# BIRTHRIGHT

Nora Roberts

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

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For my darling Kayla, the new light in my life. My wishes for you are too many to count, so I'll just wish you love. Everything magic and everything real, everything that matters springs from that.

And he who gives a child a treat
Makes joy-bells ring in Heaven's street,
But he who gives a child a home
Builds palaces in Kingdom come,
And she who gives a baby birth
Brings Savior Christ again to Earth.

JOHN MASEFIELD

Know thyself.

INSCRIBED ON THE TEMPLE
OF APOLLO AT DELPHI

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## Prologue

#### DECEMBER 12, 1974

Douglas Edward Cullen had to pee. Nerves, excitement and the Coke he'd had as part of his reward lunch at McDonald's for being good while Mama shopped combined to fill his three-year-old bladder to bursting.

He danced, in exquisite torture, from the toe of one of his red Keds to the other.

His heart was pounding so hard he thought if he didn't yell really loud or run as fast as he could, he might explode.

He loved when stuff exploded on TV.

But Mama had told him he *had* to be good. If little boys weren't good Santa would put coal in their stocking instead of toys. He wasn't sure what coal was, but he knew he wanted toys. So he only yelled and ran in his mind like his daddy had taught him to do when it was really, *really* important to keep still.

The big snowman beside him grinned and was even fatter than Douglas's Aunt Lucy. He didn't know what snowmen ate, but this one had to eat a *lot*.

The bright red nose of Rudolph, his very favorite reindeer, blinked on and off until Douglas's eyes were dazzled. He tried to entertain himself by counting the red dots that swam in front of his eyes, the way the Count counted on *Sesame Street*.

One, two, three! Three red dots! Ha ha ha ha!

But it made him feel a little bit sick.

The mall was full of noise, the blasts of Christmas music that added to his impatience, the shouts of other children, the crying of babies.

He knew all about crying babies now that he had a little sister. When babies cried you were supposed to pick them up and walk around with them singing songs, or sit with them in the rocking chair and pat them on the back till they burped.

Babies could burp right out loud and nobody made them say scuze me. Because, dummy, babies couldn't talk!

But Jessica wasn't crying now. She was sleeping in the stroller and looked like a doll baby in her red dress with the white frilly junk on it.

That's what Grandma called Jessica. Her little doll baby. But sometimes Jessie cried and cried and her face got all red and scrunched up. Nothing would stop her from crying, not the singing or the walking or the rocking chair.

Douglas didn't think she looked much like a doll baby then. She looked mean and mad. When that happened, Mama got too tired to play with him. She was never too tired to play with him before Jessica got in her belly.

Sometimes he didn't like having a little sister who cried and pooped in her pants and made Mama too tired to play.

But most of the time it was okay. He liked to look at her and watch the way she kicked her legs. And when she grabbed his finger, really tight, it made him laugh.

Grandma said he had to protect Jessica because that's what big brothers do. He'd worried so much about it that he'd snuck in to sleep on the floor beside her crib just in case the monsters who lived in the closet came to eat her in the nighttime.

But he'd woken in his own bed in the morning, so maybe he'd only dreamed he'd gone in to protect her.

They shuffled up in line, and Douglas glanced, a bit uneasily, at the smiling elves who danced around Santa's workshop. They looked a little bit mean and mad—like Jessica when she was crying really loud.

If Jessica didn't wake up, she wasn't going to get to sit on Santa's lap. It was stupid for Jessie to be all dressed up to sit on Santa's lap, because she *couldn't* say scuze me when she burped, and she *couldn't* tell Santa what she wanted for Christmas.

But he could. He was three and a half years old. He was a big boy now. Everyone said so.

Mama crouched down and spoke to him softly. When she asked if he had to pee, he shook his head. She had that tired look on her face and he was afraid if they went to the bathroom they'd *never* get back in line and see Santa.

She gave his hand a squeeze, smiled at him and promised it wouldn't be much longer.

He wanted a Hot Wheels, and a G.I. Joe, and a Fisher-Price garage, and some Matchbox cars and a big yellow bulldozer like the one his friend Mitch got for his birthday.

