

Beyond the Ashes

The Golden Gate Chronicles

Book 2

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Abingdon Press

Nashville

Beyond the Ashes

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4267-8141-4

Published by Abingdon Press, P.O. Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202

www.abingdonpress.com

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Macro Editor: Teri Wilhelms

Published in association with the Books & Such Literary Agency

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barnett, Karen, 1969-

Beyond the ashes / Karen Barnett.

pages ; cm. — (The golden gate chronicles ; book 2)

ISBN 978-1-4267-8141-4 (binding: soft back : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3602.A77584B49 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015004760

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 / 20 19 18 17 16 15

*I know the plans I have in mind for you,
declares the LORD;
they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a
future filled with hope.
Jeremiah 29:11 CEB*

*. . . To give them a crown in place of ashes,
oil of joy in place of mourning,
a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.
Isaiah 61:3b CEB*

Sacramento, California
July 6, 1906

I refuse to attend another wedding. I'm through." Ruby King Marshall juggled two glasses of punch in her gloved hand as she shepherded her blind cousin through the overcrowded ballroom. Each doting couple waltzing around the polished floor reminded Ruby of her loss, like a needle thrust into her heart. *Widows and weddings—shouldn't it be bad luck?*

Miriam gripped Ruby's elbow, leaning forward to be heard over the dozens of nearby conversations. "Then I'm relieved mine was last December. I'd have been sad if you'd missed it. And don't forget Anne Marie's next month." A tiny smile flirted at the corner of her lips.

Ruby glanced out the ornate windows, the quiet evening beckoning. Only her cousin—and best friend—would have the audacity to make light of the situation. Newspaper stories of San Francisco's earthquake refugees weighed on Ruby's heart. "With everything that's happened this year, it seems inappropriate to turn a simple wedding into a grand social occasion."

Miriam adjusted her smoky-hued spectacles. "We're not suffering here in Sacramento, Ruby. Besides, love is always worth celebrating. Our hurts remind us to delight in life's joys."

Ruby focused on the sparkling ring on Miriam's finger to prevent her gaze from wandering to her cousin's thickening waistline. She

must be at least four months along. Ruby drew up her shoulders, pulling her elbows close to her body. *What have I become?*

Miriam leaned close to Ruby's ear, squeezing her arm. "Elizabeth told me you received a letter from your brother. How is he?"

Ruby escorted Miriam to a corner table and waited as she took a seat. "He sounded rather discouraged. He'd lost another cancer patient." Ruby sat, scooting her chair closer to her cousin's so she could be heard. "With all he suffered after the earthquake and fires, I thought he might come home and set up practice here."

"You just want him where you can keep your eye on him."

"Is it so wrong? He must be lonely, working long hours at the hospital and coming home to a bachelor apartment." Ruby's gaze wandered back to the bride, the gown heavy with Irish lace and ivory buttons—a near duplicate of the dress Ruby had sewn for Miriam last year. "He mentioned having some good news, but you know Robert—he insisted on remaining vague about the topic."

"With six sisters, I imagine he clings to his privacy."

Two gray-haired matrons approached the table, smiles brightening their faces. Mrs. Frederick Compton's lemony-yellow silk gown shimmered in the glow of the hall's electrified chandeliers, her sister's mauve dress fading in comparison. Mrs. Compton's gaze flitted over Miriam and settled on Ruby. She clucked her tongue. "Oh, Ruby, dear. We're so pleased you chose to attend. How are you?"

Ruby clenched her hands in her lap. "I'm fine, Mrs. Compton. How kind of you to inquire."

The woman waved her handkerchief at someone across the hall and turned to her sister. "There's Reverend Greene, Claudia. We must speak to him about the library benefit." She nodded to Ruby. "Please excuse us, dear."

The second woman ignored Ruby and Miriam, apparently content to be pulled along in Mrs. Compton's wake, a peacock feather bobbing atop her silver curls. A high-pitched voice floated back to the table. "Poor child. So young to be widowed."

Miriam pressed a handkerchief to her nose. "Someone needs to speak to Mrs. Compton about her cologne." She muttered the words under her breath. "Worse than smelling salts."

A warm flush crept up under Ruby's collar. "I dislike coming to these functions. This is the fourth wedding in as many months and at every one, I'm petted and cooed over like a child with a skinned knee. I'm tired of being the center of everyone's pity." Ruby thumped the cup down, punch sloshing over the edge and onto her gloves. "Oh!"

