

BEST LEFT
BURIED

Best Left Buried

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BEST LEFT BURIED

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CHAPTER 1

“What on earth were you talking about, Cub?” I asked the big red-faced man who jumped off the seat of his dirt mover. “What did you mean ‘there’s something in the well’?”

The cold January wind did its best to blow my parka’s hood off my head. Shivering, I burrowed my hands deeper into the coat’s pockets. Back in my mother’s warm kitchen, my second cup of coffee was cooling so I had not had my usual quota of caffeine to jump-start the day. Cub had better have a good reason for calling me out here among the wilds of Ventris County on such a miserable morning. He had sounded urgent when he called but I could see no sign of an impending catastrophe.

“Darcy, get out here quick. I want you to look at something I found,” he had said on the phone and then hung up before I could ask questions.

Now as I gazed at the wintry scene, I certainly didn’t see anything to be excited about. Cold and lonely, yes, but nothing was unusual. In spring and summer, this was a lovely, green area but with the cottonwood and sycamore trees standing bare and white, the ancient graveyard visible in the distance, and the wind moaning among the cedars, the scene was cold and more than a little lonely.

Cub pointed at an irregular hole in the ground. “Take a gander down there, Darcy. I can’t see right well but there’s a package or a box or something and it’s lodged on a rock jutting out on the side. And

don't look so mean. You know I wouldn't have called you out here for just nothin' at all."

I wasn't so sure about that. Cub was well-known throughout my hometown of Levi as the best heavy equipment operator in two counties but he also had a reputation for being excitable and the world's worst gossip. For example, when he was digging the water line for the new court house last year, He uncovered some bones and before notifying the sheriff, he called the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation and told them he had uncovered a body. His find turned out to be the bones of a cow which had probably died when the area was farmland.

"That hole in the ground is an old dug well," I said. "It hasn't been used since my grandparents lived here. Why did you move the covering off it anyway?"

Cub's face took on a redder hue and he shrugged. "Your mom told me to cover it over with concrete and I will but I shore hate to do that. You know, there might still be right good water in it and I've always had a healthy respect for pure, clean water. It's mighty scarce in this day and time. Doesn't Miz Flora know that? So I used my grader to scoot that big rock away then I shone my flashlight down there. I saw water at the bottom, sure enough. But something else is in there. I don't have no way of gettin' it out so I wanted you to come and see if we could get it out together."

I shook my head. What did he see and what did he only imagine? My stomach rumbled. I was hungry, I was cold, and I was fast losing my patience with this man.

"Cub, that old well was dug by hand a long time ago. Maybe you see a tin can of Prince Albert tobacco the person who dug the well lost. I guess looking down in that hole in the ground didn't have anything to do with those old tales about bank robbers' loot or hiding places for money?"

He must have caught the sarcasm in my tone because he dropped his gaze and scuffed the ground with the toe of his work boot. "Oh, well, maybe," he mumbled.

"Didn't you try to get it out before you called me?" I prodded.

"I did, I admit it. It's just out of my reach though. I thought maybe I could hold onto you and you could lower yourself down into the well and bring that package or sack or whatever it is, up."

"What? I hope I've got better sense than that, Cub Dabbins."

"Now don't get excited, Darcy. You know I'd hold onto your feet good and tight. Sure wouldn't want nothin' to happen to you."

"And you certainly wouldn't want something to happen to whatever's in there," I said. "OK. You're not going to be satisfied 'til I take a look. Let me have the flashlight, Cub."

I grabbed his MagLite, lay down on the rocky ground on my stomach and peered into the dark opening. The inside of that well hadn't seen the light of day for decades and everyone knows old hand-dug wells are dangerous. The rim can cave in. I, Darcy Campbell, investigative reporter, must have taken leave of my senses. Here I was, lying on my stomach on the cold, hard earth, trying to see something that had disturbed the mental well-being of an imaginative and well-known snoop.

Cub was right. The flashlight's beam glinted on an object about eight feet down. It was caught on a ledge or a rock in the rough dirt wall.

