

Where There's a Will

Chapter One

"Derek, pass me that big flashlight, will you? You hold the smaller one." Grammie hands out instructions to my cousin and then asks me, "Can you see what you're doing in there?"

"Yeah, I can see okay, but hold the light still, please. When the beams are shooting around like that they bounce off my glasses."

When we woke up and it was so cloudy and dark, we should've decided against doing this right now. Should've waited until it cleared up and got brighter outside. I mean, it would be dark enough in this closet in Katherine's room on the sunniest day with the curtains wide open. But today with the drizzle and sleet and that hard, sharp wind coming across the strait, it's a little like trying to see through chocolate pudding.

Mom's downstairs snooping around. I could tell she was feeling edgy this morning about us all heading over to the O'Leary house to see if what Katherine told me in her letter is true. I heard her up last night moving down the stairs into the kitchen. Then the telltale hum of the microwave. When mom can't sleep she always heats up a mug of milk for herself. Not skim. Never skim. Whole milk. Says it makes her sleep like a baby.

When we came in here she told us, "If it's all the same to you guys, I'll leave the treasure hunting to you. Just holler down if you need me though. I'll just be wandering around."

I think it is true. I don't know why else she'd tell me about the gold coins under the floor of the cupboard. Katherine never lied to me about anything – never hid the truth. I guess Mom's got more riding on the existence of Thomas O'Leary's hidden fortune than I do. It would change her life, give her a new start. When you're a kid, everything's a new start.

"Here, Charly, take this." Derek's hand comes through the gloom holding a short, heavy pry bar, the one we'd put in the back of Mom's car along with our other gear way too early this morning. I take it from him and search the painted boards for a space wide enough to shove the narrow forked end of the bar into. That would give me a grip, a place to begin.

"What're you waiting for?" Patience isn't one of Derek's virtues. I choose to ignore his question and right then I notice a shadowed spot between two of the floorboards. From here it looks like that might be my starting place. I move the pry bar over that spot where the boards don't quite meet and bring it down.

"It fits!" I exclaim and lean into the bar with my weight. Something slips and all of a sudden I'm on the floor with a throbbing head. As I'd toppled over my head smashed into the heavy-duty flashlight that Grammie's holding close to where I'm working.

"Ouch! Are you all right, child?"

I sit up and look into the blinding beam of Grammie's huge flashlight. I feel like I'm in an interrogation room somewhere. *We have ways of making you talk . . .*

I give my head a little shake to see if it stays connected to my neck. It does. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"Course she's okay – she's used to being clumsy," Derek helpfully chimes in. Grammie leaps to my defense by asking him, "Would you rather be the one crawling around in that dark, dusty space or the one holding a light? Because I'm pretty sure that your cousin would agree to a switch at this time."

To my surprise and I think to Grammie's too, Derek says, "I'll give it a try." He turns to me sitting there in the cupboard, "If you don't mind, that is."

My cousin. He doesn't really want to fight. He just wants to annoy. I shrug and hop down out of that cupboard. Derek hands me his flashlight and as he steps up into the closet on his long legs I wonder for a moment if he's too tall to pull this off. Since we moved here four months or so ago, I'm sure he's grown about 6 cm taller. But he sits down cross-legged, those bony knees jutting up, in the far left corner of the closet where I'd been and grasps that pry bar. He looks serious and now I'm filled with hope. I think he can do it.

I direct my flashlight beam toward the space between the boards that I'd found and ask Derek, "Can you see where I tried to pry the boards loose?"

"Yup, I see it here. Let's see what a real man can do."

"Sure," I reply, "But until that guy shows up, why don't you give it a whirl?"

"All right, kids," Grammie interjects. "That's enough. Let's work together, shall we?" She knows we're only joking with each other but Grammie doesn't like our mean humour. She likes us both and I guess she wants us to like each other. Maybe she doesn't know that we do.

