

# Paper Treasure

A Charlie Bradford Mystery

Anne Stephenson

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# Chapter One

## *Ransack!*

Charlie Bradford stared out the car window at the passing cornfields. It had been a cold, wet spring and the stalks were barely knee-high. He couldn't remember what the countryside had looked like the last time they'd driven by. They'd been on their way back from his grandfather's funeral and nothing else had mattered.

"The house is going to seem so empty without him," sighed Laura Bradford as her husband slowed for the Colville turnoff. "I still can't believe he's gone."

"Your father was quite a character..." said Robert Bradford as he guided the car around the exit ramp and merged with the traffic on Highway 490.

"Remember the time he wore a gas mask to the burger joint because he thought the food stunk?"

Laura laughed. "If we'd done that, the boys would have been totally embarrassed."

There was a snort from the back seat.

"Humiliated is more like it."

At thirteen, Charlie was all legs and hormones. His sandy brown hair hung over one eye, giving him a slightly rakish look, which he took great pains to

cultivate every morning.

“Wouldn’t it be neat if Grampa’s ghost came back every night and walked around the house in the dark!”

“Joey!”

“Well it would!” declared the youngest Bradford from his corner of the back seat. “I saw this movie at Billy’s...”

Charlie shook his head and mentally chalked up another reason why he was going to miss his grandfather. He’d been great at *Keeping Joey Amused*.

And now he was gone.

Malcolm Rossitor had died of a heart attack one night, sitting at his desk in his upstairs study. His next door neighbour had found him when she’d gone over to surprise him with a piece of lemon meringue pie. He’d looked peaceful, she’d said, but that didn’t change anything. His grandfather was still dead.

And they were going back to Colville for the summer to pack up Malcolm Rossitor’s belongings and sell the house.

It’s like selling memories, thought Charlie as they drove into town.

Even though Colville was only an hour from Toronto, it had kept its small-town flavour. No big shopping malls or car parks threatened the family-owned shops and angled parking along the town’s main street. Rennie’s Hardware still sold nails by the pound, and the menu at Ruby’s Bar and Grill hadn’t changed in twenty years. Neither had Ruby.

Mr. Bradford stopped for a red light. He took off

his ball cap and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. It was hot. The kind of day when the hydro wires hummed in tune with the heat.

“Can we get some ice cream?” asked Joey. He stared longingly at the cool interior of Zimmer’s Ice Cream Parlour.

“Maybe later, Sport. I think your mother wants to go right to Grampa’s.”

“You can’t call it that anymore,” said Joey. “It’s not Grampa’s. It’s Mom’s. It says so in the will.”

“Geez, Joey. Don’t you ever shut up?” Charlie whapped his brother on the thigh.

“Leave him alone, Charlie.” His mother reached into the back seat and patted him on the knee. “You were the same when you were his age.”

“I doubt it,” muttered Charlie.

“Enough,” said his father.

The light turned green and the car eased ahead past the wide expanse of park that stretched beyond the bandstand and the playground, and down to the public beach.

“Laura?”

“Mmmm?” she withdrew her arm and turned to her husband.

“Did you want to stop and pick up supplies? Milk, bread?”

“No. I’ll go out later.” She adjusted the clip holding her wavy auburn hair off her neck. “Besides, Mrs. Kowalski knows we’re coming today. Ten to one she has a casserole in the oven and cookies for the kids.”

Mr. Bradford slowed the car so the boys could see what was playing at The Phoenix.

“The Javelin,” read Charlie. “Sounds like a real winner.”

“Is it PG?” asked Joey. He looked at his brother expectantly.

“Don’t even think it,” muttered Charlie.

He went back to staring out the window.

He knew from his grandfather that most of the houses along King Street had been built over a hundred years earlier from the grey stone found along Lake Ontario. Set back from the road, they all had the kind of wide, white verandahs that made Charlie want to sit in the shade with a glass of cool lemonade.

His father signalled a left turn at Rosewood Avenue and waited for a break in the traffic.

They were almost there.

“Joey.”

“Yeah, Dad.” Two blue eyes stared back at him in the rear view mirror.

