



Caroline And The Raider (The Orphan Train Trilogy Series Book 3)

By Linda Lael Miller



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So why did her breath suddenly become a shivery sigh when she looked into Hayes's twinkling green eyes? Too late Caroline knew how perilous her request really was, for this strong and daring ex-soldier would refuse her nothing no matter how dangerous...but first he intended to teach her everthing about the power of a man's love, beginning with a shameless odyssey to ecstasy in his arms....



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Editorial Review

About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is the author of more than 100 historical and contemporary novels. Now living in Spokane, Washington, the “First Lady of the West” hit a career high when all three of her 2011 Creed Cowboy books debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* list. In 2007, the Romance Writers of America presented her their Lifetime Achievement Award. She personally funds her Linda Lael Miller Scholarships for Women. Visit her at LindaLaelMiller.com.

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Chapter One

Bolton, Wyoming Territory

April 15, 1878

He was the most disreputable-looking man Caroline had ever seen, and everything depended upon him.

Squinting, she took a neatly pressed handkerchief from the pocket of her coat and wiped away some of the grime from the saloon window to take a closer look. If anything, Mr. Guthrie Hayes seemed even less appealing after that effort. He certainly didn't look like the war hero her student had told her about with such excitement.

A muscular man, probably only a few inches taller than Caroline herself, he sat at a corner table, engrossed in a game of cards. A mangy yellow dog lay at his side on the sawdust floor, its muzzle resting on its paws. Mr. Hayes wore rough-spun trousers, a plain shirt of undyed cotton, suspenders, and a leather hat that looked as if it had been chewed up and spit out by a large, irritable animal. His face was beard-stubbed, and he sported a rakish black patch over one eye.

Caroline couldn't see his hair, because of the hat, but she figured it was probably too long. She sighed, dampened a clean corner of the hanky with her tongue, and cleared a bigger area on the glass.

Just then one of the men at Mr. Hayes's table must have pointed Caroline out, for he raised his head and looked her directly in the eyes. An unaccountable shock jolted her system; she sensed something hidden deep in this man's mind and spirit, something beautiful and deadly.

He had the audacity to smile around the stub of a thin cigar clamped between his strong white teeth. As far as Caroline was willing to admit, those teeth were his only redeeming feature.

Mr. Hayes spoke cordially to the other men, threw in his cards, and pushed back his chair. The dog got up to follow him as he came toward the swinging doors.

Caroline stepped back, alarm and excitement colliding inside her and driving out her breath. Her fingers trembled a little as she stuffed the soiled hanky into her handbag. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, even though she was patently terrified.

Mr. Hayes approached her idly, the cigar stub still caught between his teeth. In the bright sunshine of an April afternoon, Caroline saw that his one visible eye was green, and she just assumed the other was, too -- provided there was another one, of course. There was a quirky slant to his mouth, and his beard, like what she could see of his hair, was light brown.

His very presence had an impact, despite his appearance.

"Ma'am," he said, touching the brim of his seedy hat, and Caroline heard just the whisper of a southern drawl in the way he uttered the word.

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Lord knew, she wanted nothing to do with the likes of Guthrie Hayes, but he might well be Seaton's only chance. She was prepared to do almost anything to help the man she hoped to marry.

She put out a hand. "My name is Miss Caroline Chalmers," she said.

An impudent green eye moved over her slender figure slowly then came back to her face. The amusement Caroline saw in its depths nettled her, and she felt a peculiar sort of sweet venom spread through her.

"What can I do for you, Miss Caroline Chalmers?" Just behind him, the yellow dog whimpered forlornly and kerplopped to its belly on the dirty wooden sidewalk.

par

Caroline ran her tongue over dry lips, and even though her errand was urgent, she was compelled to hedge. "Is that animal ill?" she asked.

"Tob?" Hayes chuckled, and the sound was warm and rich. It hid itself in Caroline's middle and melted there, like beeswax left in the sun. "Not really. He's just hung over -- bad habit he picked up before he and I became partners."

Caroline took a step backwards and felt her cheeks redden. Inside the saloon, a tinny piano made a *chinky-tinky* sound, and wagons and buggies rattled through the mud-and-manure-filled street. "Tob is a very strange name," she managed to say. "Why do you call him that?"