Without warning, hands grabbed my ankles and pushed. I kicked and squirmed but Cub kept shoving me forward. As my prone body inched toward the well, small rocks fell over the edge in front of me. I heard them splash in the water.

"Stop it, Cub!" I yelled. "What are you doing?"

Cub grunted and kept forcing me forward until my upper body dangled head down in the darkness of the well. The only thing keeping me from plunging into a watery grave were two rough hands around my ankles. Blood hammered in my ears.

As if from a distance, I heard Cub's voice. "Don't worry. I'm hangin' onto you, Darcy. Just reach down there and see if you can grab it."

I coughed and gulped a lungful of stale air. "Pull me back up, you idiot! You'll drop me!"

"No, I won't, Darcy. Can you reach it?"

Both my hands flailed the air, not because I was trying to reach the object lodged on a ledge but because I was trying to find something to brace against so I could push myself back into the light of day. My head felt as though it would burst. The smell of damp earth filled my nostrils and sticky spider webs clung to my face.

Once again, Cub called, "Come on, Darcy, try! Can you reach it yet?"

"Get me out of here. Now, Cub!" My voice sounded hollow and echoed in the depths below me.

"Oh, all right," Cub growled. He tugged me backward, dragging me over the rocks until I was in the open air again. Shaking with fear and anger, I scrambled to my feet. The dingy gray morning had never looked so good. I clawed at the spider webs clogging my nose, mouth and eyes. When I could see again, I lunged toward Cub, swinging at him with his flashlight.

"Of all the dumb, stupid..." I choked.

For a big man, he moved quickly. "Now, calm down, Darcy. You're out, aren't you?"

Cub backed away as I advanced. "You are undoubtedly the craziest, most ignorant..." I said between clenched teeth.

Cub held up his hands, palms out. "Well, it was worth a try, Darcy. We've just got to get that thing outa that well. Now I'm sorry I scared you but I knew you wouldn't lean over that far on your own."

It took several seconds of deep breathing to slow my racing pulse. "Nobody in his right mind would. I should bring charges of attempted murder! I should fire you on the spot!" I spat out more spider webs.

"Hey! Miz Flora hired me to dig the foundation for that new house of you all's and I reckon she's the only one that can fire me. Call your mom, Darcy. Tell her to bring a rope. I don't have one in my truck. I've got a wide-mouthed bucket and I figure we can tie a rope onto the bail of the bucket and maybe lever that can or package or whatever into it."

Cub dropped his eyes as I glared at him. I knew that he would not give up on getting whatever it was out of the well. If I went back to town, he'd probably think of some way to maneuver the object onto the surface and I might never find out what he had found. He was

not above keeping it unless it happened to be completely worthless. Whatever it was, old tin can or a cache of diamonds, it was on our land, my mom's and my land that had belonged to Granny Grace, and it was mine, not Cub Dabbins'.

I pivoted and stalked toward my red Ford Escape. "All right, Cub. I'll phone Mom to bring a rope. I'm going to wait in the car," I said between clenched teeth.

"I've got a thermos of coffee in my truck, Darcy. Want some to sort of warm up?"

I ignored him and climbed into my SUV. My hand shook as I dialed Mom's home phone from my cell. She picked up on the second ring.

"I've been going over these house plans again, Darcy," she said. "I've thought of several changes and can't wait to see whether you agree. I've also been looking at the notes I made about the school."

Her calm voice had a soothing effect on my jangled nerves. That school for boys was one of Mom's dreams. Plans for the school as well as the new house were spread over her dining table. She and I had been stirring pancake batter and talking about the type of shingles for the roof of the new house this morning before Cub's phone call postponed our breakfast. When a house once again sat out here on my grandparents' old farm, filled with family (actually, just our cat Jethro, my mother and me), the loneliness of Granny Grace's acres would surely disappear.

"Your school will probably be finished before the house, Mom, because I just might kill the heavy equipment operator," I said.

