



The

Double Cousins and the Mystery of the Missing Watch

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Miriam Jones Bradley

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and the Mystery of the
Missing Watch

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This book is dedicated to my grandparents, especially to the memory of my grandpa, George Lee Jones, who first inspired me to write stories, and to my grandma, Mildred Lenora Trunnell Jones, who at ninety-six still lives in Broken Bow, Nebraska, near the ranch where some of this story's events take place.

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Acknowledgments

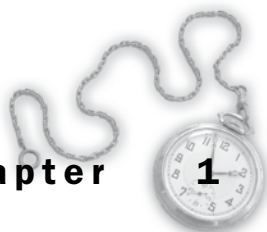
I could fill pages with my thanks to all of the people who helped me, but here are a few:

- My three parents, who gave me life and taught me how to live.
- My siblings, cousins, and extended family, who have allowed me to use their personalities and experiences.
- My nieces and nephews, all double cousins, who have been my modern-day inspiration for the past fourteen years. “You are my sunshine!”
- The Black Hills Writers Group of Rapid City, South Dakota, who gave me the accountability needed to finish the rough draft.
- My husband, Bruce, whose unwavering confidence and encouragement gave me the boost needed to finish the job!

Author's Note

This book is a work of fiction. However, many of the events portrayed in this story are based on the experiences my cousins, siblings, and I had as children visiting our grandparents' ranch. None of the characters are based entirely on any living person, but my family will certainly feel this is *our* story. Sadly, we never had a mystery to solve as the children in this story do. The seed of the idea for the mystery did, however, come from a true-life event. My Great-great-grandpa Jones left home to find work and never returned.

When siblings marry siblings, their children are double cousins.



The Adventure Begins

The rooster crowed at the same time every day. Zach stirred in his bed, his brain struggling out from under the fog of sleep. He turned over, opened one eye, and judged the darkness. Yep, it was about 5 A.M. Never fails, he thought. That rooster was what Pa called “dependable,” a word he used to describe Isaac. At the thought of his twin brother, Zach opened both eyes and looked across the room. Isaac, the dependable one. And Dad calls me the independent one, thought Zach, grinning.

Then it hit him, the sudden realization of what today was. This was it. The day for which he, Zachary Lewis Johnson, had waited his entire eighteen years. His dad had finally given in. Today he would leave home and go west. Excitement tore through his body. He knew he had to get up. Swinging his feet over the edge of the bed, Zach reached out and grabbed his pocket watch from the table that sat between his bed and Isaac’s. He looked at the face. 5:15. It wouldn’t be long before the rest of the family was

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up. He turned the watch over and rubbed the initials and date on the back: ZLJ, April 16, 1872.



The cool morning air blew the bedroom curtain back and forth as sunshine filtered in to cover Carly and Molly Johnson. The smell of bacon wafted up the stairs, and with it came Faith Hill's voice. Carly rubbed her hazel eyes and smiled. *What a way to wake up! Daddy always said that waking up to the blasting radio was one of his first memories growing up on the ranch.*

Carly bounced out of bed and hummed as she pulled on her jeans and T-shirt. Her mind raced through the plans for the day. Later, her cousins would arrive. Part of the fun of their visit to Grandpa and Grandma's ranch each summer was that the "double cousins" would be together. She and her cousin Max were both ten, their birthdays just one month apart. The other half of the "double cousins"—Carly's little sister Molly and their cousin Chad—were eight. What fun the double cousins had together!

Carly frowned as she braided her dark brown hair. She'd almost forgotten about Dorie, her oldest cousin. She hoped Dorie wouldn't act stuck up like last Christmas. Just because Dorie was a teenager now didn't mean she could treat the rest of them like babies. *Maybe she'll stay in the house and help Grandma all summer,* Carly thought with a sudden grin.

Rolling over in her sleep, Molly mumbled something Carly couldn't understand.

“Wake up, you sleepy head!” Carly jerked the covers off her sister. “Can’t you smell the bacon?”

“Leave me alone,” Molly whined, pulling the covers over her head.

Carly chuckled. Molly wasn’t a morning person. “I thought you told Grandma you were going to gather the eggs before breakfast each morning,” Carly teased.

Molly burrowed deeper under the covers.

“Should I tickle her awake,” Carly wondered aloud, “or should I leave her alone and save my skin?”

Molly settled the question when she rolled over, grabbed Carly’s socks from the bed in one swift motion, and dove to the far side of her own bed.

“Oh, ho!” Carly shouted. “You want a fight, do you?”

High shrieks and laughter filled the air and followed the stairs down to the kitchen, where their grandmother and mother cooked breakfast.

“Girls,” Mom called, “Grandma has breakfast ready, and Grandpa is coming in from the barn. You’d better shake a leg or you won’t get anything but leftover toast.”

The girls scrambled to finish dressing and hurried down the stairs.

After the blessing, Carly glanced around the table. *Mmm! Fried eggs, bacon, cinnamon rolls, grapefruit sections, and toast with chokecherry, grape, or peach jelly.* She debated about which to take, because all were homemade. She knew from experience that everything was delicious.