Mr. Hayes sighed in a long-suffering fashion, probably yearning to get back to his debauched pursuits inside the Hellfire and Spit Saloon, took off his hat, and put it back on again. In the interim, Caroline caught a glimpse of tousled brown hair with a golden glint to it.

"Miss Chalmers," he said, with irritating patience, "I didn't come out here to discuss my dog. What do you want?"

Caroline's cheeks went even redder, and out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Hypatia Furvis peering at her through the window of the dress shop. Before sunset, every warm body in Bolton would have been told that the schoolteacher had been seen talking to a man who was hardly more than a criminal.

"Miss Chalmers?" Mr. Hayes prompted.

"Is it true that you used to -- to rescue people from Federal prisons, during the war?"

He took a match from the pocket of his shirt, struck it against the sole of one scuffed boot, and lit the cigar stub. Clouds of blue smoke billowed into Caroline's face, fouling the fresh spring air. "Who told you that?"

Caroline coughed. "One of my students," she admitted.

A mischievous grin lifted one corner of his mouth. "I thought you looked like a schoolteacher," he said, and once more, his brazen gaze took in her figure. "You're surely a scrawny little thing. Don't they pay you enough to buy food?"

Caroline was patently insulted. Maybe she wasn't fashionably plump, but she wasn't exactly thin, either. She took another deep breath to show that she had a bosom, however modest. "My wages are adequate, thank you. In fact, they allow me to offer you a sizable sum in return for your help."

Hayes took a puff of the cigar. "How sizable?"

"Two hundred and thirty-six dollars and forty-seven cents," Caroline replied, with dignity. She'd saved literally from childhood to amass what she considered a small fortune. And she loved Seaton Flynn enough to hand over every penny in return for his freedom.

He gave a slow whistle and shook his head. "That's a lot of money, Miss Chalmers. Exactly what would I have to do to earn it?"

Caroline looked carefully in every direction, then dropped her voice to a whisper to reply, "I want you to free my -- friend from jail."

The eye narrowed, and Mr. Hayes tossed the cigar into the street. "What did you say?"

Caroline bit her lower lip for a moment, then repeated her request, slowly and clearly, the way she would have done for a slow student.

"I'll be damned," swore Mr. Hayes, resting his hands on his hips. "You're asking me to break the law!"

"Shhh!" Caroline hissed. Then she took his arm and fairly dragged him into the little space between the Hellfire and Spit Saloon and the Wells Fargo office. There was no telling what Hypatia would make of that, but Caroline felt she had no alternative. "You wouldn't be breaking the law," she insisted furiously, still gripping Mr. Hayes's arm. "You'd be striking a blow for justice. Seaton -- Mr. Flynn is innocent. He was wrongly accused." Tears welled, unbidden, along her lashes. "They're going to hang him!"

There was a certain cautious softening in Mr. Hayes's manner. His dog was at his side again, nuzzling the back of his knee. "I read about that in the newspaper," Hayes said with a frown, rubbing his bristly chin with a thumb and forefinger.

Desperation kept Caroline from remarking on the surprising fact that Mr. Hayes could read. "He didn't rob that stagecoach," she whispered frantically. "And I know he didn't gun down the driver. Mr. Flynn would never do a reprehensible thing like that."

Mr. Hayes looked both pitying and skeptical, and Caroline wanted to slap his face for it, but she restrained herself.

"What makes you so sure?" he asked.

Caroline huffed out a ragged, beleaguered sigh. "Because he *told* me he didn't!"

Hayes spread his hands wide. "Well, why didn't you say so?" he retorted sarcastically. "That changes everything!"

Caroline sniffled. The tip of her nose was probably turning red, but she didn't care. Practically everything that mattered to her was at stake. "If Mr. Flynn can just get out of jail, he can prove his innocence."

"Or hightail it for the ass-end of nowhere," Hayes agreed. "Flynn was convicted of robbery and murder, Miss Chalmers. He was sentenced to hang. And there isn't a damn thing I can do about it." He turned to walk away, and Caroline gripped the back of his sleeve.

"Wait," she pleaded. "Please."

He faced her again. "Breaking into Yankee jails during wartime was one thing, Miss Chalmers. But now the fighting is over, and I've got no intention of getting in the way of justice."