Jessica was too young to play with real toys. She just got girl stuff like funny dresses and stuffed animals. Girls were pretty dopey, but baby girls were even more dopey.

But he was going to tell Santa about Jessica, so he wouldn't forget to bring stuff for her when he came down the chimney at their house.

Mama was talking to someone, but he didn't listen. The grown-up talk didn't interest him. Especially when the line moved, people shifted, and he saw Santa.

He was big. It seemed to Douglas, on the first ripple of fear, that Santa wasn't so big in the cartoons or in the pictures in the storybooks.

He was sitting on his throne in front of his workshop. There were lots of elves and reindeer and snowmen. Everything was moving—heads and arms. Big, big smiles.

Santa's beard was very long. You could hardly see his face. And when he let out a big, booming *ho ho ho*, the sound of it squeezed Douglas's bladder like mean fingers.

Lights flashed, a baby wailed, elves grinned.

He was a big boy now, a big boy now. He wasn't afraid of Santa Claus.

Mama tugged his hand, told him to go ahead. Go sit on Santa's lap. She was smiling, too.

He took a step forward, then another, on legs that began to shake. And Santa hoisted him up.

Merry Christmas! Have you been a good boy?

Terror struck Douglas's heart like a hatchet. The elves were closing in, Rudolph's red nose blinked. The snowman turned his wide, round head and leered.

The big man in the red suit held him tight and stared at him with tiny, tiny eyes.

Screaming, struggling, Douglas tumbled out of Santa's lap, hit the platform hard. And wet his pants.

People moved in, voices streamed above him so all he could do was curl up and wail.

Then Mama was there, pulling him close, telling him it was all right. Fussing over him because he'd hit his nose and made it bleed.

She kissed him, stroked him and didn't scold him for wetting his pants. His breath was still coming in hard little gasps as he burrowed into her.

She gave him a big hug, lifted him up so he could press his face to her shoulder.

Still murmuring to him, she turned.

And began to scream. And began to run.

Clinging to her, Douglas looked down. And saw Jessica's stroller was empty.

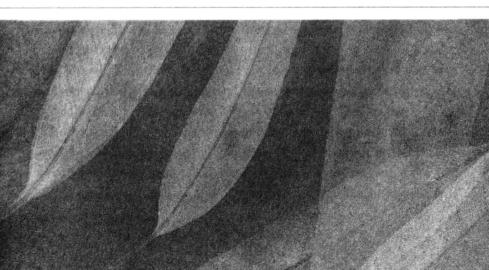


#### PART I

# The Overburden

Go where we will on the *surface* of things, men have been there before us.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU



### One

The Antietam Creek Project came to a rude halt when the blade of Billy Younger's backhoe unearthed the first skull.

It was an unpleasant surprise for Billy himself, who'd been squatting in the cage of his machine, sweating and cursing in the vicious July heat. His wife was staunchly opposed to the proposed subdivision and had given him her usual high-pitched lecture that morning while he'd tried to eat his fried eggs and link sausage.

For himself, Billy didn't give a rat's ass one way or the other about the subdivision. But a job was a job, and Dolan was paying a good wage. Almost good enough to make up for Missy's constant bitching.

Damn nagging had put him off his breakfast, and a man needed a good breakfast when he was going to be working his tail off the rest of the day.

And what he had managed to slurp up before Missy nagged away his appetite was sitting uneasily in his gut, stewed, he thought bitterly, in the goddamn wet heat.

He rammed the controls, had the satisfaction of knowing his machine would never bitch his ears off for trying to do the job. Nothing suited Billy better, even in the god-awful sweaty clutch of July, than plowing that bigass blade into the ground, feeling it take a good bite.

But scooping up a dirty, empty-eyed skull along with the rich bottomland soil, having it leer at him in that white blast of midsummer sunlight was enough to have 233-pound Billy scream like a girl and leap down from the machine as nimbly as a dancer.

His co-workers would razz him about it unmercifully until he was forced to bloody his best friend's nose in order to regain his manhood.

But on that July afternoon, he'd run over the site with the same speed and determination, and damn near the agility, he'd possessed on the football field during his high school heyday.

