



when DISASTER strikes
and SECRETS are revealed
it's up to Jack and Bryce to
UNITE THEIR FAMILY

TREASURE AT LURE LAKE

a novel

shari l. schwarz

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The promise of a treasure hunt led me into the darkness of Grandpa's barn. Out of the hot Colorado sun and away from my big brother, Jack, I could cool down and finally have some fun. I was tired of him making me play football. Being target practice for him wasn't my idea of a good time.

I trudged up the spiral staircase to the hayloft, mad at Jack for being the meanest brother in the entire universe.

At the top of the stairs, I opened boxes in Grandpa's storage area that I'd already gone through. I slid them out of my way, trying to avoid mouse poop and dead flies lying around. I slowly worked my way farther into the loft, digging through one box at a time.

Maybe I'd find something new, like last summer when I discovered Grandpa's old compound bow and arrows. He spent the rest of our vacation together teaching me how to shoot. It gave me something to do since Jack basically locked himself in the guest room for most of the week when I refused to play football with him.

Now, he was actually threatening to boycott our backpacking trip. If he didn't go, it would mess up the whole plan. It didn't even seem like we

were brothers, and definitely not friends.

Mostly, I hoped to find Grandpa's rock climbing shoes and harness. I sure could use them on our backpacking trip next week. Dad used to take us climbing at the gym, back home in Atlanta. I couldn't wait to climb in the Rocky Mountains.

In a dusty box filled with yellow *National Geographic* magazines, I found a wooden slingshot. I shoved it into my back pocket to try out for later. I sneezed in the rising dust cloud and pulled out a pair of old aviator sunglasses. As I put them on my head, I noticed beads of sweat prickling my brow.

I needed a breeze or I wasn't going to last long, so I weaved my way through boxes and crates to open the window behind Grandma's antique sewing machine. On my way to the window, I tripped over a green plastic bin I'd never seen before.

Kneeling to open the bin, I flipped through a bunch of file folders filled with boring papers. I was about to close it up when I got to the last folder. But a thin wooden box stuck up out of the back. Weird that a box would be in a file folder.

I pulled it out and unlatched its golden clasp with a click. Inside lay a pile of family photographs I'd never seen before. In the first one, Mom's hair was all curly and bleached blonde. I laughed at how different she looked. I couldn't believe she had overalls on. I was used to seeing her dressed up for work at the bank, her perfectly straight brown hair usually rolled into a bun.

Next to her in the picture, Dad's wavy brown hair stuck up in all directions like he'd just woken up. He had on an ugly, rust-colored, plaid jacket. I had seen it in the back of his closet at home when I was looking for a costume to wear for Halloween last year. I didn't realize he used to wear it for real.

But it wasn't only their clothes and hair and age that made them look different in the pictures. They actually looked happy.

Dad had his arms wrapped around Mom as she cradled two babies. There weren't any names on the back, so I guessed they were Jack and our cousin, Alex, who was about the same age.

In another picture, Mom and Dad sat on a tree branch gazing into each other's eyes like they were in love. I'd never seen them get that close

before. It made me wonder what could have happened to make them so unhappy. These days they were so serious, working all the time. If they were home, they rarely talked to each other, like being together was too painful for them. Sometimes I was afraid they were going to get a divorce.

Over the last few months, I'd tried being extra good at home to help them get along better. I'd thought maybe it was working, but seeing the pictures made me realize I was wrong.

Underneath the pictures was a yellowed piece of paper. As I unfolded it, my heart picked up speed with blazing excitement. I couldn't believe what I saw: a map of a house next to a river with a trail leading to a lake. Beside the lake was a tree, and beside the tree was an X.



My heart flashed. A treasure map? What could Grandpa be hiding?
And why would he be hiding it from me?

The metal staircase creaked and groaned under someone's weight, startling me from my thoughts.

“Bryce, you up there?” Grandpa yelled.

I jumped up, stuffing everything into my back pocket without thinking. I put the box back into the bin. Even though Grandpa told me to go ahead and snoop around anytime I wanted, I felt like I’d done something wrong, finding that box. Like it had been hidden away for a reason, not to be found, especially by me.

“Yeah,” I shouted, stepping over an old-fashioned typewriter. “Coming!”

Grandpa appeared just as my toes reached the edge of the stairs. I held my breath to slow my pounding heartbeat, hoping he wouldn’t notice my panic.

“How’s it going?” Grandpa asked, peering at me from under the brim of his Rockies baseball cap.

“Uh ... good. Just looking around.” I tried to sound casual and stop my feet from shuffling.

“Hungry?” he asked, going back downstairs.

“Starving. What’re we having?” I followed him to the farmhouse and gulped at the lump of guilt stuck in my throat.

“Tacos sound good?” he asked.

“Yeah. Sure.”

Grandpa plucked the sunglasses off my head and laughed. “Did you find anything fun up there besides these?”

“Not really,” I lied. “Just this.” I pulled the slingshot out of my pocket and showed it to him on our way to the back porch. The lie just popped out of my mouth. I didn’t know what I was so afraid of.

I’d never lied to Grandpa before.

I’d never stolen from him either.

“Oh, wow,” said Grandpa, his brown eyes twinkling as he looked at the slingshot. “That brings back memories. You can have it if you want.”