"Justice?" Caroline cried. "The territory's about to execute the wrong man! Do you call that justice?"

Hayes hooked one thumb under a suspender and regarded Caroline thoughtfully. "You really love this jaybird, don't you?"

"Yes," Caroline admitted, in a whispered wail. The dog at Mr. Hayes's feet seemed to echo the sound.

"Hell," cursed Mr. Hayes. "I do powerfully hate it when a lady cries."

Since her handkerchief was filthy, Caroline had to dry her eyes with the back of one hand. "Will you help me?"

"No," Mr. Hayes answered flatly. And then he walked away, the pitiful dog scrambling along at his heels.

Caroline took a few moments to recover her dignity, then followed him. That snoop Hypatia was standing out on the sidewalk in front of her Aunt Gertrude's shop now, her arms folded, watching with a smirk on her face.

"Hello, Caroline!" she called out in a sunny voice.

Caroline only glared at her and went back to the saloon window.

Guthrie Hayes was once again embroiled in his card game. As Caroline watched, a dance hall girl in a skimpy pink and black striped dress minced her way over the sawdust toward him, carrying an enameled bowl in one hand.

Reaching the table, she picked up a whiskey bottle and poured the amber-colored liquor into the bowl. She set the dish on the floor, showing her garters when she bent over. The dog drank the whiskey in shameless laps, then lay down at Mr. Hayes's feet again.

Caroline wasn't concerned with the dog's apparent lack of moral fortitude. It was the dance hall girl who irked her. While she watched, the shameless hussy sat down in Mr. Hayes's lap with a distinct wiggle and wrapped one arm around his neck.

For the moment, Seaton Flynn and his predicament were forgotten.

The harlot took Mr. Hayes's hat from his head and put it on her own, then bent to whisper something in his ear while he dealt the cards.

Caroline tapped insistently at the window, but Mr. Hayes's attention was all for the strumpet squirming and simpering in his lap.

A slow grin spread across his face as he listened to whatever the soiled dove was saying and then he nodded in response. In that moment, Caroline lost all concern for appearances and marched along the sidewalk to the swinging doors.

Without stopping to think -- if she had paused to consider the implications of her actions, she wouldn't have had the courage -- Caroline strode into the saloon, her prim black shoes kicking up little clouds of sawdust as she moved.

The bawdy tinkle of the piano ceased, as did the clinking of bottles against glass and the low hum of conversation.

Everyone turned to stare blearily at Caroline through a blue haze of smoke as she came to a halt beside Mr. Hayes's chair and folded her arms.

Tob whined and put one paw over his muzzle. Mr. Hayes looked up at her and grinned, and the dance hall girl, still wearing the hat, gazed at Caroline with a combination of challenge and contempt in her saucy, kohl-lined eyes.

The impetus that had swept Caroline into the saloon promptly deserted her, and she was at a total loss. After all, she couldn't very well argue her case in front of all these witnesses; the whole plan depended upon the utmost discretion.

"Mr. Hayes," she said awkwardly, operating on sheer bravado, "I demand that you speak with me. Privately."

He arched one eyebrow, his arm resting nonchalantly around the saloon girl's middle. Playfully, she put the hat back on his head. "Oh, you do, do you? What about?"

Caroline's face was flooded with color. "You know very well *what about*, Mr. Hayes. You are simply being difficult."

Much too gently for Caroline's tastes, he displaced the young woman on his lap and stood. "I believe I made myself clear when we talked before, Miss Chalmers," he said evenly, hooking his thumbs in his suspenders.

Caroline was terrified. If he repeated the request she'd made of him in front of these people, all would be lost. She might even end up in jail herself.

Almost suavely, he gestured toward the swinging doors, inviting her to leave.

Chin trembling, Caroline turned on her heel, picked up her skirts with one hand, and stormed out of the saloon and down the sidewalk.

She didn't stop to think about what she'd done until she reached the picket fence surrounding the brick schoolhouse three streets away. Pushing open the gate, Caroline stumbled blindly up the walk, one hand to her mouth, and let herself into the building.

All her students were gone for the day, since she'd dismissed classes before venturing to the saloon in search of Mr. Hayes, so she had the privacy to cry.

