

Chapter 1 The Mysterious Bag

Steve bit his lip. He couldn't explain it, but ever since he heard about the auction, he felt compelled to go, as though something there was calling for him. He shook his head, trying to get rid of the feeling. No such luck. Following the directions on his cell phone's GPS, he turned onto Gunther Street.

"What's a storage auction, anyway?" Matt Peterson's question cut into Steve's thoughts.

"It's when storage places take belongings that have been abandoned there and put them up for sale. Sometimes they auction off entire storage units all together, but this time they're taking the stuff out and auctioning it individually."

Matt pulled the water bottle from its holster and popped the lid, almost losing control of his bicycle. "And we're going, why?"

Steve slowed down to look for the address. "People put stuff in storage because they think it's important and don't want to throw it away. Maybe we'll find something cool to buy." No way was he telling him the truth. *Actually, Matt, the real reason we're going is because I have this feeling that something there wants me to buy it.* Matt would smack him.

His friend muttered something under his breath as he put his water bottle away.

"Aw, come on. It'll be fun," Steve said, noticing his pal's lack of enthusiasm. He turned his bicycle into the gate of the storage facility. "Besides, you still owe me for that monster truck rally you made me go to."

Matt grumbled but followed him inside.

About a hundred people had turned out and were all walking around looking at everything up for bid. Most of the items were furniture, but there were a few boxes of clothes

and random things.

Matt held up an original Nintendo system. “Wow. I think my dad still has this thing hooked up to the TV in his bedroom. He still calls himself the Super Mario Brothers King.”

Steve laughed for a moment, then sighed. The weird feeling grew stronger the more they walked around.

A heavysset man with a scraggly gray beard stepped up to the stage and tapped into the microphone. “Excuse me, folks, but we’re just about ready, so if you could all take your seats, we’ll get started.”

The two boys followed the crowd to the white plastic chairs in front of the stage and found seats near the back. Matt pulled out a bag of trail mix from his pocket.

Item after item the auctioneer sold off the abandoned storage pieces. Steve was amused by all the people bidding on stuff. Each piece of furniture had at least six or seven bids before it finally sold. Someday, when he bought a house, he was definitely coming here to get the furnishings.

Matt, however, looked bored out of his skull. And hot.

“Steve,” he pleaded and fanned himself with a flyer, “can we go now? It’s like a hundred and eighty degrees out here.”

“Not yet. I want to—hold on. That’s interesting.”

The auctioneer's assistant wheeled a small black suitcase up to the stage. The front had a large silver skull and cross-swords embossed on it.

The sensation inside Steve grew stronger. There was something about that suitcase. Something special. “Why would someone abandon a suitcase in storage?”

Matt shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t need it anymore. Maybe it’s broken. Or, maybe he left

it here because he's out body surfing the ocean waves because it's too hot to be sitting in a plastic chair at a storage auction in Beachdale, California."

"Next, ladies and gentlemen, we have a fine suitcase here." The auctioneer rolled the suitcase around to show the front and back. "Good condition. No rips. Looks like the lock is still on it. Perhaps there's something real valuable inside. What'll I get for this mystery bag?"

Silence.

"Come now, folks, surely one of you out there is planning a trip. An extra suitcase can come in real handy."

Nothing. Not one bid. The auctioneer looked annoyed.

Steve stared at the suitcase, completely mesmerized. The skull seemed to be smiling at him. "One dollar!" He held up his hand.

Matt turned to his friend, a look of surprise on his face. "Are you crazy?"

"One dollar!" the auctioneer hollered. "Do I hear two dollars? Two dollars for this excellent suitcase?"

Silence.

"Sold to the young man in the back for one dollar." Obviously not wanting to waste any more time, he motioned for his assistant to remove the suitcase and bring something more valuable to the stage.

"Come on." Steve got up, his dark eyes full of excitement. The idea of buying a mysterious bag full of mysterious things left behind by a mysterious person thrilled him. "Let's go pay for it."

Matt shook his head as he stood. "You are a nut, Steve Kemp. A nut. Why in the world would you buy a suitcase from somebody you don't even know?"

Steve didn't bother with a reply, knowing that his friend already knew the answer. Curiosity often got the better of him. Considered a nerd by some, he was the only sixth grader at Beachdale Middle School who was a member of the National Junior Honor Society, the Chess Club, and the Black Student Union.

Grinning, he pulled out a dollar from his pocket and walked up to the counter. "The suitcase is mine."

