

Treasure at Poison Ivy Lodge  
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2113 words

Inez and Curty were together again at last. To celebrate their seventh summer in a row at the lake, they gave one another a double high-five and a long squeezey boa constrictor hug.

Number 7 was a special year—they could play on the beach alone if a grown-up—NoNo or NaNa, a mom, Uncle Coley or his girlfriend Maggie—watched from the lakehouse deck. They promised to go no farther into the water than the tops of their ankles.

Every day was an adventure at the lakehouse they all called Poison Ivy Lodge, a ramshackle collection of rooms built on stilts dug deeply into the shifting sands of the bank. Everyone was surprised to find the lodge still standing each summer after the long, snowy winters. Inez and Curty liked to imagine that it was the poison ivy vines and bushes, with their teardrop-shaped leaves, all shiny and red, that kept the 100-year-old place from tumbling into the lake when the icy storms blew in.

The whole beach community knew that Poison Ivy Lodge was built on one of the biggest, meanest patches of poison ivy anyone had ever seen. And Inez and Curty were forbidden from exploring underneath the house. Stories of red, itchy, oozy bumps covering their arms and legs were enough to keep them away, as were tales of mice, other rodents, and spiders. And if that wasn't enough, NoNo's story about how the toilet fell through the floor while he was reading on it one morning ... they wouldn't want big NoNo landing on their heads!

So they didn't venture under the house—not until year 7.

Inez and Curty had made a plan to explore the underside of Poison Ivy Lodge in snatches of phone conversations throughout the school year. The time had come.

One day when all of the big people were out and about—the moms playing tennis with Uncle Coley and Maggie, and NaNa at the farmer's market, and the dads not in yet for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July visit—they executed their plan. NoNo was in charge for a couple of hours and that meant it was the perfect day.

After lunch, NoNo said he'd be reading the paper on the deck. From the kitchen window, Inez and Curty watched him.

"Let's just wait for his head to roll to the side. We'll know he's asleep then," said Inez.

"Good idea!" said Curty, switching on and off the flashlight in his hands.

"Stop! The battery might die," said Inez, grabbing the little green light.

It seemed as if days passed. NoNo could read and read and read—he was always behind a paper. They stared at the clock and worried about the others returning home. But just when their patience was about gone, a steady wind came up from the lake, making NoNo's newspaper flop over. He didn't budge—he was already dreaming, and his head gently rolled out of the sun.

The back of the house was a forgotten place. There were boards from the old outhouse that NoNo used as a kid. There were worn beach chairs and a rusting grill. All of it somewhat

buried by mounds of sand. Inez unearthed the duffel bag full of protective clothing (sweatsuits, goggles, gardening gloves, and baseball caps) that she'd buried a few days earlier.

The two stood in the front of the slight opening between the boards that led to the crawlspace, covered in thick cobwebs.

"I need you with me this time," Inez said, handing Curty items from the duffel bag. "No buts."

"Maybe I should stay out here and watch for someone," suggested Curty.

"Oh no you don't, Curty! No being a scaredy cat."

"I'm not a scaredy cat. We never do things this way. I'm being smart," said Curty.

"Because I'm older, I get to say how it's done," said Inez.

She was exactly 45 days older (or the amount of time between Halloween and Christmas). And Curty was reacting to the change in their approach to mischief. Inez's role was always Mischief-Maker and Curty's was Lookout. Just before a Christmas party at NaNa and NoNo's house a couple of years ago, Inez put orange food coloring in NaNa's white frosting, while Curty listened from the next room for any stirring in the napping household. The unusual color delighted her guests, but made NaNa so unhappy that she didn't let them eat any. At Thanksgiving, Inez put a tiny rubber duckie inside the turkey with the rest of the stuffing, while Curty kept the others entertained in the living room with a card trick he'd learned. The most forgiving person in the bunch—their uncle Uncle Coley—ended up with the squeaky toy in his portion.

