

Beyond the Trail

SIX SHORT STORIES FROM
THE OREGON SERIES



JAE



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I finished my novel *Backwards to Oregon*, a lot of readers asked me if I was planning on writing a sequel. I always said no. Well, that should teach me to “never say never.” Not only did I write a sequel (*Hidden Truths*, available from Ylva Publishing), but I also wrote a number of short stories about Luke and Nora. There were so many interesting facets of the characters’ lives that I couldn’t explore in *Backwards to Oregon*. How and why did Luke start disguising herself as a man? How did Nora come to work in Tess’s brothel? Will Tess find love too, or is she destined to spend her life alone? What happened to the Hamiltons after they reached Oregon?

This anthology answers all these questions. I hope you enjoy learning more about Luke, Nora, and Tess.

THE BLUE HOUR



GALENA, ILLINOIS NOVEMBER 24TH, 1838

LUCINDA HAMILTON LAID HER CHEEK against her skinned knees and wrapped her arms more tightly around her shins. A cold wind from the river tugged at her threadbare cape and carried the stench from the alley in her direction. She ducked her head and she buried her nose in the folds of her skirt.

From time to time, she lifted her rough hands to her mouth and breathed into them to warm her frozen fingers. Her behind felt numb, and she shifted on the top step of the backstairs.

Somewhere in the distance, the sounds of the town's busy river port drifted over—dock workers shouting at each other and a steamboat's whistle blaring. Lucinda imagined the boat loading its hold with lead from the town's mines and shipping it to a faraway place called St. Louis.

She listened for footsteps from inside the house, but none came.

What's taking so long tonight?

Lucinda stared up at the night sky, trying to guess how long she had been sitting there, waiting. The moon had set maybe an hour ago, and slowly the outlines of the brothel and the neighboring houses became distinguishable. The orange brick of the buildings looked gray in the bluish half-light. *Close to*

dawn already. A wide yawn made her jaw crack, and she rubbed her eyes.

Had her mother fallen into a drunken sleep once her last customer had left, forgetting all about her?

She shifted again and shook her head. No, her mother would call her back inside in just a moment. If she was patient for a little while longer, her mother would come. *Maybe she wants to surprise me. Maybe she convinced Kate to let her have the kitchen for an hour so she can bake a pie for Thanksgiving. Or she saved up for a turkey.*

Her stomach rumbled at the thought, and she licked her cold lips.

The door behind her swung open.

Finally! Lucinda jumped up, almost tumbling down the stairs when her numb legs threatened to give out on her. But when she turned around, her gaze fell on a stranger.

A man in a long, black coat pushed past her and hurried down the stairs. Just a year or two ago, Lucinda had thought it a fun game of hide-and-seek. Now she understood that he was slinking away through the backdoor because a brothel was a place of shame.

Don't think about it. She tried to distract herself with a familiar game, trying to guess who the visitor was. A miner? Farmer? Maybe a steamboat captain? And where was he going? Was he hurrying home to celebrate Thanksgiving with his family or attend a church service later in the day?

Lucinda wouldn't be going to church. Even if her mother felt up to going, the people of Galena wouldn't want to share a pew with a whore and her bastard child. But maybe she could slip away for a bit and watch the marksmanship contest or the horse races later in the day.

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She settled back down and leaned her head against the door.

The tinny plunking of an out-of-tune piano drifted through the thin wood and mingled with footsteps.

Lucinda lifted her head away from the door as it opened again.

Another man stepped outside, one arm wrapped around Rose, keeping her pressed against his body. When they descended the stairs, he palmed Rose's behind.

She inched to the side to let them pass and stared at her boots until his footsteps faded away.

Rose climbed the stairs and sat next to her on the top step. Two coins clinked when she slid them into her low-cut bodice, making Lucinda wonder what she wore underneath.

Quickly, she shoved the thought away.

"What are you doin' out here?" Rose asked. "It's dangerous for a girl all alone out here."

"Not more dangerous than inside, is it? At least out here, it's quiet."

Rose sighed. "How long have you been sittin' here? Don't tell me that goddamned Lilly forgot all about you again?"

"Oh, no, she'll call me back in as soon as the last guest is gone."

Rose's full lips twitched, but she said nothing. She smoothed her hands over her skirt, which was so short that the storeowner's wife had called it a scandal last week. "Come on, honey," Rose said and stood. "You can keep me company for a li'l while."

The warm air in the brothel made Lucinda's cold cheeks burn as if hit by a thousand pinpricks. She stumbled along the corridor, her boots sinking into a carpet that had been royal

red when she had first seen it five years ago. Now its color had faded to a tired rust brown.

