



Miss Mattie Perkins's mercantile was stuffed with everything anybody ever could want or need. Coffee beans and crackers were piled in big barrels. Overalls, work boots, and gloves were stacked on low wooden tables. A tall cooler stuffed full of homemade butter, fresh eggs, and Grapette pop hummed a low buzz all day.

Miss Mattie spotted Ruby coming through the door. "Just in time! Come over here, child, and help me with this box." Miss Mattie was wrestling with a ladder and trying to reach a shoe box on the top shelf of the back room.

Ruby glanced around for any sign of Miss Eula but didn't see her. She gave Miss Mattie a wan smile. "Would you like me to get those shoes for you, Miss Mattie?"

"You could be of some use, if you did."

Ruby scrambled up the ladder and grabbed the box.

Miss Mattie brushed at the front of her dress. "I sent Eula to check the mail." She patted her frizzled hair into place. Ruby handed her the shoe box and stepped down the ladder rungs to the floor.

As Miss Mattie took the box, the sound of children laughing and the *ping-ping-ping!* of something spilling across the wooden floor stopped her short. "What's that?" She grabbed a broom. "For pity's sake! It's those Latham children in the coffee beans. And here we've got more customers than you can shake a stick at. I *told* Eula to hurry." She shoved the box at Ruby. "Here, come help me with these shoes—they're for Leila Latham. She's been waiting for ten minutes already and those children won't let her think. You help her out—it will give you something to do while you wait."

Ruby's heart jumped into her throat. She fumbled the box, then dropped it. "But Miss Mattie... I can't..." Ruby tried to get her aunt's attention, but Miss Mattie was already halfway across the store, waving her broom and shouting commands. Ruby's shoulders fell. She picked up the box, took a deep breath, and walked out of the back room and into

Ruby almost fell out of her chair. "Miss Eula and I are going to visit the chickens tonight and see Ivy's eggs. And Miss Eula has big news for me!"

Ruby's mother stood up. "Well, take her a plate. She loves my sweet-potato pie...and goodness knows she won't cook for herself." She followed Ruby to the sink, where she kissed the top of her daughter's head. "Be back before the crow calls. And no more raids on any egg ranches."

The Pink Palace glowed in the early evening sunset. Big old hydrangeas—snowball bushes, Ruby called them—bloomed the length of the front porch. Grandpa Garnet had planted them before Ruby was born. He was the gardener in the family. "That's where your mama gets her green thumb," Miss Eula had told Ruby. "It's no wonder she's so smart about flowers and vegetables and bugs and such. She was digging in the dirt in the dark before she could talk!"

Ruby remembered doing the same thing with her grandfather. He had told her that corn was the tallest when you planted it under a new moon. He taught her to soak her moonflower seeds before she planted them. Every year they planted zinnias and marigolds and bachelor buttons and geraniums together, but no

one had planted them this year. Still, there were flowers that returned year after year, and here they were, blooming their heads off in the front yard, the side, the back, all over—flower beds full of hollyhocks and bee balm and lemon verbena and peppermint and black-eyed Susans, her grandpa's favorite. Ruby picked one now and stuck the flower stem behind her ear. The golden petals tickled her face.

Ruby and Miss Eula had painted the house "Shell-shocked Pink" late last summer, after Grandpa Garnet died. Miss Eula had said it was a rite of passage.

Rite of passage. It made Ruby think about traveling through secret tunnels and passageways and having her ticket punched at different checkpoints. She had the feeling, painting the house, that they were doing just that. One day they had splattered themselves silly, laughing and crying and telling stories about themselves and Grandpa Garnet. If he had been there, he would have directed the painting. "A little more here! You missed a spot there!" He would have made tomato sandwiches for them at lunch. He would have taken pictures.

But he wasn't there, so they did it themselves with no audience but the nosy neighbors, who drove

slowed to its regular rhythm and she even felt drowsy. She looked up through the leaves at patches of clear sky... the same sky Miss Eula said she would be under, right now. It didn't feel like it. She climbed down her tree and looked in the knothole, out of habit. *No mail*. She decided to try the post office one more time before she walked home.

June 9

Dear Ruby, Ruby, Ruby!

Aloha! Aloha means hello AND good-bye in Hawaiian. Aloha-hello! i am here!

The plane taxied onto the runway. I walked out of it. Flowers, flowers, flowers! People, people, people! calling "Aloha!" and putting leis around my neck and kissing me on the cheek. Pretty soon, I had flower necklaces up to my lips! They smelled like heaven. I will send you a picture.

IT WAS heaven to see Johnson, Annette, and the baby, who still doesn't have a name. She is adorable, Ruby. You will love your new cousin. She was wearing a muumuu—just like the ones Johnson has sent me, only smaller, of course.

Everyone here wears flip-flops or goes BARE-FOOT!

I will write more later—we are going to a luau. I am going to dance the hula and eat poi. What is poi, you ask? Who knows! I'll find out and give you a report. I have not received any letters from you yet but I suspect, since it's only been two days, they are coming any moment now... I do miss you so.

Love, love, love, and Aloha-good-bye!
your (excited) grandmother,
Miss Eula

June 14

Well, Good Garden of Peas, Miss Happiness,

Your letter was exciting. I was depressed at first. I was sure you would hate Hawaii. Maybe by now you do.

For your information, Melba Jane is curling her hair so loopy it looks like a heap of catfish guts. It's very attractive. I told her so.

I read your letter to the chickens. Then I read them from "anchovy" to "angel" in the dictionary. Ivy has asked me for a bedtime story every night, since she is egg sitting. "No violence," she said.

I am sweeping floors for Miss Mattie. It is total torture.

Every time I walk past our silver maple tree, I feel like an empty paper bag.

Here is another picture of me.

Free advice: Don't eat anything called poi.

Love,

your (awfully lonesome) granddaughter,
Ruby L.

Pee Ess: Someone is buying Peterson's Egg Ranch!

June 13

Dear Wasting Away,

I received the ten letters you sent me the day I left! What a lucky number! But my goodness, I hope you have pulled out of your WOE IS ME.

Ruby, Hawaii is COLORFUL. There are acres of sugarcane growing here! No cotton. Pineapples, too! Along the side of the road there are pineapple stands. You pay ten cents for a slice, cut fresh. The juice runs down your arm and chin.

The baby is two months old today and finally has a name: Leilani. It means Flower of Heaven, in Hawaiian. She looks me in the eye and says, "Thhhwwaaaaaagh!" A genius, of course.

I walked yesterday on a sugar-sand beach. It was so soft, Ruby. Not like the rough shore around Lake Jasper. And the waves! "Come and play," they sang. So I did. I jumped in. My muumuu mushroomed around me. No one even noticed! Here, everyone jumps into the waves!

I feel like I've always belonged here. There are even pink houses. Lots of pink here. But no you. I do miss you.

Love and Aloha,
your (content) grandmother,
Miss Eula