One thing I bet Grammie doesn't know about me is that I'm only sarcastic when I'm comfortable with someone and not frozen solid in a thick block of shyness. She doesn't see this because she only sees me at home where I'm most at ease and mostly myself – whoever that is. I'd never be this lippy at school. Not yet, anyway, but there are a couple of girls in my class who are pretty friendly and funny, too. They've invited me into their Social Studies group to work on a couple of projects and in gym, if either one of them is captain for volleyball or basketball they pick me to be on their team. So maybe someday I'll be sarcastic with them. That would be great, the best thing that could happen in my school career at this point.

For now, though, I go treasure hunting with my family in abandoned houses to fill my spare time. I can't complain. More people have less exciting lives than me. That's what Katherine did for me. My friend, Katherine.

A loud craaacckk! brings me back to the task at hand. My eyes follow my flashlight's beam to the end of the short pry bar and there I see a splintered board sticking up at a ninety degree angle. "Good start!" I yell.

"Good for you, Derek!" Grammie congratulates him. "Can you see anything yet?"

“No,” he gives the bar another quick tug and pulls it free. “Not yet. Let me get another board or two out. They’re pretty narrow. Grammie, bring that big flashlight a little closer. Thanks.” Derek jams the pry bar between the next two boards and with a screech, they separate.

“After you get one out, seems like it gets easier,” Grammie comments and Derek responds, “Seems to. Still can’t see much yet. Maybe one or two more boards and we’ll find Mr. O’Leary’s gold.”

“Should I call Mom?” Now I’m getting excited. Suddenly this all seems real, not like a dream anymore. My heart starts to pound and before either Derek or Grammie can respond I run out into the gloomy hall and call, “Mom! I think we’re getting close! Wanna come up?”

“Coming!” I hear her footsteps speed up and echo across the linoleum floor in the kitchen and then disappear as she steps onto the carpet leading to the stairs. I wait with my head poking out the door until I see her appear at the top of the stairs in her heavy woolen sweater, her arms crossed tightly. She looks cute in her ski toque. Almost like a teenager. She notices the flashlight I’m clutching and says, “I thought you were in charge of pulling up floorboards?”

I laugh a little. “I got it started for Derek then he took over. He’s making good progress. Come take a look.” Mom follows me into the master bedroom, the one that Katherine and Thomas O’Leary shared during their marriage, when they were both still alive. From the doorway, we can’t see Derek in the closet. Grammie’s practically in there too hanging over him with that heavy duty lamp. We can’t see very well but we can hear really well.

“Do you see it, Derek?” Grammie presses. There’s a tinge of desperation colouring her tone.

“No, I ... I don’t think there’s anything here.” Derek’s words come out of his mouth in white bursts lit up by the lamp beam. My heart skips a beat. I hope he’s wrong.

Mom and I step up on either side of Grammie. She takes a step back making room for us and giving me space to aim my flashlight in Derek’s direction.

“Hand me your flashlight, Grammie.” Derek reaches his arm back from where he’s leaning over the hole he’s made in the floorboards. He holds his palm open wide and Grammie places the thick plastic handle in it.

“Thanks.” My cousin gets on his knees and, bracing with one hand on the floor he points the flashlight into the splinter-edged hole.

“How ‘bout now?” I ask.

“Anything yet?” Grammie adds.

“I knew it was too good to be true,” Mom sighs and walks away from the cupboard door. I know she’s heading back out to the car.

Derek doesn’t answer any of us. Instead, he sets the lamp down, takes off his mitt, and reaches into the space he’s cleared in the floor. In the glow of my light Grammie and I can see that Derek’s arm is under the floor right up to his shoulder. He’s feeling around for anything his eyes might’ve missed. After what seems like a long time, he tells us, “There’s nothing. Just what feels like another floor.”

I click off my flashlight. My finger can’t feel the switch and my feet can’t feel the floor. I’m numb. A combination of the cold and the disappointment. Cold disappointment. Grammie puts her arm around my shoulders and gives me a tight, quick squeeze. She guides me away from the closet so that Derek can hop out, his boots thudding heavily on the floor.

“Let’s go home, kids. There’s nothing more we can do.” Reluctantly, we agree.