Possibly because he'd never had a problem, Curty was fine with being the Lookout. And Inez was thrilled to perform and take credit for the dirty deeds, which were mostly her ideas anyway. It worked. But this time was different.

"This isn't smart. NoNo might wake up," Curty said.

"He'll be out for another half hour—I know these things. Now, I'll go first just to break the trail, and when I whistle like this—ffffff— you follow me in," she said, fixing her goggles and cap for action. She flicked the flashlight on and then off and then on again.

"You must always test your equipment," she said.

"That's what I was doing before and you told me to stop!" Curty said.

"You weren't testing, you were wasting."

Curty rolled his eyes, and Inez re-fastened her goggles and cap, poked her foot through the cobwebs and then scrambled under the house.

"Be careful!" Curty said, crouching down, his stomach fluttering. He heard the scratching and scritch of the sand for a while, and then that stopped. He listened for Inez's whistle, but heard everything else instead—the birds, the waves, hammering a few houses away, some dogs barking. He got nervous and went around to the front of the house to check on NoNo. Still sleeping, though the wind had gotten stronger and had actually blown all of his

papers around the deck. Curty worried that the sound of their flapping might wake him up sooner than they anticipated. He scurried back to the opening to the crawlspace.

"Inez!" he said in a loud whisper. He called again, "Inez! Are you all right?"

He got closer and could see the beam of light moving around and then finally—ffffff—she whistled. Curty took a deep breath and peaked around the corner of the house and repositioned his goggles and cap as his cousin had done and went under.

The sand was cool and very soft and there was no sign of any poison ivy, just pieces of driftwood and rocks. Sometimes grown-ups said the silliest things.

Curty followed the beam of light, and within a few slithers, Curty was beside Inez, who was wiping her face and hair with her hands.

"Find anything?" Curty asked.

"Just a lot of cobwebs. Here, take the flashlight," she said, and then spit.

Curty was suddenly not interested in the flashlight. What if he revealed a mouse or a skunk? But he had to be brave. He slowly moved the light in a circle around them, and in the corner of the house, he noticed something glittery.

He gulped, and turned the light on his stomach so he wouldn't have to see the thing any longer. "What was that?"

"What? Where?" Inez gasped.

Curty shook the light. "There!" he said. Inez grabbed the flashlight and put it in her mouth and began scrambling in the direction of the red and yellow flickers.

Curty was on Inez's heels, holding his breath to avoid eating or breathing in the sand she was kicking up.

When they both arrived at the chest, as big as the 8-slice toaster in the kitchen, they didn't say one word. It was made of dark wood, carved with swirls that looked like waves, and adorned with shiny red and yellow jewels. There was a latch and a tiny gold lock. Inez handed Curty the light, and with wide eyes and a nod of her head, let Curty know she was going to try to open it. She lifted her hand. And then they both heard NoNo calling them.

"Curtis Fisher! Inez Frances! Time to walk Beaucoup. Let's go!"

Curty gulped again. "Oh no, oh no! See, I knew I should have stayed out there!"

Inez grabbed the flashlight back from him and turned it off. "Shhhh..." she said.

When they reached the edge of the house, they stripped to their bathing suits, and threw all else in a pile underneath an old beach chair. Inez said she'd rescue it later. NoNo suspected nothing while they all took a long walk on the beach with the dog; he just told the same stories they'd heard millions of times about how the beach was better when he was a kid.

In the days that followed, no red itchy bumps appeared, and there was no safe chance to go back underneath the house again to see the treasure either. And yet, they dreamed of it.

For Inez, it was the forgotten riches of a king and queen, who had traveled by horse and buggy to this very hiding spot. For Curty, it was full of gold, stolen by the fiercest band of pirates the lake had ever known.

"Pirates work on the ocean, not lakes," said Inez to Curty, one afternoon while they shucked corn down on the beach for supper. "Plus, we do not want any part of a group of people who steal."

"Well, your idea doesn't make sense either! Kings and queens don't live around here any more and NoNo's father would have seen the treasure when he built the house!"