The elderly gray-haired lady behind the register smiled as she took the dollar and handed Steve the suitcase.

Tracing the silver skull with his index finger, he stood lost in thought. Something was special about this suitcase.

"Seriously," Matt's voice cut in, "what are you going to do with that thing?"

Steve lifted his purchase and placed it on the ground. "It feels pretty heavy. There's obviously stuff inside. Don't you think it'll be kinda fun to—"

A commotion at the front stage distracted him. A tall, slender man in a light gray suit stood arguing with the auctioneer. The two men looked around and the auctioneer pointed at Steve.

The stranger nodded and ran toward Steve. "Excuse me, my boy." He spoke with a British accent. "I arrived a tad too late for the bidding, but I'd like to purchase that suitcase from you."

Steve shook his head. "Sorry, sir. It's not for sale."

The man pulled a roll of money out from his pocket. "I'll give you twenty-five dollars."

Matt's eyes widened. "Twenty-five bucks!"

Steve glanced at the money. Something felt off. Who carried a roll of money in their

pocket nowadays? “Sorry,” he said again. “I’m not interested in selling it.”

“Very well.” The man separated more money from the roll. “I will give you fifty dollars. That’s quite a profit for your ‘one buck’ purchase.”

Steve eyed the British man carefully. His suit looked flawless, probably expensive, and the gold pinky ring he wore held multiple diamonds. Money was obviously no object. “Why are you so interested in this suitcase?”

“It belonged to a dear friend of mine. Sadly, the old chap passed away a couple months ago. I just want to have whatever possessions of his I can get.”

There was a genuine look of sadness in his face. Either he was telling the truth or he was a good liar.

Matt held up his hand. “Hold that thought. Let me talk to my friend for a minute.” He grabbed Steve by the shirt, pulling him to the side. “What’s the matter with you? The man’s gonna give you fifty bucks for that stupid thing.”

“Don’t you wonder what’s in here that he’s willing to pay so much money for?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “It’s his friend’s stuff. Just take the money.”

Steve turned around. “I’ll tell you what, leave me your name and number and if I change my mind, I’ll give you a call.”

The man’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Steve, then a slow smile spread across his face. “Very well.” He put the roll of money back in his pocket and pulled out a business card. “You seem like an intelligent young chap; I’m sure you’ll do the right thing.”

Steve studied the plain white card after the man walked away. In black letters, the card read: Alex Franklin, Jeweler, and a phone number. He put the card in his pocket.

The boys walked to their bicycles. “You are completely out of your mind,” Matt said as

he pushed a strand of brown hair out of his eyes. He climbed on his bike and lifted the kickstand with his foot.

Just then a horn beeped and a big red pick-up truck pulled alongside the curb.

“Hey, guys!” Jenny Reed jumped out of the passenger’s seat of the truck and ran up to them. “Wanna go to the beach? My dad said he’ll take us.” Jenny was Matt’s best friend since pre-school.

Matt immediately jumped off his bike. “Heck yeah.”

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice rang through the air.

Cassie and her twin brother parked their mopeds by the curb in front of the red truck.

“Look, dear brother.” She pointed to Steve’s suitcase. “It looks like our friends have decided to skip town. Was it something we said?”

“More like something we own,” Ben said and the siblings laughed.

Matt glared at the twins. Cassie and Ben Baker were the snobbiest kids in town. Their dad owned the local bank and spoiled his kids rotten.

Jenny turned her back to the twins. “Anyway, there’s supposed to be great waves at the beach and some local band is gonna be doing a free concert this afternoon.”

“Did you hear that?” Cassie asked her brother.

“Yeah. Think we should tell them how our beach club has live bands every day?”

“Actually, Jenny,” Steve said quickly, noticing her face starting to turn a bright shade of purple, “we were thinking of going home to see what’s inside this thing.”

“Maybe it’s full of money,” Ben called out.

“Then perhaps you can afford a decent set of wheels.” Cassie giggled and the two mopeds sped off.

Matt clenched his fists. “Man, I really can’t stand those two.”

Jenny took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You and me both. So what about the beach?”

“I’m in.” Matt rolled his bike to the back of the truck.

Steve hesitated. He really wanted to know what was inside the suitcase.

“What’s wrong?” Jenny asked.

Matt shook his head. “He’s crazy. Come on, dude. We can look inside that stupid thing later. Besides, you’re gonna need some strong pliers to bust that lock. I bet Jenny’s dad will let you borrow some. But right now, it’s beach time!”

