



A Precious Inheritance

By Paula Roe

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A Precious Inheritance (Harlequin Desire)

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A Precious Inheritance By Paula Roe Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #3703453 in Books
- Published on: 2012-10-02
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.62" h x .50" w x 4.21" l, .20 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 192 pages



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Former PA, office manager, theme park hostess, software trainer, aerobics instructor and Wheel of Fortune contestant, Paula Roe is now a Borders Books best seller and one Australia's Desire authors. She lives in Sydney, Australia and when she's not writing, Paula designs websites, judges writing contests, battles a social media addiction, watches way too much TV and reads a lot. And bakes a pretty good carrot cake, too!

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"Five hundred thousand. I have half a million dollars, ladies and gentlemen. Any more bids?"

The auctioneer's French-accented baritone rose above the electric whispers spreading through the eager crowd at Waverly's. The atmosphere was a living, breathing thing, undulating in intense waves of excitement and curiosity, and Chase Harrington could practically feel the energy bouncing off each and every bidder in the room, the familiar subdued rumble of gossip reverberating off the velvet-papered walls.

The chandeliered auction room with its tufted high-backed chairs and polished wooden floor was a far cry from Obscure, Texas. And for once, no one was gossiping about him: they were all fixated on the auction.

Being able to offer D. B. Dunbar's hand-notated final draft for sale had been a massive coup for Waverly's, one of New York's oldest—and most scandalous—auction houses. Millions around the world had been riveted by the tragic death of America's famous children's author in a plane crash last October. But after the usual outpouring of grief, commentary quickly turned to the issue of the reclusive thirty-year-old's final book in his acclaimed Charlie Jack: Teenage Ninja Warrior series. Countless Facebook fan pages, regular trending on Twitter and fan fiction sites were all about one thing—was there a fourth book and, if so, when would it be published?

Now, *that* was full-scale attention.

Chase's fingers tightened on his paddle, nerves as tight as a teenager on his first date. Enter the distant relative, some cousin twice removed, desperate for money and fame.. Walter. .Walter... Shalvey, that was it. Yeah, Shalvey was a narcissistic bottom feeder, but unfortunately he knew how to play the media, drip-feeding just enough information to keep the story in the public eye for months. The guy was not only set for life, thanks to lucrative royalties and associated licensing fees from the first three books. There was also a fourth book—Dunbar's agent had just sold it for seven figures last week, with a scheduled publication date of April.

Which was way too late.

Chase cast an impatient glance over the crowded room. Judging by the turnout today, the hype had worked. Not that it was any old public auction, oh, no. Invitation only meant handpicked rich, famous or otherwise connected. He'd already spotted a politician and a socialite, plus an incognito actor who was rumored to be interested in the movie rights for his production company.

The extremely private Dunbar would probably be rolling over in his grave right about now.

"Any more bids?" repeated the auctioneer, his gavel poised and ready to call the sale.

Chase may have spent years honing his "detached and aloof" expression, but inside, a triumphant smile itched to escape. That manuscript would be his. He could almost taste it.

"Five hundred and *ten* thousand dollars. Thank you, ma'am."

A unified gasp coursed through the crowd, drowning out Chase's soft curse. Fist clenched tight on his paddle, he smoothly lifted it.

The auctioneer nodded at him. "Five hundred and twenty."

The sharply dressed blonde sitting next to him finally looked up from her cell phone. "You *do* know the book is being published in six months, right?"

"Yes."

She paused, but when Chase said no more, shrugged and went back to her phone.

Another wave of murmurs bathed the spectators, then... "Five hundred and thirty thousand dollars."

Oh, no, you don't. Chase raised his paddle again then followed the auctioneer's gaze.

His rival was on the far side of the room, three rows up, standing with her back against the wall. Petite, huge eyes, fiery-red hair pulled back into a no-nonsense hairdo, grim expression. He noticed all that within seconds then, oddly, *that severe black suit isn't working with her pale skin.*

Right. But she *was* determined, judging by the way she countered his bid again, her brows dipping before her chin tipped up defiantly.

She was also, he realized as he ruthlessly picked her apart, a woman totally focused on projecting a haughty, untouchable facade. A woman obviously used to getting her own way.

And just like that, a broken fragment of his past jabbed him, flattening his mouth as a thousand sour memories filled it.

Oh, no. You are not sixteen anymore and she is definitely not a Perfect.

The Perfects... Man, he'd managed to not think about those three jerks and their catty girlfriends in years. Perfect in looks, perfect in social skills, perfect in freezing out anyone labeled "unsuitable" by their beautiful standards. Goddamn Perfects had made high school a living hell. He'd barely gotten out alive.

