



CHAPTER 1

A New Beginning

Once upon a time, there lived a girl named Ruby Starr. (That's me.) If we haven't met before, I'd like to tell you some super-important things about me. If we *have* met before, you probably know most of this, but there are a few surprises.

1. I love, love, love books (even nonfiction books, especially ones about baking cakes)!
2. Chocolate can make even the worst day a little bit better. Trust me, I know this from personal experience.
3. My favorite color is the color of

dragons, pickles, and my eyes. Have you figured it out yet?

4. I have four besties—Siri, Jessica, Daisy, and Charlotte. Charlotte wasn't an instant bestie, but that's a whole other story!
5. Sometimes I imagine I am in the pages of a book. My thoughts sort of fly up into bubble-gum bubbles full of ideas. Sometimes that also gets me into trouble with a lowercase *t*.
6. I believe a good book should always have a sequel.

Today starts out as just an ordinary Tuesday. Well, except that every Tuesday is sort of extraordinary on account of the Unicorn Book Club. My friends and I have a special group that meets every Tuesday at lunch to discuss a book we are all reading at the same time. (A lot of books begin

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with a regular kind of day to set the stage for a new adventure.)

So, I am sitting at the lunch table in our usual spot with the other Unicorns: Siri, Jessica, Daisy, and Charlotte. Pink is our signature color, so we all have something pink on today. The sleuth in me needs to be specific about every detail. (*Sleuth* is on my spelling list for this week. It means detective, like Nancy Drew.) So here are the details: I have pink laces in my green sneakers and a pink headband holding back my curly hair. Siri is wearing a pink skirt, and Daisy has on a pink T-shirt with her jeans. Jessica and Charlotte are both wearing pink sweatshirts.

“Has anyone finished reading *Little Women*?” I ask. This is the way we begin every meeting. I check to see if anyone is done with the book, because no one wants to hear about the ending of a book before they have read it.

“I finished last night,” Siri says before she

pops a grape into her mouth. Siri has been my best friend since kindergarten, and someday when she's a famous fashion designer and I am a famous author, she's going to design all my clothes for book signings. I already have my signature planned. It's going to look like this:

Ruby Starr ☆

"Me too," says Daisy as she hands me a graham cracker. The Unicorns share lunch on Tuesdays. I brought a big red-and-white cloth napkin and spread it on the table where we all put our food. It feels more special that way, unless the boys at the other end of the table decide to have a food fight. Last time that happened, we ended up with orange peels in our veggie dip. No one wanted to eat anything after that.

"Ruby and I finished the book on Saturday," Charlotte adds with a grin at me. Her smiles are

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extra sparkly because of her pink braces. I grin back. Charlotte and I are reading buddies.

“I read the last page at breakfast this morning,” Jessica shares. “I almost dropped the book in my cereal bowl.” Everyone laughs. Only I laugh the most because I’ve almost dropped books in cereal, spaghetti, and even my dog Abe’s water bowl (which usually has dog drool floating on the surface). I guess that’s just what happens when you have a book with you at all times.

“We’re all done. That is most excellent,” I tell them in my fake British accent. Talking in a fake British accent is kind of my thing. I use it when I want to sound extra smart and wizardly.

I am already prepared with a question to get the group talking about the book. “Which one of the March sisters is your favorite and why?” I ask. Jo is my favorite of the four sisters because she is a writer, and also because my middle name is Josephine. But I don’t say my answer out loud yet.

Since I asked the question, I think it's a good idea to let someone else answer first.

Jessica jumps in right away. "Beth for sure. Because she is the one who keeps the sisters tied together."

"Beth is the kindest one," Charlotte adds. "But I like Amy because she changes the most. She only thinks about herself at the beginning."

Siri hands each of us a strawberry. Then she says, "I like Jo because she's the strongest of the sisters."

"And she's a writer," I mumble as I bite into the berry.

Daisy shrugs and sighs. "Since you have all picked my favorites, I have to say Meg. Otherwise, she'll be completely left out."

Then Jessica asks if we liked the ending. But before we can answer, my friend Charissa and her two besties, Sophie and Brooke, come over to sit with us. We all smush closer together to make room.

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“Did you choose your next book yet?” Charissa asks. Her book club is called the Macarons. (Fun fact: Macarons are little French cookies that come in pretty colors like pink and lavender and even green!) One time, the Unicorns and Macarons joined up to read a book together. My mom says you can never have too many readers in a book club.

“Not yet,” Daisy tells her. “Do you want to read the next one with us?”

We all agree that the Unicorns and the Macarons will be a team for the next book.

Which is why Charlotte says, “What should we read?”

Choosing a book is the most exciting part of being in a book club. There are so many choices. Suddenly, everyone is talking at once. I hear lots of titles I recognize, most of which I have already read. Suddenly, I am no longer at the lunch table. I am inside my imagination.