Miriam lifted her shoulders. "At least women speak to you. It's as if they believe I don't hear, either."

"I wish they'd ignore me as well." As soon as the careless thought passed her lips, Ruby winced. She placed a hand on her cousin's wrist. "That was thoughtless of me. I apologize."

"Please don't guard your words around me, Ruby. I know you better than that." Miriam flicked her fingers through the air dismissively. "Why would I care if some stranger speaks to me, anyway? I'd rather listen to you—even if you're being ridiculous."

Ruby's skin crawled. Her cousin had an uncanny habit of seeing right through people. "What do you mean?"

"With the exception of gossips like those, most people aren't fussing over you. Hardly anyone gives a thought to the accident any more. You're the one who's stuck fast."

Ruby swallowed against the lump rising in her throat. Who'd have expected the mere thought of Charlie's death would bring tears, two years later?

"It's good you came tonight. You're alone too often." Miriam touched Ruby's sleeve.

"I'm not alone. I have Otto." The little black and tan dachshund sported tiny gray hairs on his muzzle. How many more years before she lost him, as well? Ruby tightened her fingers around the cup's delicate handle. "And if you say you've found the perfect man for me, I'm going to march out the door." In her haste, she splashed punch onto the white tablecloth for a second time. "Drat! I'm going to need another napkin."

Miriam's gentle laugh trilled. "You wouldn't walk out on me. We promised as girls to always speak the truth to each other." She passed a linen square to Ruby and gestured toward the refreshment table.

“Now, would you like a refill? Or have you spilled enough for one evening?”

“I think I’ll pass for now.”

“I do know some nice fellows, but I wouldn’t dream of trying to match you up.”

Ruby pushed back the cup. “Everyone keeps telling me to move on, and I’m too young not to marry again. I don’t feel young. I feel like I’m a hundred years old and my life is over. I can’t even look at another man without seeing Charlie’s face.” She stared down at her hands.

Miriam spoke, her voice hesitant. “You’re only twenty-seven, Ruby. If you won’t marry again, then it’s time to decide what you *will* do.”

“What do you mean?” Ruby lifted her head.

“You were always the one with the plans and dreams. You arranged every step of our lives when we were children.” Miriam’s hand settled on the bump in her midsection.

“Exploring haunted attics and searching for lost Indian camps?” Ruby fingered her lace cravat. “Most of my schemes led to disaster, or have you forgotten? I got us into some pretty good scrapes.”

“And then you planned a way out.”

I never planned a way out of widowhood. A familiar ache twisted in her stomach. According to her early dreams, she should be the one expecting the baby. “I think God laughs at my schemes.”

“Perhaps. But it never stopped you from making them.”

Ruby’s throat squeezed as she stared at the centerpiece, the riotous flowers overflowing with ridiculous joy. “I gave up dreaming when Charlie died.”

“Then maybe it’s time you started seeking God’s plan for your life. Find a new sense of purpose for yourself.” Ruby’s cousin landed her cup squarely in front of her. “It doesn’t have to be marriage. It’s the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. You’re free to make your own choices.”

Shivers ran down Ruby’s arms. The thought had been close to her heart as well. “I keep reflecting on the situation in San Francisco. I saw an article in the *Evening Bee* stating the need for aid workers.

Thousands are still homeless. Robert mentioned they were short-staffed at the hospital, too. I suppose many of the nurses fled the city after the disaster.” She closed her eyes and pictured her own nurse’s cap gathering dust on the upper shelf of the wardrobe. How would it feel to pin it on again? To bring hope to the sick and the dying? Her heart fluttered, like the wings of her mother’s peach-faced canary beating against its wire cage.

Miriam placed her hand atop Ruby’s. “Perhaps God is calling you back into nursing.”

God calling? Ruby pushed the difficult thought away. She made her own decisions, she didn’t require divine guidance. “It isn’t the dream I had for my life.”

“God has a plan for you, Ruby—but it might be profoundly different than your own.”

Ruby sighed. Her cousin would not be swayed once she’d taken to an idea. It explained why she’d always been such an excellent conspirator. “I’ll think on it, I promise.”

“I’ll pray God provides you swift counsel.”