Steve pushed some sweat up his forehead and into his slight afro. He hesitated a moment longer, then nodded. Although curiosity gnawed at him, it was an unusually hot day in Northern California and cooling off in the ocean did sound refreshing.

The two boys put their bikes in the back of the pick-up, then Steve laid his purchase down between them.

“What’s with the suitcase, anyway?” Jenny asked.

Matt sighed. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you about it on the way.”

As Matt struggled to climb into the small back seat of the truck, Steve looked around. Just inside the gate of the storage facility, three men stood talking. One of them was the mysterious Alex Franklin, holding a cell phone. It looked like he was taking a picture.

“Let’s go, dude,” Matt’s voice boomed.

Steve climbed into the truck and they drove off.

The day at the beach was invigorating, and at five o’clock, Jenny’s dad dropped the three kids

off at Steve's house. They scurried into the living room, where Steve laid the suitcase in the middle of the floor.

"Now, let's see what Mr. Alex Franklin was willing to pay fifty dollars for." He used pliers borrowed from Jenny's dad to cut the small lock.

Matt grabbed a red apple from the fruit bowl before sitting on the ground. "I still can't believe you didn't take the money." He took a bite and juice dripped all over his shirt.

Jenny sat on the floor across from Steve. "Ignore Matt. You totally did the right thing." She rolled her long blonde hair into a bun. "Maybe there's something really valuable inside."

Matt groaned as he attempted to wipe the juice off his shirt. "You're as crazy as he is."

Steve unzipped the suitcase and flipped the lid open. Carefully, he pulled out clothes, one item at a time. There were several tee shirts, a couple pairs of shorts, and a faded pair of blue jeans. He carefully checked each pocket so he wouldn't miss anything.

"Wait!" Matt jumped up and grabbed the pants. "These jeans! I think they belonged to Elvis. They're worth a hundred million dollars!" He laughed as Steve snatched them from his grasp and put them on the floor.

"Is that it?" Jenny asked as she looked inside the empty bag.

Steve ran his hand through the inside of the suitcase. There was nothing else. "I don't get it," he scowled. "Why would someone be willing to pay fifty dollars for this?"

Matt sat back down and took another bite of his apple. "Maybe it's just what the guy said. His friend died and he wanted to get his stuff." Just then, his cell phone rang. As he spoke to his mom, Steve and Jenny went through the suitcase and clothes one more time.

He put the cell phone back in his pocket and stood. "Mom wants me home for dinner."

"I should probably get going, too," Jenny said.

Matt threw his apple core into the kitchen trash. “Sorry about the suitcase, dude. Maybe you should call that Alex Franklin guy and sell it to him.”

Steve walked his friends to the door and said goodbye. He took the suitcase and its contents upstairs to his room, spread everything out on his bed and stared at it. The strange feeling returned. Something in front of him had to be important. Something was worth fifty dollars. He examined each piece of clothing again, but found nothing.

Turning his attention to the suitcase itself, he opened every zipper and ran his hand inside. Still nothing. Frustrated, he pushed the suitcase away, but it fell to the floor, landing on the cord to his nightstand lamp. The force of the landing caused his lamp to fall off the table and into the suitcase. Steve cringed, shutting his eyes tight, hoping the lamp was not broken.

Slowly opening his eyes, he looked down and saw it in one piece. He breathed a sigh of relief and bent down to pick up the unbroken lamp. Then something caught his eye...a loose piece of thread hanging from the lining. He returned the lamp to his dresser and held the empty suitcase up close to his face. The dangling strand was a different color than the rest.

He pulled on it, but it was stuck. Taking out his pocketknife, he used one of the blades to cut the thread of the lining. Carefully, his hand reached inside and pulled out two sheets of paper. Someone had sewn them inside the lining to hide them.

Excitement flooded him. Steve unfolded the first mysterious paper. It turned out to be a map of California with a place called Grim Reaper’s Mine, just north of Beachdale, circled in red pen. The other paper felt fragile, as though it were very old. He carefully unfolded it, noticing it was ripped. The only thing written on the paper was a poem.

He whipped out his cell phone and sent Matt and Jenny a text telling them to meet him at Tyrone’s at eight o’clock. Next, he went to his computer, scanned the poem in, and printed out

several copies. One way or another, he was going to figure out the mystery behind the hidden papers.