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Grandpa's voice interrupted Carly's decision-making. "Well, Jeff, I don't know what to do. I can't find anyone for the haying season who isn't already working somewhere else. Brad told me he could send one of his boys to help for a day or two, but I need someone for at least a month."

"I wish I could help you out with the haying," Carly's dad said, "but we're so busy this summer with church activities. Between preparing sermons and getting ready for VBS and camp, my hands are full."

Grandpa sighed. "I know. I hoped you might have an idea of who I could ask."

Dad lowered his cup of coffee to the table and gazed out the window, obviously deep in thought. "I wonder," he said softly. Then he caught his wife's smile. Together they said, "Slim!"

Carly dropped her knife with the chokecherry jelly on it. It hit the corner of her plate and clattered to the tabletop, splattering jelly onto the table. At Molly's gasp, Carly jerked to look at her sister then turned to her dad. "Slim?" she exclaimed.

Their father ignored his daughters' shocked responses. "Slim's a homeless man," he explained to Grandpa. "He stopped by the church a couple of weeks ago after he saw our church's sign from the train tracks. He needed money but didn't want a handout. He wanted to know if I could help him find work. I set him up to work for Joe Rogers. So far, he seems to be a good field hand as well as an honest, respectable man."

"But can he put up hay?" Grandpa wanted to know.

The Adventure Begins

“I think so. From what little he’s told me, he grew up on a ranch somewhere in the Great Plains area. Besides, it would help him out to work here.”

Grandpa took a gulp of milk, which he liked more than coffee, sat back in his chair, and looked up at Grandma.

“Well . . .” Grandma began with a slight frown. Then she smiled. “It’s a fact you need the help. We could clean out the old bunkhouse. He could stay there.”

Grandpa nodded. “I’d have to be sure he could work until we have the hay all cut.”

“I’ll talk to him when we get home and let you know what he says,” Dad promised.

“Al-righty!” Grandpa finished his milk, slapped his leg, and rose to his feet. “Now that it’s settled, I guess I better get over to the North Place pasture to check them cows. I’ve got to check the house too. It’s empty right now, and that storm we had a couple of nights ago could have done some damage.”

Carly’s mind raced. *Slim, the homeless man, coming here? Shivers ran up and down her back. I’ve sure got something to tell Max when he gets here!*



A few hours later, Carly sat on the porch swing with Grandma, shelling peas for supper. She worked without looking at her hands. Her eyes were glued to the road, watching for her cousins.

“I hate waiting,” she said, tossing a pea shell into an old ice-cream bucket.

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“I know,” Grandma said. “I thought it might be a bit easier out here where we can watch the road.” She turned to Molly, curled up in a chair beside them. “What are you reading, Molly?”

There was no answer. Carly and Grandma looked at each other and laughed.

“She’s the biggest bookworm I’ve ever known,” Carly said. “I like to read too, but Molly can sit all day, reading one book after another. I think it’s *Little House on the Prairie*. That’s what she was reading earlier.”

Finally, Uncle Jack’s car drove up the long driveway and pulled to a stop. With a yelp, Carly jumped off the swing. She bounded down the three porch steps and dashed for the car. She watched Max reach over Chad to open the door. Chad’s eyes were heavy, as if he had been asleep. His wiry red hair stuck up all over the place. Max shoved Chad out of the way and climbed out of the car with a whoop.

“Carly!” he shouted. “I thought we’d never get here.” He started to throw his arms around her and then, just as suddenly, he backed up.

Carly glanced toward the car. She knew exactly what Max was thinking. Last Christmas, Dorie had teased them for what she called “such childish displays of affection.”

Dorie stepped out of the car. Carly noticed she had begun to fill out and wasn’t quite as skinny as she was at Christmas. Dorie stood perfectly straight—just like a fashion model, tossed her straight brown hair back over her shoulder, and announced to no one in particular, “I must really go wash up. The roads were so dusty.” She gave Grandma a hug and then headed for the house.

Max rolled his eyes at Carly and said under his breath, “Mom says she’s trying to become a lady, but I think she’s gone off the deep end.”

Carly giggled, then sobered. “Max,” she whispered, “we need to talk.”

“About what?”

“About—” Carly started, but was interrupted by Aunt Joanna, Max’s mom.

“Max, you come on up here and tell your grandma hi.”



It was several hours before Max and Carly could get away by themselves. Finally, after supper, they dashed out the door and down to the old silo, which always reminded Carly of a huge birdcage. It was taller than the barn, but Grandpa didn’t use it now. It was the perfect place to go for secret conferences. They sat on either side of the cement trough in the middle, swung their legs, and caught up on all the news.

“What’s up?” Max asked. “I thought I’d die waiting for supper to get done.”