I find myself in a room filled with books. The walls are made of books, the stairs are made of books, and even the ceiling is made of books. I can't figure out which one to read! I choose the first book my hand touches. Only when I open the cover, a little bookworm pops his head out of the pages. He wears glasses and a top hat. The bookworm tells me if I can read every book in this room, he will make me the Keeper of the Library. I'd love to be in charge of all these books. So I start reading right away.

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“Ruby? Do you have an idea for our next book?”

Siri is asking me a question. It’s sad to realize I am here at school, not in a magical library with a talking bookworm.

“I was thinking about another classic,” I tell them. “Like *Anne of Green Gables*.” I love the classics.

“Has anyone heard of *The Misfit Girls*?” Siri asks. “I saw it at the bookstore.”

“I want to read that book too,” Charissa answers.

“Is it the one with five pairs of sneakers on the cover?” Daisy asks.

“Yes,” Siri responds. “It’s so cool. You read the ending first and then the rest of the story in reverse.”

“You never read an ending first. It’s the first rule of reading,” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

No one speaks for at least a full minute.

Maybe even two minutes, and that's a super-long time for complete silence at lunch with a group of girls. It's almost like I've dumped a giant bucket of freezing-cold water on everyone.

And I know why. It's because I just sounded like our teacher, Mrs. Sablinsky. That's not a good thing because:

1. She has absolutely no sense of humor.
2. She never—and I mean never—makes exceptions to her rules.
3. She would probably not invite a talking chipmunk to tea.

(I would absolutely invite a talking chipmunk to tea, wouldn't you?)

Even though I don't want to sound like a mini-Mrs. Sablinsky, reading an ending before you reach the end of a book is a book people no-no. It just isn't done.

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“It might be fun to try something new.”
Jessica is the first one to break the silence.

Uh-oh. I’ve been here before. This is like one of those *déjà vu* moments where something feels familiar even though it hasn’t ever happened before. Except in my case, it actually has happened. And me *not wanting to try something new* ended up causing a lot of friend drama. Even possibly some tears (mostly mine). One thing about me is that I make a lot of lowercase *m* mistakes, but I do learn from them. So right now, instead of arguing about the book, I smile really big at my friends and say, “If everyone wants to read *The Misfit Girls*, then let’s read it.”

Maybe it will be fun to read a book backward.
Maybe.

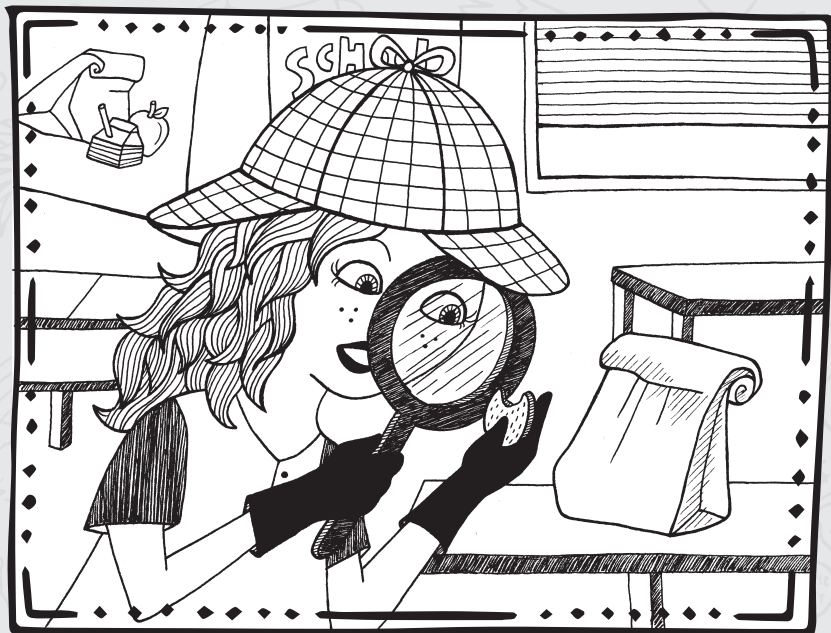
Just then, a slice of half-bitten cheese lands on the table next to me. It is followed by pieces of corn-puff cereal.

EWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!

The Unicorns and Macarons jump to our feet. Everyone reaches for their lunch bags and begins cleaning up as fast as possible. I am just folding up Mom's cloth napkin when something hits my left hand. I am almost afraid to look. I don't want to look. But bravery means overcoming fear. So, I shift my eyes to see what has landed on the table next to me.

It can't be. But it is. A half-bitten, very slimy piece of salami. (Secret fact about me: I really and truly can't stand salami.)

In a situation like this, Nancy Drew would remain calm. She wouldn't run away screaming.



I am no longer me. I am a famous sleuth solving a mystery. I must discover who threw the piece of salami. My personal opinions about this form of lunch meat are not important. What is important is to find clues. I take a closer look at the salami. It has something shiny on it. Could it be mayonnaise? Could it be saliva? Whoever had this salami probably began with a sandwich, so my first step will be to find two empty pieces of bread with one medium-sized bite missing. Just then, I hear someone calling my name.