She sat down on one of the small desks, attached to each other by long runners of black iron, covered her face with both hands, and wept in earnest. She hadn't felt this bleak or hopeless since that long-ago day in Nebraska, when she'd been forced to leave Emma and Lily behind on the orphan train.

With Seaton Flynn, a handsome young lawyer who had appeared in town on the afternoon stagecoach one day two years before, she'd found the hope of a home and children of her own, a real family. He'd charmed her easily, with his dancing brown eyes and ready smile -- he had a grand sense of fashion and propriety, too, unlike Mr. Guthrie Hayes -- and he'd soon built a respectable practice. Although Caroline had caught glimpses of a cold, quicksilver temper in Seaton, she'd felt that his good qualities outweighed such a transitory flaw.

Then he'd been accused of robbing a stagecoach and actually shooting another person to death! Seaton had been whisked away to Laramie, tried, and convicted, but Caroline was convinced it was all a colossal mistake. She loved Seaton Flynn, and that wouldn't have been the case if he were a murderer and a thief. She would have known.

When the door creaked open behind her, interrupting her reflections, Caroline thought one of her students had returned for a forgotten book or slate. She sniffled once, lifted her chin, and scraped up a smile to put on. But when she turned to look, she saw Guthrie Hayes standing at the back of the schoolroom.

Instantly, the room was too warm. Caroline bolted off the desk top and went to take a long pole from its hook on the wall. Her heart pounding at a rate all out of proportion to the activity, she went from one high window to another, opening them from the top.

Soon, there was nothing to do but face Mr. Hayes again. "What do you want?" she asked.

He was still standing in the framework of the inner door, next to the entrance to the cloakroom, one powerful shoulder resting against the jamb. "You've been crying over Flynn," he said seriously. "Has it ever occurred to you that he might not be worth your tears?"

Caroline thought of picnics and long Sunday afternoon walks with Seaton Flynn, of shared kisses in the moonlight and her many bright dreams. Caroline's heart had gone tumbling into infinity the first moment she saw him, when they'd collided at the base of the outside stairway leading up to his office over the feed and grain.

"You don't know Mr. Flynn," she said, as reasonably as she could, putting the window pole back in its place. "And may I say I think it's abominably cruel of you to come here and torment me further."

The barb didn't appear to catch Mr. Hayes in a tender place. He shrugged. "Evidently, the judge and jury

didn't know him either. They convicted him of murder, among other things."

Caroline was tired, discouraged, and exasperated. "Why did you come here?" she demanded.

He pushed off his hat and thoughtfully scratched his head. "I'm not sure," he replied, "considering that I had better things to do."

Recalling the trollop who'd practically draped herself across Mr. Hayes's muscular thighs, Caroline was stung. She gathered the first-grade arithmetic primers into a stack and slammed them down onto her desk top. "That isn't a satisfactory answer, Mr. Hayes."

Again he indulged in that obnoxious, off center grin. "I seem to be flunking this conversation, Teacher."

For some reason Caroline couldn't begin to divine, he was toying with her. She swept him up in one contemptuous glance. "You seem to be flunking this *lifetime*," she replied.

He laughed and slapped one hand to his chest as though she'd sunk a knife into him. Then he hoisted himself away from the door jamb and ambled toward her, until he was standing very close.

"Maybe you shouldn't insult me quite so freely," he said, in a low voice that caused a warm, quaking sensation somewhere deep down in Caroline's person. "From what you've told me, I'm the only hope you've got of springing your gentleman friend from the hoosegow."

She took a step backwards and raised one hand to fidget with the loose tendrils of dark hair at the back of her neck.

Mr. Hayes's single eye slipped to her breasts at the motion, then came moseying back to her face. Again, one corner of his mouth tilted in a quirky grin. Caroline felt dizzy and took refuge in her official chair.

"Are you going to help me or not?" she asked breathlessly, looking up at Guthrie Hayes as he bent over her, his hands braced on the gouged oak surface of the desk.

"I haven't decided yet," he answered. "This isn't the kind of thing a man enters into lightly, Miss Chalmers. There are a lot of variables to consider."

It struck Caroline then that Mr. Hayes was better educated than his clothes and general personal appearance would indicate. "But you're not saying no?"