Inez planned to restore the riches to the heirs of the royal couple and anticipated a great reward in return. She was worried, however, that she didn't have the appropriate clothing for a royal meeting. Feeling adventurous, she asked Maggie, who was studying fashion in school, to help her look glamorous. Over the years they had shared moments of exasperation over various family members' taste in clothes. Maggie swathed Inez in a swishy beach cover-up and gold high-heeled sandals. Now Curty had to ask for help, too. He had Maggie draw anchor and parrot tattoos on his arms in ballpoint pen and marker. One afternoon, Maggie brought home a red bandana from the five and dime and tied a perfect knot and tied the perfect pirate cap, which convinced Curty to wear it rather than his Red Sox baseball cap.

Inez and Curty didn't dare speak of it, not after their Uncle Coley found a list of names they'd written down for their treasure-finding company: Treasures R Us, Finders, Inc., Search Party. Inez was quick with the satisfying response when Nana asked about the names.

"Oh, a list of books I need for school," she said.

"They sound interesting," said Uncle Coley. "We'll have to go to the library in Port someday soon to see if they have them."

This made Curty nervous and he felt that flutter in his tummy again, but Inez just said, "Sure, Uncle Coley," as if it wouldn't matter if the librarians said, "No book like that exists anywhere in the world."

Even when they were alone on the beach, they were quiet, imagining that the wind off the lake might carry their words up to the deck.

On the night that their dads arrived for the 4<sup>th</sup> of the July holiday, everyone stayed up too late laughing, which meant that Inez and Curty did, too. When they were asked to clear the table, Inez cornered Curty in the kitchen and said, "I'm going under."

Curty grabbed her arms. "No! It's too dark, too scary! You can't"

"Curty, we have to. It's a perfect time. You stay here and cover for me. I'll be back in 5 minutes."

Curty opened his mouth to speak, but Inez put her finger to his lips. "Shhh," she said, and pulled a flashlight out from behind the dog food bag, and slipped out the side door.

Curty thought to look at the clock. When the minute hand reached the seven, Inez would be back. But he knew really that the hand would reach at least the nine before she returned. That's just the way things worked with Inez.

Beaucoup showed up wagging his tail. He nuzzled his head under Curty's hand, so Curty scratched his head for a while. Then the phone rang on the wall above his head. He jumped up to reach it and knocked it out of its cradle and on to the floor. "I'm sorry," he said into the receiver. It was for NaNa, so he ran it to her, and saw his mom walking around the room stacking dinner plates, and likely headed for the kitchen.

"I'll do it, mom!" Curty said, pulling the stack of plates from her hands.

"Why don't you get Inez' help?" asked his mother.

"I got it!" he said, and braced the messy stack against his stomach.

He piled them in the sink and scrubbed them without being asked, but did not look at the clock. He wiped his soapy hands. He straightened a picture of himself and Inez that was stuck to the fridge, and started to write his full name with the magnet letters. Just then, Beaucoup barked. Curty tackled him with a hug, and then he heard Inez's voice.

"Is anyone there?" she whispered.

Curty looked behind him and could still hear all of the grown-ups laughing and telling stories in the living room voices. "No. Just Beaucoup."

Inez came into the kitchen, still wearing her sweatsuit. Beaucoup lunged out of Curty's arms and sniffed her up and down.

Curty waited for an answer. Inez could be tricky, so he wasn't sure whether her frown was real.

"It's gone!" She said, and threw her hands up to her face.

"What's gone?" asked Uncle Coley, standing in the kitchen door. "And aren't you hot wearing all of those clothes, Ms. Inez? It must be 80 degrees in this room. Darn stove heats up the whole place." He walked over to the window above the sink and cranked it open.

Curty stroked Beaucoup's fur faster and faster, while he waited for Inez to answer Uncle Coley. She ran her tongue over her teeth several times and then said, "Ah, the moon's gone! The moon's not out tonight. Curty and I wanted to get a moon tan, right Curty?"