Elizabeth, Ruby’s seventeen-year-old sister, wove through the crowd, a smile dancing across her face. She hurried to the table, clasping her fingers in front of her. “Have you heard? Hattie and Ernest are engaged. Ruby, Hattie hopes you will help with the gown.”

Not again. Ruby grabbed for the cup, desperate to distract her nerves. It clattered across the table and dumped the remainder of its contents on the linen cloth.

Miriam giggled, pressing a hand to her mouth. “Ask and ye shall receive.”

Ruby blew a long breath through her gritted teeth and shook her head. “Please give Hattie my regrets, Elizabeth. I’m going to San Francisco.”

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San Francisco, California

July 23, 1906

A beam of sunlight pierced the stained glass window in Dr. Gerald Larkspur's study, casting a rosy glow on the stationery in his hand. He eyed the dainty feminine script marching across the page in ordered lines. Gerald lowered the letter, staring at Dr. Robert King over the stacks of medical files littering his desk blotter. "Your sister wants to come to San Francisco now? Does she understand the city is in shambles?"

His friend leaned on the oak desk. "Ruby wants to help with the relief work. She's had extensive nursing training. My sister even assisted our father in surgeries, back when we were children." Robert frowned. "Never seemed fair, since he wouldn't let me step foot over the threshold. Sure, she was six years older, but I was a boy. If anyone should be man enough to handle the sight of blood, you'd think it would have been me."

Gerald passed the letter back to Robert as he fought a smirk, picturing his young medical partner as a petulant child. "Sounds like she was 'man enough.'"

The paper crinkled as Robert tucked it into his inside pocket. "Trust me, Ruby has a strong spirit. She put up with my antics, after all."

"I can imagine."

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Robert leaned forward, placing both palms against Gerald's desk. "I know it's asking a lot. With your mother living here, and your cousin's family, and me—maybe I should put Ruby off the idea."

Gerald rested his chin on his palm, the paper's rosewater scent lingering on his skin. Another woman in the house? So much for the quiet bachelor life. "I can't see why not. What's one more?"

Robert grinned. "Abby's already set up an extra bed in her room."

"I see." Gerald opened the nearest file, and flipped through the pages. "You two were so confident I'd say yes?"

His young partner straightened, tugging on the hem of his gray vest. "Not confident, just optimistic. You're always reaching out to help others. You've taken the rest of us in, after all."

The chair squeaked as Gerald rose to his feet. The scent of vegetable stew scented the air, his stomach rumbling in response. The noon meal must be nearly ready, one advantage of having three women—soon to be four—in his house. "Does your sister know about Abby?"

Robert's gaze lowered. "I haven't informed my family, yet. I'm certain Ruby will be pleased."

A chuckle rose in Gerald's chest. He clasped Robert's shoulder with a firm hand. "In the same way you were sure I'd consent? Your understanding of human nature never fails to amaze me."



San Francisco, California

August 1, 1906

I hope Robert received my telegram. Ruby clutched her wrap with one hand and the ferry rail with the other, stunned at the sight before her. She thought the newspaper stories had prepared her for the devastation, but as the boat pulled up to the dock, prickles crawled across her arms. Even three months after the earthquake and subsequent firestorm, San Francisco looked like the parlor stereoscope images of Pompeii. Skeletal buildings dominated the skyline, either

half-destroyed or half-built—Ruby couldn't decide. Stacks of building supplies lined the piers.

The ferry eased to a stop, the passengers collecting their belongings. Ruby lifted her bag and clumsy wicker basket and clutched the items before her as she joined the stream of passengers jostling their way to the front. At the plank, a porter reached for the basket.

"No, I'll hold this. Thank you." She offered the carpetbag instead, and the man grasped it with a nod before assisting her to the dock.

Ruby froze as the crowd pushed past her. The stench of ashes lingered in the air. Beyond the hundreds of voices, she could hear a cacophony of hammers and saws.

"Miss?" The porter held the bag toward her, a frown dragging down his bushy moustache.

Ruby transferred the awkward container to her left hand and reached for the bag with her right, trying not to stare at the man whose face resembled a walrus minus tusks. She stumbled a few steps forward before lowering the rectangular carton to the ground and grappling with her wrap, pulling it tight around her shoulders. She swiveled her gaze from side to side, overcome with the image of the city as a giant anthill, carelessly kicked over by a mischievous child.