He shook his head, and the expression in the eye Caroline could see revealed bafflement. "No. Why the hell I'm not is anybody's guess, because this whole idea of yours is just plain crazy. One or both of us could end up in jail, right alongside your beau."

To her own surprise as much as his, Caroline smiled, and he drew back slightly, looking mildly alarmed and more confused than ever.

"Thank you," she said.

Mr. Hayes muttered a curse word, wrenched his hat off, then put it on again. After that, he waggled an index finger at Caroline. "I haven't made my final decision yet, Teacher, and don't you forget that."

"I won't," Caroline replied, unable to keep the little trill of joyous triumph out of her voice.

Mr. Hayes swore again, turned on one heel, and strode back along the aisle between the desks to the inner door. He was muttering to himself as he went out.

For the first time since Seaton's arrest, Caroline's heart was light. She closed all the windows, washed down the blackboard, swept the floor, and left, her lesson book clutched to her chest.

Miss Ethel, gray-haired now but as delicately spry as ever, was in the front yard when she arrived home, examining her cherished rose bushes for buds. She beamed when Caroline swept through the gate, humming happily.

"You've finally gotten over that wretched Mr. Flynn!" the older woman said, looking delighted.

"On the contrary," Caroline replied, in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'll soon prove to the entire world that Seaton isn't guilty."

Miss Ethel's wrinkled face fell. "But he is, dear," she said. "Don't you remember? One of the stagecoach passengers identified him."

Caroline continued up the walk toward the front steps, though her gait wasn't so springy now and her spirits were drooping just a little. "It was a mistake," she insisted. "The real robber is someone who resembles Seaton, that's all." She didn't look back, because she knew if she did, she'd see Miss Ethel shaking her head.

In the front parlor, Miss Phoebe was perched on the settee, sipping tea and gossiping with a neighbor. She inclined her head and wagged her fingers slightly as Caroline passed by in the hallway.

Miss Phoebe had planned to marry a Mr. Gunderson immediately after she and Caroline and Miss Ethel arrived in Bolton thirteen years ago, but a Shoshone brave had shot the prospective bridegroom dead before she'd even finished unpacking. Despite hordes of eager suitors -- like all the western territories, Wyoming suffered a drastic shortage of marriageable women -- neither Miss Phoebe nor Miss Ethel had ever expressed interest in matrimony again.

Reaching the spacious kitchen, Caroline hung her sensible navy blue cloak from a peg beside the back door and snatched a piece of fresh bread from the box on the counter. The scent of a mutton roast simmering in the oven made her stomach grumble.

She buttered the bread and went to the stove for the teakettle. Soon, she was seated in one of the sturdy oak chairs, her lesson book open on the red-and-white checked oilcloth covering the table, her feet up on another chair. While she ate and drank her tea, she was planning assignments for the next day's classes.

Presently, Miss Phoebe came in to open the door of the oven and peek at the aromatic mutton. There were carrots, potatoes, and onions stewing in the pot along with the meat.

"Is Mrs. Cribben gone?" Caroline asked. That lady was the head of the Bolton Community Literary Club and the author of reams of truly wretched poetry, and in Caroline's opinion she was a terrible bore.

"Yes," Miss Phoebe replied, with exasperated goodwill. Her hair had turned gray, like her sister's, but she was still an attractive woman. "It wouldn't have hurt you to stop and greet her, you know. She was

instrumental in persuading the mayor to levy a special saloon tax so that we could buy new textbooks last spring."

Caroline sighed and nodded. She was a dedicated teacher, and the concerns of the school were her concerns, but her mind had fastened onto Mr. Guthrie Hayes and she couldn't seem to pry it loose. What had that saloon woman whispered in his ear, to make him grin like that? Had the two of them gone upstairs together to do scandalous things?

Caroline clenched her fist.

What was Guthrie Hayes doing in Bolton, anyway?

"Caroline," Miss Phoebe scolded.

Caroline jumped. "I'm sorry," she said, flushing. "You were saying -- ?"

"I was saying that Mrs. Cribben told me that Hypatia Furvis told *her* that you walked right into the He -- that awful saloon" She paused to shudder. "In the broad light of day!"

Caroline swallowed and stared at her kindly guardian, heat climbing her neck to pulse in her cheeks. She saw no anger in the fragile, well-bred face, but Miss Phoebe did look disconcerted. "There was a gentleman there I needed to see," she explained lamely.