“Well,” Carly said, her voice hushed, “Daddy might send a homeless man out to work for Grandpa. You remember Ted, who was working for him?” Max nodded. “But he had his appendix out. So Grandpa said he needs a man to help with the haying, and Daddy told him that he knew someone.” Carly paused for breath and rushed on. “Grandpa said the man could come.”

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Grandma's going to clean out the old bunkhouse, and he'll sleep there."

Max's eyes grew big. "Where did your dad meet this guy?"

"He came to the church from the train tracks," Carly said. "He was looking for work. Daddy talked to Joe Rogers—right now he's working out there on Joe's ranch. Daddy thinks he's different from most homeless men." Her voice dropped. "But he never looks you in the eye. I read in a book once that if someone doesn't look you in the eye, it's a sign that he's got something to hide."

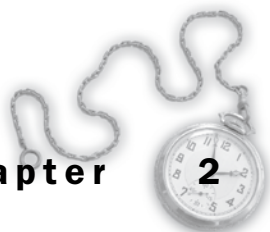
"We'll have to be careful." Max leaned forward, his voice quiet and tense. "He could be a thief. He might steal from Grandma and Grandpa. We'll have to watch him."

Carly gasped. "Do you think so? He seems nice enough, but he never talks. I haven't heard him say a single word. Daddy says we should be kind to him. He says we shouldn't judge people too fast."

"Uncle Jeff's right," Max said. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep our eyes open." He gave his cousin a mysterious smile. "I have a feeling this is going to be the most exciting summer of our lives."

Chapter

2



A Mystery!

A few minutes later, as they ambled back to the house, an old tan Tempo pulled into the driveway. “Look, it’s Great-uncle Floyd and Aunt Esther,” Max said.

Grandpa was headed to the barn, but he turned as he heard the Ford approach. He waved to his brother and sister-in-law. The farmhouse door flew open and there stood Grandma, her hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

Like a magnet, the car drew the entire family. Grandma, her daughter Joanna, and her daughter-in-law Sheila came out of the house. Carly’s and Max’s dads left the porch where they had been talking and joined the family gathering around the old car.

“What do you have in there today, Uncle Floyd?” asked Max. He and Carly exchanged grins. Uncle Floyd was known throughout the area as “Trader Johnson.” He always carried around a trunk load of items, which he tried to sell to everyone he met. It was said that

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he could trade anything to anybody. The exact items always changed, depending on what he found that looked like something he could trade. He had clothes, hardware items, tools that were frequently in demand on ranches, boots, and even some toys.

Uncle Floyd opened his trunk. "Well, it's like this." He pushed his cowboy hat back on his head and moved the toothpick in his mouth from one side to the other. "I heard you kids were coming and figured you needed some boots." He eyed the children. "Your grandpa is mighty big on wearing boots when you ride a horse."

With almost the same motion as his brother, Grandpa pushed his hat back and scratched his balding head. "Yep, it's safer that way, harder for the horse to drag you if you fall off."

The kids nodded. They'd heard this many times.

"Anyway," continued Floyd, "I said to your Aunt Esther, 'Esther, we have to get boots out to the ranch. Those young'uns will need them.'"

The children inched closer to the trunk and peeked in. A box of books lay stashed in among the boots, clothes, heavy staples, and tools.

Floyd winked at the kids. "Oh, and I found a box of books at an auction last week. Don't suppose you kids would be interested in mysteries, would you?"

"Would we!" Carly and Max yelped in unison.

"We love mysteries." Molly's blue eyes shone.

Carly's dad reached into the trunk and pulled out the box of books. As he did, a couple on top fell out. Carly bent down, picked them up, and squealed. "Molly, it's a *Trixie Belden* book and a *Meg Mystery*! We haven't read either one."

Max pulled out a *Hardy Boys* book and held it up. "Here's one I don't have, Dad." He handed it to his father and continued to dig through the box.

Even Dorie and Chad were down on their knees with the others. They giggled and shouted as they found several by their favorite authors.

"Thanks, Uncle Floyd," Carly said. "These are great."

"You're most welcome," he said, his face and neck turning red. "I suppose, though, you won't have much time to read mysteries. I'm sure your grandma and grandpa will keep you too busy."

"There's always time to read, especially if it's a mystery," Molly said, hugging a book.

"You like mysteries, do you? What about real-life mysteries?" Uncle Floyd's eyes twinkled.

"A real-life mystery?" Carly asked.

"Really?" Max chimed in. "What kind of mystery?"

"Tell us!" Molly and Chad shouted.

Uncle Floyd wrinkled his brow. "You mean your grandpa has never told you the story of our great-grandfather? Now, *there's* a mystery."

Carly glanced at Grandpa and saw the look that passed between the brothers. "No," she said, shaking her head, "you've never told us about a family mystery." Her heart beat fast. Could their family be part of a real-life mystery? "Tell us!" she echoed Molly and Chad's plea.

The old man smiled at his granddaughter's impatience and turned to his brother. "Why, Floyd, I haven't thought of that story for . . . well . . . for years. Can't imagine why I never told the kids before." He scratched his head.