

# Baghdad Heist

## Sample Chapter (1)

*Rural Virginia, 1995*

Charlie sent thoughts of killing Old Roger to the back of her mind.  
For now, she concentrated on his capture.

Sixteen-year-old Charlotte Glass lay on a weathered crag, warmed by the long, sun-drenched day. A blonde, home-cut bob framed a pretty face, blossoming with bronzed freckles, indicators of time well spent in the glow of an endless summer. She was in her favorite spot, shoeless and carefree. Eyes of the deepest blue stared into the darkest recesses of the meandering waters below. There lay the plumpest brown trout in the river, Old Roger, in his usual spot, taunting and tempting her. She studiously applied her favored fly, the black butcher, then carefully cast upstream. Charlie's fidgeting fingers mended the line, centering the feathery snare on the perfect course. Tensions rose as the nymph danced around the margins of the surface. Charlie fought the urge to fidget with line, rod, and reel; preferring, for once, to allow nature to take its course. Passions ran deep as the lure slipped below the surface into the settling waters.

*Moments of truth*, her father called them.

She waited with baited line, nerves jittering, as the butcher drifted ever closer to the wily old trout.

*Patience. Patience.*

Suddenly, a stumbling hulk bludgeoned through her line of sight. Losing balance, rod, and temper, her father toppled headlong into the river before her. After much flailing, he regained his footing. A mutton-chop grin and a thunderous "Tadah!" followed immediately thereafter. Charlie sat, laughing and speechless. From the serene to the ridiculous. The merriment continued during the frenetic fumbling for rod and reel. With frothy river foam drenching her dad's bushy mustache, he gave the perfect impression of a drunken walrus scrabbling for a submerged ball. Success came slowly and noisily. Eventually, he honked and splashed his way back to the bank, his rod held high for balance and in celebration.

The performance was over.

Old Roger remained at large.

Once beached, Pop playfully chased his daughter down, his sodden frame looming large. Shrieks and growls rang through breezy leaves as his bear hug enveloped her. His cloudy gray eyes watched down from above. She was home. It had never felt so good, nor smelled so bad. They loved their place in each other's lives. She was the son her father had always wanted but never had. He was the father she'd always wanted and always had. The pair shared a soppy moment. The smell of wet tweeds ripened in the sun.

"We'll get him next time," her father promised.

Preferring the thrill of the chase more than the glory of success, Charlie smiled. "I doubt that very much, Pop." Charlie squinted. "What's that?" A glistening crevice between a nearby boulder caught her eye. She narrowed both gaze and brow but could produce no definitive answer. Her bond with her father broke when she raced to investigate. Never one to spoil her fun or curtail her adventures, Pop let her go.

Down at the rock face, almost obscured, Charlie made out the form of a mottled bauble. She flicked and picked at the object, but her fingers were too weak to pry the item from nature's grasp. When it shifted, her heart jolted. *Treasure*. She darted to her wicker tackle box and tugged its distressed leather strap through a tarnished buckle. The vintage lid opened with a dried creak.

"Scissors? Scissors? Scissors? Aha!"

In a flash, she returned to the site and started digging like a crazed Klondiker. Midway through the frenzied attack, the mystery object broke free and skittered off down the rock face. Charlie followed in hot pursuit. A desperate lunge led to its capture.

Perplexed Pop looked on. Although, soaked and shivering, his head shook more. His incredulous, admiring smile widened with every breath. Charlie pulled the trinket close and squinted in the sunlight. Mild disappointment washed over her. It looked to be an old black bauble with a buckled shank. It wasn't the magical treasure she'd hoped, but it seemed worthy of a place in her secret trinket box. She gripped it between thumb and middle finger, squatted down by the side of the stream, and washed her new totem in the fresh water. She handed over her talisman with equal amounts of pomp and pride.

"What do you think?"

Pop twisted his face to prepare for the disdain that would surely follow.

"Not much—" His face stiffened. His elbow bent and straightened, bringing the piece closer, then further away, as he sought the perfect distance to bring it into focus. A flicker of intrigue escaped the corner of Pop's eye as he fumbled under the flap of his breast pocket. As part of the inspection process, he retrieved and donned his wire-rimmed spectacles.

Charlie bounced from one foot to the other, many times over. "What is it?" she inquired.