"Why?" Miss Phoebe wanted to know.

Only with the severest difficulty did Caroline lie to the woman who had been a mother to her. "H-he's the father of one of my students," she said, looking down at her lap and smoothing her crumpled sateen skirt with nervous fingers. "Calvin has been missing school, and I wanted to know why."

"Couldn't you have gone to the family home and inquired?" Miss Phoebe pressed.

Caroline forced herself to meet the other woman's gaze. A lie was a lie, but this was an extenuating circumstance. After all, Seaton's life hung in the balance. "Calvin told me his mother was very ill," she prevaricated, her eyes wanting to dodge away from Miss Phoebe's. "I didn't wish to disturb the poor woman."

Miss Phoebe sighed. "I don't think I need to remind you, Caroline, that a teacher cannot afford so much as a speck on her reputation. If word of what you did gets back to the school board -- and it most certainly will -- you could lose your job."

Caroline imagined herself as Seaton's wife, returning to Bolton in triumph. Cleared of all charges by his own efforts, Mr. Flynn would reopen his law office and Caroline would be busy sewing curtains and having babies. Her job wouldn't be a concern anymore.

"I'll be more careful," she promised, not daring to tell Miss Phoebe that Guthrie Hayes had virtually agreed to break Seaton out of jail.

Miss Phoebe reached out and patted her hand. "See that you are, dear." She sighed as she rose from her chair and went to the sideboard for supper china. "I do hope you've put that lawyer fellow out of your mind," she said. "Heaven knows, there are plenty of other young men in Bolton who would be thrilled to marry you."

Caroline hid a smile as she got up from the table. After closing her lesson book and setting it aside, she tossed away her bread crusts and began taking silverware from one of the wavy wooden drawers in the sideboard. In its round mirror, she saw that her color was high and her brown eyes were twinkling. "Don't worry, Miss Phoebe," she said cheerfully. "I'll be married before you know it."

Just then, Miss Ethel came through the dining room doorway, carrying her straw gardening hat in one hand. "Who's getting married?" she inquired eagerly.

Caroline laughed as she set silverware alongside the plates Miss Phoebe had already laid out. "I am," she said.

"Caroline is teasing, Ethel," Phoebe put in gently.

Miss Ethel looked downright disappointed, but she brightened after only a moment. "There was a letter for you today, Caroline," she announced, patting first one skirt pocket and then the other. "Here it is."

Caroline rarely received letters and, when she did, her heart always did a cartwheel. She'd never given up the hope, even after all these years, that she'd hear from Lily or Emma.

But the envelope bore a return address in Laramie, and Caroline instantly recognized Seaton's elaborate handwriting. Of course it followed, because Mr. Flynn was being held in that town, and had been since his trial.

Her fingers shook a little as she opened the letter, and there was a feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach.

It wasn't at all the reaction she would have expected.

Dear Caroline, he had written, It's lonely in this place, and I miss you with all my heart...somehow, we must find a way to secure my release...I swear to you, by all that's holy, I didn't kill that man...we'll go away together, start a new life...

Caroline refolded the letter carefully and tucked it back into its envelope. In her mind, she stood before Seaton, looking up into his sincere dark eyes, touching his rich ebony-colored hair, being held against his tall, lithe frame. And for the very first time since the whole nightmare had begun, she felt a whisper of doubt brush against her spirit. Could Seaton be lying?

"Excuse me," she said to Miss Phoebe and Miss Ethel, who were watching her with worried puzzlement. And then she hurried up the rear stairs and along the narrow hallway to her room.

Safely behind her own door, she laid one hand to her heart and breathed deeply until the dreadful suspicion began to pass. Seaton Flynn was innocent of any crime, no matter what the judge, the jury, and Guthrie Hayes happened to think. He was just as much a victim as that poor stagecoach driver.

Wasn't he?

Resolutely, Caroline went to her bureau and picked up the framed sketch she'd done herself, from memory, of Lily and Emma. One by one, she touched their faces, aching to know where they were and whether they were safe and happy.

"He didn't do it," she told her lost sisters, and their large eyes regarded her solemnly from behind the glass.

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Users Review

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