Curty couldn't believe how smart Inez was sometimes. He thought he could never have come up with such a story under pressure. But did Uncle Coley believe it? Curty rolled his eyes to the left.

"You two are so imaginative! Oh, to be seven again," Uncle Coley said, and rubbed Curty's head. "Well, you'll have a full moon in a couple of weeks and then again in a month, so there's plenty of tanning time. Now why did I come in here? Oh, some more ice."

The next day was the fourth of July, which meant the start of the tennis tournament, lots of cooking, and decorating with blue and red.

Both Curty and Inez slept in until 8:30 in the morning because they'd had trouble sleeping. For Curty it was because Inez kept threatening to go back under the house again, just for one more look. She was certain she must have just missed the treasure because she was so rushed. He kept telling her that pirates always come back for their treasure, but she was not listening to him. Finally, he just got in bed next to her, so he'd know if she tried to leave.

Over cereal and bananas, Curty and Inez were quiet. Nana said, "Hey you chums, why so glum? It's the birthday of our nation! I know you love birthdays!"

Without looking up, Inez said, "But we're in Canada, not the United States. It's silly to celebrate here."

"Oh my dear, seven going on thirteen!" Nana said. "Guess I won't ask you to help me to hang streamers."

"I'll help, Nana," Curty said with a mouthful of food.

"When you're done," Nana said. "And what's that bird doing on your arm?"

Curty shoved more cereal in his mouth.

Inez sulked in the middle of the living room in the papason chair, while Curty helped Nana with the red, white, and blue streamers and balloons. In fact, Inez stayed there all day reading a mystery, while everyone else strolled in and out of the house to and from the tennis tournament, the store, and the beach, inviting her to join them, eat something, go for a dip. Even Curty got tired of trying to get her to do something other than sit behind a book.

"Now you are just being rude!" Curty finally said and ran out before he could see her face, letting the door slam behind him.

Uncle Coley and Maggie were on the beach playing in the waves. They invited him in, but now he was feeling sulky. He just sat in the sand.

"Hey, buddy, what's going on? Want to go for a walk?"

They resumed the family tradition of picking up sea glass. Curty wasn't too distracted by Inez's insolence to find about five perfectly blue and smooth pieces within a short stretch of beach.

"Inez got you down?"

"I hate it when she pouts. We can't play."

Uncle Coley chuckled and put his arm around Curty's back. "Hah, women!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Maggie's pretty sulky right now, too?"

"Maggie?" Curty stopped. "No way, she's so fun."

Uncle Coley laughed again, and handed Curty a soft green piece of glass the length of his finger. "Well, I am glad you think so. Does Inez think so, too?"

"Are you kidding? Inez thinks she's cooler than anyone in the whole wide world," Curty said, feeling the edges of a yellow one before throwing it back into the waves. "I think she's pretty."

Uncle Coley smiled and took a deep breath and hopped on one foot. "Great news. Great news. It's unanimous. Everyone loves Maggie. Can you keep a secret?"

Curty was rinsing a boring white piece and couldn't help but think, oh, gosh not another one, but then said, "Yes! I think so."

"OK, great," said Uncle Coley, rubbing his hands together. "Let's keep walking. I need to tell you something."

Inez was asleep in the papason chair when Curty returned from the beach. Curty was glad that Inez was asleep, and hoped she'd sleep away her rudeness because there was a lot of excitement planned for later that day. Curty was pretty sure he would have no trouble keeping the secrets, but it was easier not to have Inez awake and questioning his every move.

Curty and Maggie played several round of Go Fish on the deck and then shucked corn and peeled potatoes. She taught him how to peel one long piece of skin and he'd almost mastered it by the last potato in the bag. He kept eyeing the papason chair, and sneaking looks at Maggie. When Uncle Coley walked by and winked at him he buried a giggle in a cough. Oh, so many secrets! He couldn't wait until dusk.