From the first floor, the clinking of glasses and shouts from the faro table drifted up the stairs. "It's almost morning," Lucinda said. "Why aren't the men going home?"

"Kate will keep the parlor open all night and all day tomorrow." Rose shrugged. "Said the Thanksgiving crowd will bring in some extra money."

Lucinda's shoulders slumped. How much longer until she could crawl into bed and finally find a few hours of sleep?

Rose opened a door and tugged on her sleeve. "I'm done for the night. You can come in and share my bed." A broken-off front tooth flashed when she giggled. "Didn't think I'd say that again tonight."

Blood rushed to Lucinda's cheeks, and she turned her face away. She sat on the edge of the bed. Like her mother's room, this one had no other place to sit.

The sound of water splashing made her look up.

Rose dipped a cloth into the washbowl and rubbed it over her face. Beneath a heavy mask of rouge, a pale face appeared.

Try as she might, Lucinda couldn't stop staring, even as Rose turned and looked at her. She had always thought of Rose as her mother's friend. Well, not friend, really, but someone who shared her history. Now, after seeing her without the rouge, she realized that Rose was barely older than fifteen or sixteen. But where Lucinda was gangly and still flat-chested, Rose was elegant and pleasantly rounded. The weary expression in her eyes said she'd seen and done things that Lucinda had only listened to through the protection of closed doors.

In three or four years, this could be me. The thought rippled through her, shaking her.

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“What?” Rose asked, one hand resting on her hip.

Lucinda wrenched her gaze away. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Rose flicked water at her. “Then why are you starin’ at me like I’m a cow with two heads?”

“It’s just that ...” A drop of water ran down Lucinda’s chin, and she wiped it away. “You’re beautiful.”

Rose laughed—not the fake laugh Lucinda had heard her use to entice men but a deep chuckle that flowed over her like a cleansing rain. “Thank you, honey,” Rose said. “You’re a real sweetheart.” Then her grin dimmed, and she shook her head. “Your mother shouldn’t have brought you here. This hellhole is no place for you.”

The edge of the bed dug into Lucinda’s hands when she clamped her fingers around it. She kept her gaze focused on her knuckles. “I know.” She glanced up at Rose, then away. “It’s no place for you or any other woman either.”

“I’m stayin’ just until I earn enough to start a new life,” Rose said.

A burning sensation spread down Lucinda’s throat until it settled in her stomach. She’d heard those words before. In fact, her mother had said them in every town, every new brothel, and every night Lucinda had to wait outside their room.

She hasn’t said it in a while. She realized her mother had stopped talking about getting out. Now she just worried about getting enough whiskey and laudanum to make it through the night.

“Come on.” Rose slid out of her colorful skirt and tight bodice and stood before her in just a see-through shift. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Um.” Lucinda slammed her eyes shut. The thought of sharing the bed with Rose made her uncomfortable. Somehow,

it felt different from sharing the bed with her mother. “I-I think I’ll go see if Mama has finished entertaining for tonight.” She escaped from the room before Rose could stop her.

Wandering down the hall, she ignored the noises—snores, grunts, and moans—coming from behind the doors as best as she could. She stopped in front of the room she shared with her mother and pressed her ear against the door.

Nothing.

No grunts, no heavy breathing, not even her mother’s drunken snores.

Lucinda blew out a breath. Maybe her mother had stopped working to spend some time with her. Maybe she’d already been looking for her. She opened the door an inch at a time, ready to stop and retreat should a customer still be with her mother.

Everything stayed quiet.

She slipped into the room.

The sickening mix of stale liquor, sweat, and cheap perfume hit her nose.

Lucinda gagged and crossed the room to open the window. In the dim light, she almost stumbled over a pair of boots. The oil lamp on the scarred dresser flickered and dimmed as the oil in the reservoir burned low.

Lucinda turned and looked at her mother.

Lilly lay on the bed, the violet coverlet ruffled around her. The red ruffles of her skirt had slipped up one thigh, revealing one of her garters. A bottle of whiskey had slid from her hand and spilled its content onto the floor.

Quickly, Lucinda crossed the room and picked up the bottle. It was empty now anyway.

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When she straightened, her gaze fell onto an empty vial clutched in her mother's hand. She wrinkled her nose as she caught the heavy odor of laudanum. *Not again.* She sighed.

There'd be no talking to her mother tonight. Her mother would spend Thanksgiving floating in numb lethargy, leaving Lucinda behind.

She dragged the covers up over her mother. When she tucked them around her, cold skin brushed her fingers. "Mama?" Lucinda whispered. She bent closer.

Her mother didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Dread clutched Lucinda, squeezing until she couldn't breathe either.

"Mama!" She shook her mother's shoulder. "Mama, please!"

The empty vial slid from beneath a limp hand and rolled onto the floor.