"Old brass. It's probably nothing. Patience."

Charlie beamed, impressed that her find had induced such excitement in her reserved father. "Don't you always say patience is a card game?"

Pop rasped the button across his tousled tweeds. Even through the stubborn tarnish, the button told tales.

"What do you see?"

"An eagle with spread wings and a shield on its chest. Intricate, almost imperial."

Pop turned the item over and cast his eyes around the bent shank at the back of the button. In frustration at not being able to read the lettering, he reluctantly handed Charlie the button with an accompanying humph.

"What does that say?"

It was now Pop's turn to bob from foot to foot. Charlie lifted the piece to her bright eyes and slowly twisted the angle of the button to bring the wording into focus. She vocalized each letter as they slowly came into view.

“W-A-T-E-R-B-U-R-Y.”

Pop blurted. “Manufacturing? Does it say Scoville?”

“Hang on.”

She lifted her head in puzzlement. “Scoville Manufacturing. Waterbury.”

“Wahooooo!” With a childish yelp, Pop snatched the button back. “Do you know what this is?”

Charlie rolled a sarcastic eye. “Duh, a button?”

“A Civil War button, from a Union General. Scoville made all their buttons.”

Charlie threw out a skeptical glare. “How could you possibly know all this?”

“A lifetime of studying and teaching the Civil War.” Pop's time as a custodian within the Smithsonian allowed him unprecedented access to the array of artifacts held within its museums and archives.

The scrubbing intensified. “Have you seen one of these before?”

“No. But I've heard of them. Who hasn't?”

“Er, every other person in the world?”

Pop ignored the jibe, too distracted by the new find. He surveyed the scene. “It must have fallen here as they drove the ford. They skirmished around these parts for most of the war. It would have been a great place to set up camp. Easily defended, multiple escape routes and difficult to find. Grant came this way during the Battle of the Wilderness. It could be his.”

“Battle of the Wilderness?”

“The first battle of the 1864 Virginia Overland Campaign. Goodness, do they not teach you anything at that school of yours?”

Even at her young age, Charlie had already inherited her father's skeptical streak. He had taught her well. “Aren't you getting carried away?”

They laughed at the tenuous possibilities as Pop lifted the glinting button into view. “This deserves to be in the museum.”

Charlie playfully snatched the button back. “You deserve to be in a museum.” She seized a spare spool of fly line from the confines of her wicker basket. She neatly and quickly cut the dark line to the exact length. A sheet knot ensnared the shank of the button with seamless efficiency. Pop gawked in questioning disbelief when Charlie threw the fresh loop around her neck.

Under Pop's incredulous gaze, Charlie explained the rationale: “If I find out it's genuine, you will weasel me 'round to giving it away, and I'll probably never wear it. If it's not real, I will be sad. It's best that I don't know.”

“The biggest lies in our lives are the ones we tell ourselves,” Pop protested.

“Who said that?”

“I did.”

Pop seemed transfixed by the button, but the look on Charlie’s face amplified her determination. With a smirk and a shrug, she threw the trinket down the front of her shirt. Pop tossed his palms open in resignation. “Okay, you win. I am heading back up to the cabin. I am starting to stink.”

“*Starting* to stink?” laughed Charlie.

Her father offered a loving nod and moved to drag her close. Charlie broke free and darted on ahead.

“Race you!”

Excited yelps clattered through the leafy enclave as Charlie made her escape. Pop trudged off through the undergrowth, well off the pace. Thorny briars snared his tangled breeches, as if reluctant to let him go. Crashes and curses accompanied his undignified retreat as he plowed an alternative furrow through the snaggy brushwood. By the time he had loosened his breeches from one overly clingy briar, Charlie had long disappeared.

Back at the log cabin, Charlie bounded into her room, slamming the latched door behind her. Dropping to her tiny knees, she pulled back the threadbare rug before tussling with a loose floorboard. After yanking the tired lumber to one side, she retrieved a dilapidated cigar box. Despite its small size, the box looked lived in. With impressive ceremony, she laid the talisman inside the box alongside all the mementos from a life yet to be lived; a faded photograph of her departed mother, letters from a friend, postcards from afar, seashells, trinkets, and findings from adventures gone by. The burnished button took its place within her memory chest.

At that moment, Charlie did not realize: one day, that little trinket would save her life.