’s location, I figure I’m bound to run into a ghost eventually.

The air was thick with the smell of chocolate as I walked into the kitchen. The Cocoa Cauldron was already bubbling near the far window. It was Topher’s week to make Boneyard Brew, our cafe’s most famous treat. As near as I can describe it, Boneyard Brew is like hot chocolate with a heavenly twist. Maybe it seems crazy to drink hot chocolate in the summer, but I’m here to tell you: Once you’ve had a taste of Boneyard Brew, you’ll never stop craving it. Topher even makes homemade marshmallows.

The marshmallow man himself was perched on the tip-top of the tall ladder, digging through one of the supply cabinets like a scrawny snack bandit.

“Hungry?” I asked him.

Thomp. Topher bumped his head on the cabinet, and let out a low groan. He got all squinty-eyed, pretending to be mad, as he hunkered down to look at me. But I could see the start of a smile on his face. “Emma Pearl Casey, I thought you might be a ghost.”

“I yelled and declared myself!”

“I know.” Topher gave me the same dimpled-cheek grin that made most of the girls at Blackbird Hollow Community

College go googly-eyed. “I always get skittish when I’m down here before daylight.”

“It *is* early for you to be making brew,” I agreed. In my nearly twelve years of existence, we’d never opened before ten a.m. on Sundays.

“I can’t get this recipe out of my head,” Topher said by way of explanation. “Peach-lavender muffins. I won’t have any peace of mind until I make them. And I thought I’d get the brew going while I was down here.”

“I’m glad you’re making extra. I usually have a big tour group in the graveyard on Sunday.”

Topher cocked his head and studied my face. “Are you okay? You look . . . troubled.”

I gave him a thumbs-up. “All good.”

“Huh.” He didn’t look convinced, but he reached back into the cabinet and dislodged one of the giant silver muffin pans. He twisted out of the way as it clattered to the floor.

“Easy!” I said as I jumped to hand it back to him. “If you make any more noise down here, you’ll—”

“What? Wake the dead? You and Blue play music so loud the dead can’t get any sleep around here anyway.”

“I was going to say wake my *dog*. But that’s a fair point about the loud music.”

Topher stretched tall again, and got back to digging. He tossed a sack of Blue’s organic flour down on the counter-top before he dismounted the rickety ladder. I could tell by

the tune he was whistling that Topher was about to go into a serious baking frenzy. He'd already tied his red bandana securely around his head. That was a direct order from Granny Blue. Topher likes to let his hair grow long and shaggy for summer, so Blue makes him pull his hair back when he bakes.

I felt a soft thump-thump-thump against my boot, and looked down to see Bearclaw yawning up at me. I scooped her up into my arms and hugged her against my chest.

When Topher took me to the animal shelter to pick out a pup, the lady said we didn't want *That Dog* because she was scrawny. But I knew from the first time I saw *That Dog*, she was meant to be mine. I hope every person in the world gets to have an experience so wondrous: the sweet tug at your heart when you look at a dog, and a dog looks at you, and you know you're meant to take care of each other.

Topher thought I made a fine choice in picking *That Dog* but we both decided she needed a bolder name, something that'd help her see herself in a new way. So I named her the toughest word I could think of: *Bearclaw*.

I call her Bear for short.

That day at the shelter, Bear leaped up into my arms as soon as I called out her name, as if she'd been waiting her whole life for someone to see her true potential.

"Good morning, my fearless little fuzz monster," I whispered against her floppy ear.