With trembling fingers, Lucinda felt for a pulse.

Nothing.

She pressed one hand to her mouth and bit back a sob. When her knees threatened to give out, she sank to the floor and rested her back against the bed. "Lord, Mama, what did you do? What did you do?" Numbness spread through her, as if she, not Mama, had drunk the laudanum. She rubbed burning eyes, but no tears would come.

When the sun peeked over the horizon, Lucinda struggled to her feet. She stood looking down at her mother, then lifted a hand and trailed a finger over rouged cheeks and painted eyebrows, a touch her mother hadn't allowed when she was alive.

Outside, a door banged shut.

Lucinda flinched. She straightened, turned away from her mother, and went to tell Kate.



Kate read haltingly, stumbling over a word every so often. Finally, she said “amen” and closed the Bible.

Unclamping her lips, Lucinda mumbled “amen” too. She knew at least that much of the Lord’s Prayer from attending other funerals. Just last month, Fanny, who had the room next to theirs, had been choked to death by a customer.

Now half a dozen of the brothel’s girls had dragged themselves out of bed to say good-bye to Lilly, but no pastor was present. He had refused to bury Lilly in the cemetery’s sacred soil, so Kate had paid someone to dig a grave near a lone crossroad at the edge of town.

Lucinda stared at the wooden cross on her mother’s grave. Because she couldn’t afford a granite tombstone, someone had carved her mother’s name into a simple cross. Now the wood held two of the few words Lucinda could read.

Lilly Hamilton.

Was that even her mother’s real name? Lucinda wasn’t sure. Most of the women in brothels didn’t use their real names, so there were lots of Daisys, Roses, and Lillys in the parlor houses, cribs, and bordellos. If her mother had ever been called by another name, it was long forgotten.

A hand on her shoulder made Lucinda jerk.

“What are you gonna do now?” Kate asked. She hooked her arm through Lucinda’s and set them off toward the brothel.

Lucinda dug her teeth into her lip. “Don’t know.”

“Got no relatives that can take you in?”

“No.” Her father was one of many faceless customers who had shared her mother’s bed, and Lucinda had never known her

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grandparents. She was on her own now. Her belly cramped into a ball of anxiety at the thought.

Around the bend, the brothel's orange brick façade appeared in her line of sight.

"How old are you now?" Kate asked.

"Just turned twelve."

Kate studied her like a side of bacon she wanted to buy. "You're welcome to stay on, you know. With a bit of rouge and some cotton padding in your corset, you could be quite pretty."

Lucinda stared at her, took in the madam's grim face, the thin lips turned down as if she were constantly tasting something bitter. The rouge couldn't hide the broken blood vessels across Kate's nose and plump cheeks. "No," Lucinda choked out through a tight throat. *No. Not that. Never that.*

Kate shrugged. "Suit yourself. But don't come back crying when you realize that a girl alone won't get very far."



Lucinda packed her only other dress and put the hairbrush in her carpetbag but left her mother's bottle of perfume. When she closed the bag, her glance fell onto the mirror shard on her mother's dresser. A customer had broken the mirror some months ago, but Lilly didn't have the money to replace it.

Outside, horses raced by the brothel and riders shouted, trying to win the Thanksgiving contest. She knew many of the riders. More than just a few were regular customers, and she had always envied the freedom that being men gave them. No one ever spoke ill of them for visiting the brothel. No one criticized them for racing horses or doing whatever else they wanted.

A girl alone won't get very far. Kate's words echoed through her mind.

She knew Kate was right. What options did she have for survival? She couldn't read or write and had no talent for needlework. The one thing she was good at was taking care of the two horses Kate kept in the town's livery stable.

But no one would hire a girl to work in a stable. Stable boys were just that—boys.

A girl alone.

She trailed her hands through her long, black tresses. Years ago, some of the younger prostitutes had oohed and aahed over them, combing Lucinda's hair as if she were a doll. While she had liked the attention, she'd never been that fond of her long hair.

What if ...? She gathered her hair behind her head and stared at herself in the broken mirror.

Not allowing herself time to reconsider, she picked up a pair of scissors.

Black locks fell onto the dresser, and she imagined stripping off the grief, anger, and shame of her past with them. When she was done, she wiped the strands of hair away from the mirror and stared at the thin, pale boy looking back at her. She touched the bare skin of her neck and slid her palms down her still flat chest.

Could this really work? Would she be able to make people believe she was a boy?

She tried a male pose, her thumbs stuck in imaginary vest pockets, but it looked out of place since she was wearing a dress. Another idea came to her and made her smile. When she looked down, the boy in the mirror answered with a grin of his own.