"Darcy! What do you mean? Cub Dabbins? Why? What happened?"

I drew a deep breath. No use upsetting her too. She probably *would* fire Cub, that is, after she had given him a piece of her mind, or had him arrested and I didn't know who else we could hire for excavation work on the house.

"Nothing, Mom. You know Cub. He is stubborn and insists on doing things his way. I'm glad you are making headway on plans for building."

Ben Ventris, an old friend of my mother's had named her in his will as his sole heir. She was in the process of changing Ben's farm she

had inherited into a live-in school for homeless boys. She even had the name picked out, "Ben's Boys."

"Yes, they are beginning to take shape in my mind, Darcy, the house and the school too. I'm anxious for you to see what you think about them. But what about Cub?"

"Cub is all excited about something he sees in that old dug well," I told her. "He needs a rope to try and get the thing out."

"What kind of thing?" Mom asked.

"Hard to say. Using a flashlight, I can see a whitish-looking oblong something. It's probably nothing but Cub is in a dither and we won't have any peace at all until it's out of the well."

"Cub always did get excited over nothing," she said, "but I'll bring the rope. I suppose I'll have to."

"What is that sound?" I asked, hearing some sort of rustling come across the line.

"Jethro! That cat thinks all these papers on the table are his playthings. Get back, Jethro."

"Good luck, Mom," I said. "He does have a few bad habits."

"He's worth the trouble." Mom sighed as I heard more sounds. "I guess."

When the yellow and white tomcat appeared on our doorstep a few weeks ago, badly needing care and attention, we welcomed him in. Isn't it good luck when cats decide to favor someone with their presence?

"See you soon," I said. Then I snapped my cell phone shut, turned on the radio to my favorite Easy Listenin' station, leaned against the seat's headrest and closed my eyes.

The old love song, *Fascination*, lulled me to sleep. I dreamed that I was once again in the kitchen of my house in Dallas. The sadness that had haunted me since my husband Jake's death evaporated and I felt happy. The dream seemed real. Jake's arms slid around me as he walked up behind me and peered over my shoulder.

"What are you stirring up this time, Darcy?" he asked, his breath warm in my ear.

"Your favorite brownies," I said, smiling. "What are you doing today?"

"I'm going out to blow those leaves off the lawn," he said. "I just wanted to tell you I love you, Darcy."

“Love you too, Jake,” I murmured.

But when I turned around to kiss him, it was not Jake with his arms around me, it was Grant Hendley, sheriff of Ventris County. I felt no shock nor surprise, only comfortably warm to be in Grant’s arms.

The noise of the leaf blower became the sound of my mother’s car as I awoke. Reality as cold as the January day replaced the dream as I realized anew that Jake was gone forever. As for Grant Hendley, well, he might be a part of the past too. But why were the two men, Jake and Grant, the same in my dream?

Mom sprang from her car, a small woman, her short gray hair in loose curls around her face. She moved and spoke like a person who was much younger than her nearly seven decades on this earth. Though my hair was dark and I wore it longer than Mom wore hers, our Cherokee heritage was clearly evident in our shared high cheekbones. As I aged, I suspected I would resemble her even more. I slid out of the Escape.

“Just what are you in such a tizzy about, Cub?” Mom asked as she winked at me. We were both well aware that some people in Ventris County still hunted for the money outlaws had hidden in our area in the 1930s. Cub was one of those people.

“Over here, Miss Flora. There’s something stuck down in that old well,” Cub said, pointing.

“Cub Dabbins! Why did you uncover the well? Nobody has used it for a long time. When Darcy and I move out here to live, we’ll use the drilled well over there.” She pointed to a pipe sticking up out of the ground. “I told you to cement that well up, not move off the rock that covered it. What if a person or cats and dogs fell in?” Mom stomped over to the opening, hands on hips, and looked first at it then at Cub.

“He had to take a look inside, Mom,” I said. “You know how he values fresh pure water and...”

“He does?” I giggled at Mom’s look of amazement.