When he'd regained his breath and coherency, he reported to his foreman, and his foreman reported to Ronald Dolan.

By the time the county sheriff arrived, several other bones had been exhumed by curious laborers. The medical examiner was sent for, and a local news team arrived to interview Billy, Dolan and whoever else could help fill up the airtime on the evening report.

Word spread. There was talk of murder, mass graves, serial killers. Eager fingers squeezed juice out of the grapevine so that when the examination was complete, and the bones were deemed very old, a number of people weren't sure if they were pleased or disappointed.

But for Dolan, who'd already fought through petitions, protests and injunctions to turn the pristine fifty acres of boggy bottomland and woods into a housing development, the age of the bones didn't matter.

Their very existence was a major pain in his ass.

And when two days later Lana Campbell, the transplanted city lawyer, crossed her legs and gave him a smug smile, it was all Dolan could do not to pop her in her pretty face.

"You'll find the court order fairly straightforward," she told him, and kept the smile in place. She'd been one of the loudest voices against the development. At the moment, she had quite a bit to smile about.

"You don't need a court order. I stopped work. I'm cooperating with the police and the planning commission."

"Let's just consider this an additional safety measure. The County Planning Commission has given you sixty days to file a report and to convince them that your development should continue."

"I know the ropes, sweetheart. Dolan's been building houses in this county for forty-six years."

He called her "sweetheart" to annoy her. Because they both knew it, Lana only grinned. "The Historical and Preservation Societies have retained me. I'm doing my job. Members of the faculty from the University of Maryland archaeology and anthropology departments will be visiting the site. As liaison, I'm asking you to allow them to remove and test samples."

"Attorney of record, liaison." Dolan, a strongly built man with a ruddy, Irish face, leaned back in his desk chair. Sarcasm dripped from his voice. "Busy lady."

He hooked his thumbs in his suspenders. He always wore red suspenders over a blue work shirt. Part of the uniform, as he thought of it. Part of what made him one of the common men, the working class that had made his town, and his country, great.

Whatever his bank balance, and he knew it to the penny, he didn't need fancy clothes to show himself off.

He still drove a pickup truck. American-made.

He'd been born and raised in Woodsboro, unlike the pretty city lawyer. And he didn't need her, or anybody else, to tell him what his community needed. The fact was, he knew better than a lot of the people in the community about what was best for Woodsboro.

He was a man who looked to the future, and took care of his own.

"We're both busy people, so I'll come straight to the point." Lana was dead sure she was about to wipe that patronizing grin off Dolan's face. "You can't proceed on your development until the site is examined and cleared by the county. Samples need to be taken for that to happen. Any artifacts excavated won't be of any use to you. Cooperation in this matter would, we both know, go a long way toward shoring up your PR troubles."

"I don't look at them as troubles." He spread his big workingman's hands. "People need homes. The community needs jobs. The Antietam Creek development provides both. It's called progress."

"Thirty new homes. More traffic on roads not equipped to handle it, already overcrowded schools, the loss of rural sensibilities and open space."

The "sweetheart" hadn't gotten a rise out of her, but the old argument did. She drew a breath, let it out slowly. "The community fought against it. It's called quality of life. But that's another matter," she said before he could respond. "Until the bones are tested and dated, you're stuck." She tapped a finger on the court order. "Dolan Development must want that process expedited. You'll want to pay for the testing. Radiocarbon dating."

"Pay—"

Yeah, she thought, who's the winner now? "You own the property. You own the artifacts." She'd done her homework. "You know we'll fight against the construction, bury you in court orders and briefs until this is settled. Pay the two dollars, Mr. Dolan," she added as she got to her feet. "Your attorneys are going to give you the same advice."

Lana waited until she had closed the office door behind her before letting the grin spread across her face. She strolled out, took a deep breath of thick summer air as she gazed up and down Woodsboro's Main Street.

She refrained from doing a happy dance—too undignified—but she nearly skipped down the sidewalk like a ten-year-old. This was *her* town now. Her community. Her home. And had been since she'd moved there from Baltimore two years before.