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She opened her mother's trunk. Beneath half-empty bottles of whiskey, she found a man's shirt and pants. One of her mother's customers had liked for Lilly to dress up as a boy.

After slipping her dress over her head, she stepped into the pants, pulled them up, and rolled up the too-long pant legs. The waistband was too loose, so she was grateful for the suspenders that held the pants in place on her narrow hips. The shirt was too wide at the shoulders, but it would conceal whatever female form she had.

She glanced in the mirror again, blinked, and shook her head at her image. *This is me!*

It felt as if she were seeing herself for the first time.

Her gaze swept through the room, taking it all in one last time, then she picked up her bag, turned, and strode away.



The door opened just as Lucinda wanted to give up knocking. A sleepy Rose, wrapped in a short dressing gown, blinked at her. "For heaven's sake, it's the middle of the day. Come back tonight." Already closing the door, she asked, "Besides, aren't you a bit young to lie with a woman?"

"What?" Almost too late, Lucinda held out her hands and stopped the door from closing. "Oh. No, no. That's not why ... Rose, it's me."

The door whooshed open so abruptly that Lucinda stumbled into the room. Rose caught her, then held her at arms' length and stared at her. "Lucinda?"

She nodded and, trying to make her voice sound firm like a boy's, added, "I suppose you should use another name now. Call me ... Luke."

"Luke?" Rose's brow contracted. "What are you doing?"

The unfamiliar shirt slid against her skin as she straightened her shoulders. “Starting a new life.”

“As a boy?” Rose’s carefully tended eyebrows arched.

“It feels right.”

Rose let her gaze wander down Luke’s body, making her blush. “Looks right too,” she said with a shake of her head. “Except ...”

“What?” Luke peered down her body but couldn’t find anything amiss. As far as she could tell, she looked like every other twelve-year-old boy in Galena.

“Well, you’re missing somethin’.”

Luke smoothed her palm over the back of her neck and through her hair. “You mean a hat?”

“That too.” Grinning, Rose glanced down Luke’s body. “Take off your pants.”

Heat stained Luke’s cheeks. “What? No. Why?” She clamped her hands around the suspenders, tightly holding on.

Rose rolled her eyes. She turned away, searched for something in her dresser, and then strode over to Luke. Before Luke could react, Rose stuffed her hand down her pants.

“Rose!” She struggled to get away, but Rose was stronger. “W-what are you doing?”

“Calm down. I’m not out to hurt you. There.” Finally, Rose withdrew her hand. When she glanced down at the spot between Luke’s legs, she gave a satisfied nod.

Her heart still hammering against her ribs, Luke followed Rose’s gaze down.

A soft object tented the material at the crotch of her pants. Luke carefully touched it. The tips of her ears burned. “W-what’s that?”

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“Don’t worry.” Rose laughed. “It won’t bite your privates. Just some rolled-up stockings. Now you can pass as a boy.” She shook her head and stared at Luke. “And a handsome one at that.”

More heat suffused Luke’s cheeks, and she frowned at herself. *Boys don’t blush about things like this. If you want this to work, you better stop acting like a girl.*

“So you’re leavin’?” Rose asked.

Luke nodded. “I’ll try to get hired as a stable boy.”

“Sure beats the only other option,” Rose mumbled. “But you’ll get older. Your bosom will grow, and you’ll start your monthly curses. What will you do then?”

Luke’s mother had talked to her about these things, but somehow, imagining herself as a woman was stranger than wearing men’s apparel. She raked her front teeth over her bottom lip. “I’ll think of something.” She held out her hand. “Good-bye, Rose.”

Instead of taking her hand, Rose pulled her close for a short hug. “Take care of yourself,” she whispered. “I’m glad you’re gettin’ out of here. That’s at least somethin’ to be thankful for at Thanksgivin’.”

“You could come with me,” Luke said. With Rose at her side, leaving the brothel and Galena wouldn’t be quite so scary. She imagined earning enough money to buy a turkey for the two of them next Thanksgiving.

“I don’t think my bosom is as easy to hide.” Rose lifted one side of her mouth into a crooked grin.

“You wouldn’t need to.” Luke gestured down her body, at the men’s clothes. “I could take care of you.”

Rose’s half-grin blossomed into a true smile. “Thanks, honey. You’re quite the gentleman already. As much as I hate

livin' here, I don't think I'm cut out for a life like you're plannin'. Always hidin' ...” She shook her head.

Luke nodded, but strangely, she didn't feel as if she were hiding. For the first time in her life, she wasn't ducking her head.

As she made her way downstairs, heading for the front door instead of slinking out the back, a few customers were still standing at the pockmarked bar with its row of spittoons, celebrating Thanksgiving in their own way. Luke hoped that one day, she'd have something to be thankful for too.