“Okay, sure.” I figured if Grandpa gave me his slingshot so easily, he probably wouldn’t care about me having the map and the pictures for a while either. “I’ll go wash my hands.” I needed to figure out what to do. Maybe I could put them back after lunch. But I had to know what was up with the map.

After washing my hands, I ran upstairs with the pictures and map tucked under the front of my shirt. Over my shoulder, I yelled to

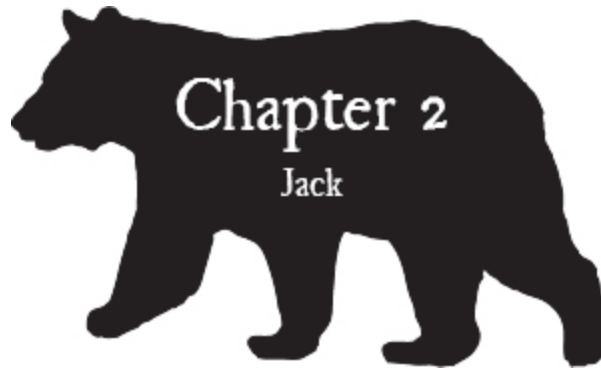
Grandpa, "I'll be back down in a second."

In the bedroom, Jack was lying on his bed with his headphones on. I waved and waited for him to slide one off.

"Time for lunch," I announced, and in case Jack didn't believe me, I added, "Grandpa said so."

He rolled off the bed with a grunt and turned off his phone. I pretended to look for something in my backpack until he left so that I could hide the map and photos. I stashed them deep in the main pocket and raced back to the kitchen.

As I helped Grandpa carry plates into the dining room, I realized I wasn't very hungry anymore. I'd never kept anything from Grandpa before. He was probably my best friend in the whole world. But now that I'd betrayed him, I felt like the worst grandson he could ever have.



Of course Dad canceled on us. I don't know why I let it bug me so much, but it did. He said we'd have the best time: camping, hunting, fishing, climbing, hiking, four-wheeling.

And now?

Nothing.

Plus, Bryce made me even angrier trying to make excuses for Dad. Sure, I knew Dad's work was important. But now I was stuck going on the backpacking trip to play babysitter for Bryce.

Last night when Dad called, he made it very clear. "Yes, you still have to go, Jack. Help your grandpa with chores at the cabin. Keep an eye on Bryce. You know, stuff like that."

I should have known better than to get my hopes up that Dad would have actually shown up. When I asked him if I could talk to Mom, I heard them argue in the background. I pulled the phone away from my ear. I couldn't handle that.

Mom answered, and I begged her, "Please, don't make me go. I didn't even want to go in the first place. Why can't Grandpa just take Bryce? They don't need me."

"You have to go, Jack. Keep an eye on Bryce. Make sure he's safe ... okay?"

Mom was always worried about Bryce. I could picture her nervously sliding her silver locket back and forth on its chain.

I sighed. Trying one last time to persuade her, I argued, "Grandpa will take care of him. They'll be fine."

"No, Jack, there are too many bad things that could happen out there. Three people are safer than two. I could never forgive myself if something happened to your little brother."

What about me, Mom? I thought. *What if something bad happens to me?* She was always protecting Bryce. Always babying him like he was made of gold and I was a cursed stepchild. I might think I was adopted if I didn't look exactly like my dad, with his wavy brown hair, bright blue eyes, and dimples. And Bryce had Mom's blue-gray eyes, Dad's brown hair, and one dimple on his right cheek.

"I'm sorry it's not going as planned," Mom continued. "Dad has some ... well, things he needs to do, and maybe a last-minute business trip. Please try to make the best of it, sweetheart."

It was final. That was it. Dad never budged when he made a decision, unless it had to do with himself. He could get out of the backpacking trip, but there was no way I could.

After the phone call, Grandpa had knocked on the guest room door.

"Come in," I mumbled.

"Hey," he said and sat on the edge of my bed.

"Hey." I slid my headphones down around my neck.

"So ... about your dad." He crossed his arms over his chest.

I shrugged, trying to blow it off like it wasn't a big deal.

"It's not your fault, you know."

I narrowed my eyes, wondering what Grandpa meant.

"Most likely, it's mine," he continued, rubbing his face with a weathered hand.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

He hesitated, shrugged, and shook his head slightly. "Look. It's hard for him to come back here. Sometimes there are things, hard things, that keep people away. Since Grandma passed on, he's only been back here once. The last time we all hiked to the cabin. Remember?"

"Oh." I blinked, remembering back. That was a long time ago. I knew Dad and Grandpa didn't talk much. But I never thought about why Dad

didn't visit his own father. Dad let us fly to Grandpa's every summer, so I assumed he at least trusted Grandpa. Or maybe he just wanted to get rid of us for a couple of weeks.

"So, we'll have a good time, right?" he asked, breaking in on my thoughts. "We'll still do everything we planned on. Sound good?"

I shrugged. I didn't have any other choice.

"And I'm counting on you to help me fix a few things at the cabin." He grinned as if that was supposed to make me feel better.

"Right, okay." I tried to smile back.

Grandpa hugged me from the side and left the room.

I checked my phone. Sophie had texted three times saying how excited she was that I got to go backpacking in the mountains. I started to answer her, but I couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound lame, so I hit the delete key. I'd answer her later.

I plugged my headphones in, closed my eyes, and tried to fall asleep. But my anger, or maybe it was hurt, kept me tossing and turning all night long.

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