“No ‘yucks’ even if you don’t like Mrs. Kowalski’s cookies, okay Sport?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Nuts. I don’t like nuts.”

Charlie bit his tongue. It was going to be a long, boring summer.

“Looks like a bit of excitement ahead,” Mr. Bradford said as they turned onto Rosewood.

Laura leaned forward in her seat. “I wonder

what's going on....”

“It's the police!” screeched Joey. “And they're in Grandpa's driveway!”

Mrs. Kowalski rushed across the front lawn to meet them.

“Oh, dear” – she scrunched her apron in her plump hands – “I checked the house yesterday. Everything was fine. And then when I went to open it up for you today....” She dropped her apron and flailed the air with her arms.

Laura Bradford reached out to the older woman. “Calm down and tell me what happened.”

“You've been robbed!”

“What!”

Mrs. Kowalski nodded. “I called the police. I hope I did the right thing.” She glanced anxiously from one Bradford to another.

The family hurried up the walk and into the house.

The front hall was a mess. Coats and hats had been pulled from the cupboard and left in a heap on the floor. Even the umbrella stand had been tipped over, spilling Malcolm's collection of canes, umbrellas and walking sticks like a life-size game of pick-up-sticks.

“Wow!” exclaimed Joey.

“Unreal,” said Charlie as he followed Joey and his parents into the living room.

It was as if a giant had lifted the house from its foundation, given it a good shake and set it back

down again. Books, tables, lamps lay every which way but the way they should.

“Ma’am.” A stocky man in a lightweight jacket picked his way through the debris and introduced himself to the Bradfords. “Sergeant Punkari, Colville Police. And this is Officer Newsome,” he added with a wave in the direction of his uniformed assistant.

“How do you do,” said Laura Bradford automatically extending her hand in courtesy despite her obvious shock. “This is my husband, Robert. My sons, Charles and Joseph.”

Joey slipped his hand inside his brother’s. Whenever his mother called him Joseph, he knew it was serious.

“Makes you wonder about people, doesn’t it,” said Sergeant Punkari, shaking his head as he surveyed the damage. “Most of the time though, they rob a house when the family’s at the funeral, not several weeks later.”

Mrs. Bradford looked around the room in despair.

“What do they do?” asked Robert Bradford incredulously. “Read the obituaries?”

“That’s about it,” said the plainclothes detective. “All the information a burglar needs is right there in the newspaper or on the website. The time of the service, sometimes even the address of the deceased. If not, they check the phone book. Not hard to find in a town the size of Colville.”

“Has anything been taken?” Charlie asked.

“Now that’s the odd part.” Sergeant Punkari scratched his head. “There doesn’t seem to be

anything missing. At least, not the usual stuff, like a television or a....” He cleared his throat. “Hard for us to tell in this mess. He didn’t happen to have a computer, did he?”

“Grampa didn’t even have a laptop,” said Joey.

“My father was a bit old-fashioned when it came to electronics,” Laura added ruffling her son’s hair. “Although he did have an electric typewriter.”

“If you could go through Mr. Rossitor’s belongings and let us know...” Sergeant Punkari reached inside his jacket and produced a business card. He held out to her. “Call me anytime.”

“How did they get in?” asked Charlie, letting go of Joey’s hand. He bent down and picked up one of his grandfather’s books, *Rocks and Minerals in Canada*. Several pages had been torn from the middle, leaving ragged edges by the spine.

“Good question, son,” said the sergeant. “It looks like the back door was forced open. In a small town like this people don’t worry too much about locks.”

“Are you going to dust for fingerprints?” asked Joey. His eyes threatened to pop right out of his head.

“We already have,” said Officer Newsome. “But I don’t think they’ll be much help. The prints were pretty smudged and your neighbour has been in and out the back door regularly.”

The two policemen began to edge towards the door. “There’s nothing more we can do here, I’m afraid,” said Sergeant Punkari. “Not much of a

homecoming for you, is it?” he added gruffly, sensing Laura Bradford’s distress.

She shook her head. Her eyes were brimming with tears. “I can’t believe it.”