She didn't belong here. A wave of emotion swept over her. *Charlie, why'd you have to buy the fool horse, anyway?* Ruby stepped close to the basket, brushing it with her shoe tips. She shouldn't have allowed Miriam to bully her into making new plans. It wasn't her place to save the world. She should be home where life remained predictable and secure. And boring.

Ruby tucked a stray curl under her hat before grasping the wicker handle and hoisting it up over her arm. She straightened her posture, willing confidence into her steps. She'd come to help the people of San Francisco. And poor Robert, slaving away in this broken carcass of a city. *No more talk of weddings and babies.* Robert was clearly too immersed in his work for such nonsense. It still seemed remarkable her impish baby brother would grow up to be a doctor like their father. If only she'd been a boy.

A shout from the distance drew her attention.

"Ruby!" Robert pushed through the crowd, arms extended.

Ruby dropped the bags and fell into his arms. “I am so relieved to see you. This place is such a mess.”

He laughed. “This is nothing, Sis. You should have seen it a month ago.” He pulled her into an embrace so tight it lifted her off her feet.

Robert’s touch crumbled the last of her resolve and tears stung at her eyes. “It’s a joy to see your face.” She squeezed his arm. “I can’t believe I’m actually here. We’ve been so worried about you. It’s been months since we received your last letter. Mother is irate.” A shiver rushed through her and her voice trembled. “Why haven’t you written, you lout?” She dug into her pocket for a handkerchief.

Her brother laughed, pressing a silk square into her hand. “I’m fine, Ruby. I’ve been a little busy.” His face lit up in a huge boyish smile. “Just wait until you hear all my news. You’ll forgive me in a heartbeat.”

“Never. There can be no excuse for keeping us all wondering. I’m sure you’re not at the hospital every hour of the day. Certainly you could have spared a moment to write.”

He pushed his chocolate-brown derby to the back of his head, a familiar puckish grin lighting his face.

She took a step back and studied him. Shadows under Robert’s eyes showed the effects of the disaster and his difficult work—these she’d expected—but his expression also contained a spark of unspoken delight. He didn’t look the part of a lonely, overworked bachelor.

Robert stepped to one side, revealing a well-dressed man and woman standing directly behind him.

Ruby dabbed at her reddened eyes, a wave of heat crawling up her neckline beneath the collar of her traveling jacket.

The man flashed a disarming smile, his Bristol-blue eyes causing Ruby’s breath to leak from her chest. Fine lines around his mouth spoke of a life filled with either worry or laughter.

Ruby glanced down, awash with emotions after the long, exhausting trip. She certainly wasn’t going to swoon over a man, even if his eyes were a dead-ringer for her Charlie. *Especially because of that.*

Robert clasped a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Ruby, this is Dr. Gerald Larkspur, my mentor and friend. I’ve written to you about

him, right?" He turned his attention toward Dr. Larkspur. "Gerald, may I present my sister, Mrs. Ruby Marshall?"

Ruby reached her hand out to the doctor, noticing too late she still clutched the damp handkerchief.

Dr. Larkspur took her fingers, with only a quick glance at the fabric crushed between their palms. With his other hand, he touched the brim of his black hat. "It is an honor to meet you, Mrs. Marshall. But your brother does himself a disservice. I can't be called a mentor any longer. He's left me in the dust, I'm afraid. I keep reminding him, we're partners now."

Ruby bobbed her head, giving herself a second to string words together into a polite greeting. "Dr. Larkspur—the honor is mine. My brother has spoken most highly of you." She retrieved her hand and tucked the handkerchief into her sleeve, casting a final glance at the man's eyes. Not exactly like Charlie's. A tad darker. She pushed the memory from her mind.

Ruby directed her gaze at the young woman hovering near her brother's other arm. *Mrs. Larkspur, perhaps?* The woman glanced up at Robert, her sweetly freckled cheeks sporting a light blush. Ruby's stomach crawled up into her throat. *Oh, no. Please, no.*

"Ruby," her brother turned back to her. "I'd like to introduce you to someone very special."

Ruby fought the urge to cover her ears and run screaming back to the ferry.

Robert cleared his throat, his eyes warming as he gazed at the young woman. "This is Miss Abby Fischer. Abby is Dr. Larkspur's cousin . . ." his words rushed toward her like an engine roaring down the track, ". . . and my fiancée."