

HIDDEN RICHES

13



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Hidden Riches

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**“The past is never Dead.
It’s not even past.”**

William Faulkner

**“Birthdays are a pain. When you decide
who you are going to invite, you’ve automatically
not invited the rest of the world.”**

Marion Quidley

**“We now have this light shining in our
hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile
clay jars containing this great treasure.”**

2 Corinthians 4:7

**“Those who fail to remember the
past don’t get good grades in history.”**

Chuck Burly



PART 1

THE FIND



CHAPTER 1

☺ Bryce ☺

Sometimes big treasures are found in unlikely places. That's what happened to Ashley and me on a Sunday afternoon in November. She's my twin, born 57 seconds before me (which she always reminds me), and our birthday was less than two weeks away.

Sam, our stepdad, took us to our favorite thrift store in Colorado Springs while Mom worked on her latest book. She's an author and writes under the name Virginia Caldwell. Mom's eyes lit up when Sam offered to take our little brother, Dylan, too. Our older step-sister, Leigh, was out with her boyfriend, Randy, and that meant the house was going to be nice and quiet.

After we moved to Colorado from Chicago, Mom married Sam. Our real dad was killed in a plane crash caused by terrorists, and every birthday or holiday I think about what it would be like to get a present from him.

Dylan grabbed Sam's hand and dragged him into the store. If you've never been to a thrift store, you don't know what you're missing. Ashley likes clothes. She's found designer jeans in perfect shape for \$4. I've found good hockey sticks and baseball gloves in great condition.

The store is laid out with racks of clothes in the middle and different sections running around the walls. Furniture is in the back, sports equipment is along the right wall, and the toy section is to the left.

You can figure out where Dylan and Sam went.

I had \$10 saved up for Ashley's birthday present, and I slipped to a jewelry display. There were earrings, necklaces, and rings, but they all looked the same. I can't figure out why women like jewelry so much.

I was afraid Ashley was catching on, so I moseyed back to the sports section and found a \$7 first-baseman's mitt.

Hmm. I had seen an earring-and-necklace set that was \$3.50, and I distinctly remembered some change in the cup holder in Sam's truck.

That's when Ashley gasped. She has a distinct gasp—a cross between a rabbit just about to be picked up by a hawk and a bear discovering honey ham.

“Bryce, you've gotta see this!”



CHAPTER 2

❧ Ashley ❧

Some of my friends hate the thought of used clothes. If they only knew how many of my outfits came from these racks.

I thumbed through Christmas sweaters—snowflakes and Santas and reindeer—until I glanced at the back wall. Several pictures hung at eye level. Some had expensive golden frames. A velvet Elvis and several Ansel Adams black-and-white prints were propped against the wall.

But one painting took my breath away. I couldn't stop staring. I moved like a zombie toward it and called for Bryce.

A couple was standing near the picture, talking and pointing as I approached.

“That would go nice over the fireplace, don’t you think?” the woman said. “It’s so peaceful.”

The man shook his head. “I want to put my dad’s saber there. Maybe at the top of the hallway landing?”

The couple didn’t notice me, even though I was standing right behind them. I stared over their shoulders.

The painting showed sheep grazing in a pasture near a stream so realistic you could almost hear water trickling over the rocks. Just the mountains rising behind the flock would have made the painting worth the \$17.50 price. But it wasn’t the sheep or the mountains or the stream or even the way the sky was painted that interested me.

“What is it?” Bryce said, making his way through the clothes.

The couple turned briefly and looked at us like we were ants at a picnic.

“Look at that,” I said.

“Yeah, nice painting, but—” Bryce stopped, noticing what I had seen. “Whoa. That’s incredible.”

“Wouldn’t Mom love it?” I said.

Bryce moved closer, studying the shepherd.

“We can find the right place when we get home,” the woman said. “Let’s get it.”

The man turned. “Were you two interested in this?”

I nodded.

Bryce stepped forward. “The shepherd looks like someone we know.”

I studied it again. The shepherd leaned against his staff and stared at the flock. You could see only the side of his face, but the resemblance was uncanny.

“He looks just like our dad,” Bryce said.



CHAPTER 3

☺ Bryce ☺

"Your father?" the woman said. She was actually looking at us like we were humans instead of stains on a carpet. "Is he with you?"

"He passed away," Ashley said.

There was a long pause. Then the man held the picture up and winced. "Hon, looks like there's a scratch on the frame. I don't want a damaged picture, do you?"

She shook her head. "Better put it back."

The man handed me the picture. The wooden frame was huge, and it was a lot heavier than it looked. "We have to buy this," I said.

Ashley and I put our money together, which meant I had to give up on the first-baseman's mitt.

Then Sam walked toward us and looked at the picture. “Where you going to put that?”

“In Mom’s office?” I said.

Dylan tugged on Sam with one hand and held a toy drum in the other. It looked like a toy Mom would put on a high shelf in his room. “Can we go now?”

Sam squeezed Dylan’s hand and studied the painting. Clearly he didn’t understand.

“It looks a lot like our dad—I mean, our first dad,” Ashley said.

“Yeah, now I can see it,” Sam said. “Your mother will love it.”

I held the picture in front of me in the truck. When we went around a corner, it tipped and my knee went through the paper on the back.

When we got home, Ashley got some Goop from the laundry room, and we cleaned the frame. I tried to tape the hole in the back, but as I pressed, it ripped more. Ashley tried, but the hole got bigger. That’s when I noticed something inside the frame. A piece of brown paper.

We tore some of the backing and used a screwdriver to pry a staple from the paper. It kind of looked like the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, but when we opened it, we found a map.

“Bryce, this looks like a treasure map.”



CHAPTER 4

✧ Ashley ✧

Everybody's heard stories about treasure maps. I took a deep breath as Bryce and I looked at markings and an *X* near a large tree. Behind the tree was a mountain with *D.P.* written on it.

"That has to be Devil's Paw," Bryce said.

Devil's Paw is a rock formation north of Red Rock. "But there's no way to tell how far away from the mountain it is," I said.

As Bryce studied the map, I tried to repair the rip. Something else caught my eye inside the painting. A blue zippered envelope sat at the bottom, fastened by staples. Bryce's jaw dropped when I ripped the paper all the way down. Then he saw the envelope, which was

actually more of a pouch. He picked it up, and my heart thumped like Dylan's toy drum.

"I wonder how long that thing's been in there," I said.

"There's no date on the painting, but it sure looks old." Bryce unzipped the pouch.