“Ruby, step away from the salami!” Jessica orders as she pulls me away from the table.

OK, I am not a brilliant and stylish sleuth in the middle of an investigation. I am here at the lunch tables and about to actually touch the half-bitten piece of salami next to my hand. Not good.

Wow, that was really close. I might never have used this hand again. And it’s my writing hand, so it’s super-important. “Thank you for saving me,” I tell her. “I don’t know what happened back there.”

“Let’s get you to the library,” she tells me. “Books will bring you back to yourself.”

I grin at my friend. For book people like us, seeing pages and pages of stories just waiting to be read can make us happy.

The school librarian, Mrs. Xia, keeps the library open at lunch in case students would like to read. I think it’s a really smart idea because sometimes a person (I’m not naming names) might have a worser-than-worse kind of day with friends

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and might need a place to hide for a little while. A place where it's not embarrassing to be alone.

"Maybe we can get copies of *The Misfit Girls*," Charlotte says with a spin and a whoosh of her long dark hair. (Charlotte fact: She's a dancer, and she's going to get pointe shoes soon. Ruby fact: I am not a dancer. I will never be getting pointe shoes unless they are on a poster to hang on my bedroom wall.) We all follow the whirling Charlotte through the red door into the school library.

"Hi, girls," Mrs. Xia greets us. "What are you reading this week?"

"We just finished *Little Women*," I tell her with a smile. I know she will like this choice. She loves the classics too.

Sure enough, Mrs. Xia claps her hands together and gets a sparkle in her eyes. "Wonderful choice. That book was ahead of its time, you know." Then she winks at us. "What are you reading next?"

“We decided to read *The Misfit Girls*,” Siri tells her.

Mrs. Xia crinkles her forehead. “I’m not sure I am familiar with that one. Let me look it up.”

She sits down at the computer and begins typing. All eight of us line up in front of her desk in a row. After a moment, she looks at us. “I’m sorry, girls. But the library doesn’t have copies of this book.”

“Not even one?” I ask. “It’s a really popular new book.”

Mrs. Xia shakes her head slowly. “I’m afraid we have had some budget cuts in the library. Right now, we don’t have the funds to purchase new books—or even replace old ones.”

There is a quiet moment then, as all of us try to understand what she’s saying. I trade a look with Siri, who trades a look with Jessica until the look goes all the way down the line. We understand. No new books. No *Misfit Girls*.

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“Perhaps I can help you select another book to read,” Mrs. Xia suggests.

But Charissa speaks up. “Thank you very much, but we already agreed and everything.”

Mrs. Xia nods like she understands, but I see her mouth crumple. Mrs. Xia loves books and helping kids find something wonderful to read. I can tell she feels bad that she doesn’t have *The Misfit Girls* here.

“It isn’t going to be easy to get copies for all of us,” Jessica begins. “Maybe we should try to find something here with doubles at least.”

“We didn’t have this problem before,” Brooke says.

“Because we were reading a classic,” I remind her. We read *A Wrinkle in Time*—a super-great book club choice, I might add—and Charissa’s teacher loaned us books from her classroom.

When the Unicorns choose a book, it’s not so hard to find copies. We go to the school library or

the local library or the bookstore. If we're reading a classic, I might have it at home already because my mom has a whole shelf of her favorite books from when she was my age. My brothers have a lot of books too. Once or twice, the Unicorns have even shared one copy of a book by reading it and then passing it around the group. And Jessica just got an e-reader for her birthday so now she can download books. (Fun fact: I've already put e-reader in the number one spot on my Christmas wish list.)

Here's the thing though. Combining the Unicorns and the Macarons means eight readers. And that makes finding copies way more complicated, especially since we chose a brand-new book.

That's when I have an idea to fix the problem. It just pops right into my head like a light bulb has turned on. Hey, I guess that poster on Mrs. Sablinsky's wall of the boy thinking with a light bulb over his head isn't just a cartoon. It's real

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life! (This is when the ordinary day becomes an adventure as the main character sets out on a difficult journey.)

“I’ll try the local library after school. Maybe I can get copies for us.” OK, so maybe going to the library isn’t exactly a *difficult journey*. A girl can dream, can’t she?

“Ruby is our hero!” Charlotte calls out. The other girls join in, chanting my name. “Ruby! Ruby!”

I’m really enjoying this hero moment...



I imagine myself as the superhero of books. I disguise myself as a librarian, but if there is a reader in need, I become Book Girl! I wear magical glasses that can spot books anywhere and have a book bag that looks ordinary on the outside but can actually hold hundreds of books on the inside. With my magical powers, I can climb the tallest bookcase, find an out-of-print book, speed-read faster than anyone in the world, and deliver copies of books to everyone who wants to read one!

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I am saving the day until Mrs. Xia shushes us.

“Girls, this is still a library.” She holds her finger to her lips. *Shhhhhhhhhhhhh.*

And that’s the end of my hero moment. But not the end of my journey.