Her husband put his arm around her shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” said Joey. “We’ll catch the bad guy. Won’t we, Charlie?”

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## Chapter Two

### *The First Clue*

Charlie was putting the last book back on the shelf in the living room when the front bell rang.

“Will somebody please get that!” called his mother from the back of the house. She’d been in the kitchen all afternoon, cleaning inside cupboards and drawers, getting the house ready to put on the market.

“Yeah, yeah.” Charlie took his time. It was probably Mrs. Kowalski. They’d been there three days now and every time the doorbell rang, there was Mrs. Kowalski. Not that he didn’t like her, but she kept fussing over him, telling him he should go out and make some new friends. Charlie put on his polite face and opened the door.

“Hi...”

“Hi!”

Definitely not Mrs. Kowalski. The girl on the step was about his age, with straight, dark hair that curled to a stop under her chin.

“I’m Lisa Kirby. I live next door.”

“You do?” Charlie glanced over her shoulder at the red-brick house on the other side of the hedge. The house had been sold so many times over the

years; he couldn't remember who'd been there last summer.

"We moved here about a month ago."

"Oh, well, uh, welcome to the neighbourhood. I'm Charlie Bradford."

"I know."

"You do?" Charlie flushed. He was repeating himself.

There was a loud thump on the hallway landing and Joey appeared in the doorway.

"Hi, Lisa. What's that?" He pointed to the covered cake plate in Lisa's hands.

"You two know each other?" Charlie looked from one to the other. Mrs. Kowalski was right. He'd definitely have to get out more.

"Sure, Joey and I are old friends, aren't we, Joey?" Lisa smiled at the younger boy and handed him the plate. "My mother made this for your family."

"Wow. Thanks." Joey peered at the cake through its plastic cover. "I hope it's chocolate."

"I think your little brother is adorable," said Lisa as she watched Joey disappear down the hallway, cake in hand, to find his mother.

Charlie shook his head. Joey had been called a lot of things over the years, but adorable wasn't one of them. "Wait till you get to know him a little better."

Lisa smiled at him and they stood in awkward silence for a few moments. Charlie racked his brain for something witty to say.

No luck. His mind was like a black hole.

His mother came to the door drying her hands on a towel, and she and Lisa introduced each other.

Lisa said. ‘Mrs. Kowalski told us about the break-in. Do they know who did it?’

‘I’m afraid not, said Charlie’s mother. ‘As far as I can tell, nothing has been stolen, so it’s unlikely we’ll ever find out.’

Charlie was about to mention the missing pages in his grandfather’s book, but for all he knew Malcolm Rossitor could have torn them out himself.

‘Is your mother home, Lisa?’

The girl nodded. ‘She’s taking the summer off.’

‘Good. I’ll run next door and get her – I’m dying for some company. Why don’t you come in? Charlie, go and put the kettle on. We’ll have tea and cut into that delicious cake Lisa bought over.’

Fifteen minutes later, they were all seated in the living room enjoying Mrs. Kirby’s double-layer chocolate fudge cake when Joey put his foot in his mouth.

‘How come your mother looks Chinese and you don’t?’

‘Joseph Bradford!’ declared his mother.

Charlie glared at his brother, but Lisa laughed. So did her mother, her almond-shaped eyes crinkling at the corners.

‘That’s because you haven’t met my husband yet,’ she said.

Joey looked puzzled.

‘My father’s Caucasian,’ explained Lisa.

“White,” Charlie translated.

“Oh,” said Joey.

“So,” continued Lisa, “I’m fifty percent Chinese and fifty percent Caucasian.”

“Which makes her one hundred percent Canadian,” added her mother proudly.

“Just like me,” said Joey.

“That’s right.”

The second they leave, I’ll kill him, fumed Charlie as he watched Joey polish off his milk and head for the door.

His mother set her cup and saucer down on the coffee table. “Charlie, why don’t you and Lisa take those magazines up to your grandfather’s study.” She pointed to a stack of old *Northern Miners* and *Canadian Geographics* leaning precariously against the wall. “I can’t think what they’re doing down here anyway.”

“Sure. Okay with you, Lisa?”

“Sure.”