It was a good town, steeped in tradition and history, fueled by gossip, protected from the urban sprawl by distance and the looming shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Coming to Woodsboro had been a huge leap of faith for a born and bred city girl. But she couldn't bear the memories in Baltimore after losing her husband. Steve's death had flattened her. It had taken her nearly six months to find her feet again, to pull herself out of the sticky haze of grief and deal with life.

And life demanded, Lana thought. She missed Steve. There was still a hole in her where he'd been. But she'd had to keep breathing, keep functioning. And there was Tyler. Her baby. Her boy. Her treasure.

She couldn't bring back his daddy, but she could give him the best childhood possible.

He had room to run now, and a dog to run with. Neighbors and friends,

and a mother who'd do whatever needed to be done to keep him safe and happy.

She checked her watch as she walked. It was Ty's day to go to his friend Brock's after preschool. She'd give Brock's mother, Jo, a call in an hour. Just to make sure everything was all right.

She paused at the intersection, waited for the light. Traffic was slow, as traffic was meant to be in small towns.

She didn't look small-town. Her wardrobe had once been selected to suit the image of an up-and-coming lawyer in a major urban firm. She might have hung out her shingle in a little rural dot of less than four thousand people, but that didn't mean she couldn't continue to dress for success.

She wore a summer blue suit in crisp linen. The classic tailoring complemented her delicate build and her own sense of tidiness. Her hair was a straight swing of sunny blond that brushed the jawline of a pretty, youthful face. She had round blue eyes that were often mistaken for guileless, a nose that tipped up at the end and a deeply curved mouth.

She swung into Treasured Pages, beamed at the man behind the counter. And finally did her victory dance.

Roger Grogan took off his reading glasses and raised his bushy silver eyebrows. He was a trim and vigorous seventy-five, and his face made Lana think of a canny leprechaun.

He wore a short-sleeved white shirt, and his hair, a beautiful mix of silver and white, exploded in untamed tufts.

"You look pretty full of yourself." His voice was gravel spilling down a steel chute. "Must've seen Ron Dolan."

"Just came from there." She indulged herself with another spin before she leaned on the counter. "You should've come with me, Roger. Just to see his face."

"You're too hard on him." Roger tapped a fingertip to Lana's nose. "He's just doing what he thinks is right."

When Lana merely angled her head, stared blandly, Roger laughed. "Didn't say I agreed with him. Boy's got a hard head, just like his old man did. Doesn't have the sense to see if a community's this divided over something, you need to rethink."

"He'll be rethinking now," Lana promised. "Testing and dating those

bones is going to cause him some major delays. And if we're lucky, they're going to be old enough to draw a lot of attention—national attention—to the site. We can delay the development for months. Maybe years."

"He says it's progress," she mumbled.

"He's not alone in that."

"Alone or not, he's wrong. You can't plant houses like a corn crop. Our projections show—"

Roger held up a hand. "Preaching to the choir, counselor."

"Yeah." She let out a breath. "Once we get the archaeological survey, we'll see what we see. I can't wait. Meanwhile, the longer the development's delayed, the more Dolan loses. And the more time we have to raise money. He might just reconsider selling that land to the Woodsboro Preservation Society."

She pushed back her hair. "Why don't you let me take you to lunch? We can celebrate today's victory."

"Why aren't you letting some young, good-looking guy take *you* out to lunch?"

"Because I lost my heart to you, Roger, the first time I saw you." It wasn't far from the truth. "In fact, hell with lunch. Let's you and me run off to Aruba together."

It made him chuckle, nearly made him blush. He'd lost his wife the same year Lana had lost her husband. He often wondered if that was part of the reason for the bond that had forged between them so quickly.

He admired her sharp mind, her stubborn streak, her absolute devotion to her son. He had a granddaughter right about her age, he thought. Somewhere.

"That'd set this town on its ear, wouldn't it? Be the biggest thing since the Methodist minister got caught playing patty-cake with the choir director. But the fact is, I've got books to catalogue—just in. Don't have time for lunch or tropical islands."

"I didn't know you'd gotten new stock. Is this one?" At his nod, she gently turned the book around.