They all ate dinner on the deck—the potato salad, the corn, and hamburgers. Curty and Uncle Coley exchanged looks when no one else was looking. When they were nearly done, Uncle Coley nodded to Curty.

Curty nodded back and said, "Hey Inez, let's clear the dishes and get down to the beach!" He didn't wait for an answer, and miraculously, Inez followed him.

While they were stacking dirty dishes, Inez said, "Ech, what a boring day!"

Without looking at Inez's face, Curty said, "Well, I have an idea that will make it a whole lot more fun!"

"Really? What?"

Curty forced back the smile that showed he knew more than Inez about everything at this moment, and pushed forward the one that just had a fun activity to share.

"Well, I got this tip, from some people down the beach when I was picking up sea glass. They said they had found a treasure under their house—"

"Shhh..." Inez said, looking around. "Who are they? Do we know them? You didn't tell them about what we found, did you?"

"No and No! They are from a different bay. Now listen, Inez," Curty said. "They said the next day it was gone. And then they said they saw something weird sticking out of the sand

at the bottom of their beach steps, so they started digging. They found the same treasure again. They called the police and got a reward."

"No way! So..." Inez's eyes got wider and wider. She was doing exactly what Curty wanted her to do—this had never happened! "So, we should go to the beach, right? Right now, right?"

"Wait, Inez. I want to bring Uncle Coley and Maggie with us. You know, just in case whoever owns the treasure comes back and they're mean, or something."

"Good idea, Curty," Inez said, grabbing his shoulder. "Good idea."

Down the rickety beach stairs the four went. They set up their pails and shovels around the spot Curty said had to be it.

"Can we start?" Inez asked Curty.

"Yes, let's!"

They all dug—the red, yellow, and blue shovels were flying. After a few minutes, they had dug a hole that would fit two treasures, but there was no sign of any real treasure. Curty knew what was coming from Inez.

"Those people were wrong. There's no treasure here," Inez said and she threw her shovel to the side.

Curty and Uncle Coley winked at one another.

"Keep digging Inez," said Curty.

As planned, it was Inez who first hit the chest with the shovel. She stood up and started jumping up and down. "Yippee!"

They all started digging, digging, and digging, until the red and yellow bejeweled black chest was completely uncovered.

Curty and Uncle Coley let Inez and Maggie dust off the remaining sand. And then they all just stared. The treasure sparkled in the setting sun.

"Wow! What do we do now?" asked Maggie.

Uncle Coley said, "You open it, Maggie." And he handed her the key.

"Me?" Maggie asked and looked around. "What about..."

"No, Maggie, you," Inez said. Curty was amazed. She was really smart. She got it.

"Me?" Maggie smiled and rolled her eyes. "Coley, what have you done?"

"Let's find out!" said Inez.

Maggie turned the key in the gold lock, pulled it off, unhooked the latch slowly, and then lifted the lid back. In the chest sat a teensy weensy red velvet box. Maggie held it in her

hands and smiled as if the box itself was the treasure. Finally she opened it, and in it was the diamond ring Uncle Coley said had been Inez and Curty's great-grandmother's.

"Will you marry me, Maggie?" asked Uncle Coley.

"Yes!" Maggie said and reached for Uncle Coley, who picked her up and spun her in the air.

"Yay!" yelled Inez and Curty, and then they ran up the beach stairs to tell the others, who were all on their way down to start the bonfire and watch the fireworks.

After several s'mores and lots of fireworks, Inez pulled her beach chair over to Curty. She brought the chest, now empty of Maggie's ring, and plopped it down in front of them. The firelight made the jewels on top bright. Curty wondered if she was going to be mad at him for knowing secrets she didn't know, but he knew he'd done the right thing.

"So much for pirates and kings and queens, huh?" Inez said.

Curty thought about it for a second and said, "We can make up any story we want, Inez. It can still be a buried treasure ... if we want."

Inez ran her fingers over the top of the treasure and then turned toward him. "You're right, Curty! You are absolutely right!"