“Well, he says he does but actually I think he wanted to be sure he wasn’t sealing up gold or diamonds or rubies or, who knows? The treasure of the Lost Dutchman’s Mine.”

Cub snorted. “I know that the Lost Dutchman is out in Arizona, Darcy! Actually, Miss Flora, there’s a box or something lodged on a

rock in there and I think we oughta find out what it is before we cover it up forever.”

She handed the coil of rope to Cub. “Go to it,” she said.

Cub took the rope, tied one end around the bail of the bucket he had taken from his truck and started giving instructions.

“OK now Darcy, you hold the flashlight and shine it right on that thing and I’ll take this big ole long limb and see if I can scrape it off the ledge into the bucket.”

Cub knelt down beside the well.

I nudged him with my foot. “If you try any funny stuff again, Cub Dabbins, I swear I’m going to push you in there head first. So don’t get any ideas.”

“What funny stuff?” Mom asked.

Cub looked up, an innocent smile on his face. “Aw, nothin’, Miss Flora. OK, Darcy, shine that MagLite down in this hole.”

I squatted as close to the edge as I dared and beamed the flashlight into the depths of the well. Cub carefully lowered the bucket. It would serve him right if he knocked the object off its resting place and it fell into the water. I had a mental picture of Cub diving in after it.

“Shucks!” he said. “I can’t hold the bucket still. It keeps swingin’. I need two hands on this rope.”

“How about if I drive the Escape up to about 4 feet of the well, then you and I can hook our toes under the bumper and sort of anchor ourselves above ground. You hold the bucket still and I’ll take the limb and try to rake it into the bucket. Mom, would you like to stand back a way and hold the flashlight? I don’t want you to get close to the edge.”

“I’ll do it,” Mom said.

“OK,” Cub muttered, “but for Pete’s sake, Darcy, don’t knock it off into the water.”

After twenty long, uncomfortable minutes, Cub and I still lay stretched precariously over the opening, our toes hooked under the bumper of my Ford. I tried for what felt like the hundredth time to nudge that packet into the bucket. My limb would either miss its mark or merely scoot the packet. Although Cub tried to hold the bucket

steady, it insisted on wobbling away from the wall of the well. Mom grasped the flashlight with both hands, but as she shivered from the cold, so did the bright beam.

Propping myself on one elbow to ease the strain on my arms, I said. "I'm ready to say that thing can stay down there. I'm freezing. The wind is coming up and I think I felt some sleet a minute ago."

"Same here," Mom said. "My teeth are chattering."

"One—more—try," Cub mumbled. "C'mon, Darcy. The bucket's as close to the ledge as it's going to get."

I pushed the limb against the bundle just as Cub maneuvered the wide-mouthed pail under it. With a satisfying plop, the package fell into the bucket.

Cub let out a war whoop that echoed off the hills. Hand over hand, he carefully drew the bucket with its cargo out of the well.

Mom and I crowded around Cub, trying to see what the prize looked like.

Cub had brought up a whitish-tan package that was maybe eighteen inches long and twelve inches wide. The package looked like dirty, worn, tattered paper of some sort and smelled as musty as the well. I poked it with a finger. "It's hard," I said. "And kind of crackly."

"What in the world is it?" Mom asked.

"That's what I'm going to find out," Cub said, setting the bucket with its treasure on the ground.

I darted down and grabbed the package from under his hands. "No! That's what Mom and I are going to find out!"

Cub's eyes were pleading. "Aw, Darcy, come on now..."

"Sorry," I said. "I sure thank you, Cub, for being so curious and uncovering this thing. There's no telling what is in there. Could it be money from Pretty Boy Floyd's last bank robbery? You know, stories were that he buried some loot somewhere around here."

"Just let me have a look," Cub begged, trying to grab the package.

"Nothing doing. Mom and I are going back home and finish that breakfast you interrupted. Have a nice day, Cub."

The look on Cub's face as we drove away almost made up for the dirty trick he played on me. Almost.