He glared at the woman, cataloging the familiar arrogant tilt of her chin, the aura of entitlement and control, the superiority as she looked down her nose at everyone. Judging him, finding him lacking. Unacceptable. Unworthy.

Get it together, man. You buried that life a thousand times over. You're not that helpless boy with the white-trash parents anymore.

Yet he couldn't take his eyes off her. His teeth ground together so tightly his jaw began to ache.

He finally tore his gaze back to the auctioneer before the poison filled him, and called out loudly, "One million dollars."

The ripple of surprise erupted into a tsunami. Chase glanced over at his rival, his face expressionless. *Try beating that, princess.*

She blinked once, twice, those huge eyes studying him with such silent intent that he felt a frown furrow his brow.

Then she turned away, her paddle loose at her side as she shook her head at the auctioneer.

It was over a few seconds later.

Yes. Victory pulsed through him as he stood and made his way down the row of congratulatory observers.

"Congratulations," the blonde said as she followed him through the tightly packed crowd. "Me, I could think of better things to spend a million bucks on."

Chase gave her a thin smile then glanced across the room one last time.

She was gone.

He scanned the crowd. Blonde. Blonde. Brunette. Not red enough. Ah...

His gaze lingered and people began to move, finally parting to offer a better view.

She was talking to a tall blonde woman in a sharp suit, and as that woman turned, recognition hit.

Ann Richardson, beleaguered CEO of Waverly's.

He'd read more than he cared to about Waverly's these past months. Movie stars, scandals, a missing golden statue. Crazy stuff that belonged in bestselling fiction, not real life. Sometimes he found it hard to believe he actually moved in some of the same social circles.

But he knew firsthand how dark the flipside could be, especially when money was involved. Take Ann Richardson—a driven, charismatic woman who'd dragged the Waverly name through the tabloids, thanks to her alleged affair with Dalton Rothschild.

He scowled. There was something about Rothschild that rubbed him the wrong way... Oh, he had bags of charm and was a talented businessman, but Chase had never liked the way he seemed to seek the spotlight for every charity event, every donation he made. Too overdone, Chase had always thought.

While he suffered a few more handshakes, his gaze returned to the two women, noting the familiar way they chatted, the hand Ann placed on the redhead's arm, the smiles. Then they bent their heads and a quick volley of words flew, in between a few surreptitious looks that could only mean they were exchanging something private.

A sliver of doubt took hold.

Chase pulled out his phone and on the pretext of checking his calls, studied the women more closely.

To a casual observer, the redhead's appearance was impeccable. But Chase was looking for flaws and pretty soon his keen eyes found them. A loose thread on her cuff, sharp creases on her jacket—both pointed to lots of wardrobe storage. Then there was her bag, which showed faint wear along the leather handles.

He hesitated at her legs, appreciating the lean calves for a moment until he dragged his gaze down. Impossibly high shoes, shiny and obviously expensive. And vaguely familiar.

His thoughtful frown cleared. Yeah, that fashion designer he'd dated a few years back had had a thing for shoes and she'd had the exact same style in five different colors. If these were real, they were at least three years old. If they were fake, it only created more questions.

The redhead slowly shifted her weight from one leg to the other and winced, a dead giveaway that her feet were killing her. So, a woman not used to wearing fancy shoes. A woman—he quickly realized—who definitely did not have half a million to spare.

All those little anomalies exploded into full-blown suspicion. He'd seen more than his fair share of underhand deals not to realize something was off.

Anger flared, making his gut tighten. Coincidence? No way. Things always happened for a reason, not because of some cosmic karma. The redhead was up to something. Her conflicting appearance, her link to Ann Richardson, combined with Richardson's tainted reputation.

Anger and distaste swelled up inside. If Richardson had resorted to shill bidding then Chase was *not* going to let her get away with it.

Lost, lost, lost. Vanessa's red-heeled Louboutins tattooed out that one word as she clacked down Waverly's polished hall, her throat thick with disappointment.

Her failure had been briefly overshadowed by seeing Ann Richardson, her sister's college roommate, and for a few minutes she was simply Juliet's sister, exchanging friendly chatter and playing catch-up.

"Juliet's in Washington for a few weeks, you know," Vanessa had said. "You should give her a call and we could do lunch sometime. That is," she amended, belatedly recalling the recent sensational headlines, "if you're not too busy."

Ann smiled. "I'm always busy. But it is tempting. A chance to get away from the cit..."

Users Review

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