Charlie and Lisa divided the pile between them and headed for the stairs.

Malcolm Rossitor’s study was Charlie’s favourite room in the house. When he was little, he used to spin the globe with his eyes closed. Then he’d stop it with his finger and try to guess which continent he was touching before he opened his eyes.

Once he’d had his finger on France, and his grandfather had told him all about World War Two and how he and five other Canadian soldiers had

hidden in a barn in France for two days surrounded by enemy troops.

“Weren’t you scared?” Charlie had asked him.

“Aye,” said his grandfather, “but when you’re with your friends even the worst times don’t seem so bad.”

Charlie set the magazines down on the table inside the door, crossed over to the globe and gave it a spin.

“Wow,” said Lisa. “Your grandfather sure had a lot of books.” She eyed the floor-to-ceiling bookcases lining two of the walls. “Was he a teacher or something?”

“No,” said Charlie. He opened his eyes and lifted his finger. California. Not even close. “He was a bank manager. Geology was his hobby. He used to go rock collecting and stuff like that.” Chunks of amethyst and crystal and samples of a variety of rocks and minerals lay interspersed amongst the books.

“My dad collects stamps.”

“Does he?” Charlie sat at his grandfather’s roll top desk. “There might be some interesting stamps lying around here. Grampa used to get postcards and letters from all over.”

He rolled up the slatted top and revealed the dozen cubby holes, little drawers and a writing area that had been hidden beneath the desk’s cover.

“Neat,” said Lisa. She leaned over and slid one of the little drawers in and out. “Does it have a secret compartment?”

“Nah, Joey and I already looked. Wait a minute, what’s this?” Charlie tugged at a corner of black leather wedged in the back behind a box of envelopes. It was his grandfather’s little note book. He used to keep it in his shirt pocket because, as he used to tell his grandson, “you never know when something’s important.”

Charlie flipped idly through the pages. Oil change on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April. Joey’s birthday. Buy stamps. And then the last entry. On Wednesday, May 23. The day before he died.

Charlie cleared his throat.

“Are you okay?” asked Lisa.

He shook his head. “The last entry in my grandfather’s notebook...” his voice caught. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Why? What’s it say?” Lisa peered over his shoulder.

“Must go to the Colville Nursing Home and see Weir. The old coot might know something.”

“Who’s Weir?” asked Lisa.

“One of Grampa’s old army buddies.”

“So what’s funny about him wanting to see one of his old friends?”

“Dad once told me Grampa hadn’t spoken to Jack Weir in almost twenty years.”

“Well they must have made up,” reasoned Lisa, “or he wouldn’t have been planning to see him.”

“Yeah, but why after all this time?”

Charlie stared at his grandfather’s familiar scrawl. “I wonder if it has anything to do with the book.”

“What book?” asked Lisa.

Charlie filled her in on the missing pages from *Rocks and Minerals in Canada*.

“Why don’t you ask your father? Maybe he knows.”

Charlie shook his head. “Dad left last night for Toronto. He won’t be back until the weekend.”

“Then why don’t you ask Weirdo?”

“Hi, guys, whatcha doing?”

Charlie slammed shut his grandfather’s diary and shoved it to the back of the desk as Joey bounded into the room.

“I thought you were playing outside.”

“I was. It started to rain.”

Lisa glanced out the window. The sun was still shining, but a fine sheet of rain was slanting across the afternoon sky. She looked at her watch.

“I’d better get going. It’s almost five.”

Charlie stood up. “I’ll walk you downstairs.”

“Me, too,” said Joey.

Charlie gritted his teeth.

“I’ll tell you what, Joey,” said Lisa, bending down and giving him a dazzling smile, “why don’t you go ahead and see if my mother’s still here.”

“Okay, Lisa.” Joey raced for the stairs.

“Smooth move,” said Charlie.

“I babysit.”

“Look. If I decide to go and see Weirdo, do you want to come?”

“I’d love to,” said Lisa. “But don’t you have to look after your brother?”

Not if I can help it, thought Charlie. “I’ll call on you tomorrow morning,” he said and followed her out of the room.

The summer was shaping up after all.

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