

# The Cloverfinder ©

By Linda J Pifer



His hands were hardened by years of farm work; calloused and rough, nails cut short and on the left, a finger missing from a careless moment with a hay baling machine. Tanned and strong, they were perfect extensions of the man who labored from dawn to sunset, caring for his animals and crops. His face had fine features and there were smile lines around his eyes; their sparkle came from within and radiated through a squint he'd acquired against the bright sun. He was a man who started as a young farmhand on my grandfather's farm, married my aunt at an early age and bought land of his own; he was my Uncle Harlan.

My earliest memories center around his farm where land extended for several acres into the fields and woods of the countryside, cows grazed in pastures and corn grew tall. The red brick house, a saltbox style, sat easy along a narrow, tree-lined country road. It was surrounded by barns and orchard, with a large kitchen garden off its west end. The garden stretched up and over a gentle rise and was planted with carrots, peppers, onions, tomatoes, chard and many other vegetables. Behind and visible through the lace-edged windows of the house, the countryside lay open like a hand sewn quilt with patches of different colored crops, each lined by the fine stitch of wood fence and barbed wire.

Family reunions were always held on Uncle Harlan's and Aunt Rhea's farm and the two story house filled to overflowing with kids and adults of every age. Their four sons and two daughters produced fifteen grandchildren; several great aunts and uncles still lived in the surrounding area as did their children and grandchildren. Many came to stay overnight for the gathering the next day and cots were added to the large upstairs loft room for any that needed them.

The resulting reunion was always a time of joining together, getting to know cousins all over again and strengthening our family ties. The women of the family would begin preparing the reunion feast early in the morning when cool breezes stirred through open windows. Counters and tables were piled high with extra dishes, pots and pans of every description. The air grew steamy despite the open windows; as the sun rose higher in the sky an electric fan would blow air the length of the long narrow kitchen out the back screen door. Occasionally, a drift of kitchen talk and laughter carried outside to the men who sat under the shade trees discussing summer planting, new tractors and politics. With so many children in one place, games like hide and seek, statue, and tag were lively and raucous, played with much yelling and scrambling about in the large yards of the farm.

When all was ready, the women carried out great pans of crispy fried chicken, steaming pots of corn-on-the-cob, dishes of fresh garden vegetables, and breads with a choice of homemade jams to spread on them. Fresh-baked elderberry, rhubarb-strawberry, and apple pies remained in the

kitchen to be brought out later after the meal was finished. The feast was arranged upon sawhorse tables covered with tablecloths, where dishes and silverware were already in place.

With the smell of the food wafting over the yard, there was little trouble in getting everyone to the table. Each found a seat on the odd assortment of chairs from the kitchen, with benches fashioned from saw-horses and boards for the kids. Hands young and old were joined together in a prayer of thanks and as soon as Uncle Harlan's bowed head came up, the food began to be passed. Laughter and conversation continued until finally, even the largest man had his fill.

As the table cleared, sounds of pots and dishes clanging in the kitchen began. The warm afternoon sun cast shade over the great yard through maple and buckeye trees, the small country lane beckoned to some for a long stroll down its hilly way. Others retired to the cool of the house to sink into huge overstuffed furniture in the livingroom. The children quieted from their games, too full of dessert to play. It was usually in that time of day that someone among them was elected to go find Uncle Harlan.

"Uncle Harlan, find us four-leaf clovers!" the child would coax him off the couch, away from coffee and a little nap after his dinner. He would good-naturedly be led to the side yard between house and barn where the other children waited.

Tall evergreens grew around the shady red brick of the house where the sun only reached between them part of the day. A clover patch, cool and green grew in that place and with Uncle Harlan's arrival, it became magic. He would study the shady patch, while many of us tried to beat him at the game by looking hard at the dark green plants he surveyed. But not one would be able to see until the instant he suddenly bent down and reached to pluck a large, green beauty. The stem in his large hand held not three leaves as was common, but four.

Who would get the first-found, we all wondered, as he held the treasure upward. We never showed disappointment when the clover was finally handed away to the child of his choice for we knew by faith in his talent, each child would get a treasured piece of good luck for his or her very own that day.

Years went by, families grew, children became adults and left to find their own lives and dreams. Many came back for regular visits to the land they had been raised upon, usually when they felt that life needed a little slowing down. There were some who even moved back after years of being away and brought grandchildren again to that red brick farmhouse. I returned to find old friends and family one fall when the countryside blazed with yellow, red and orange, and the air fell warm and hazy over it all.

At eighty-six years of age, Uncle Harlan greeted me with a broad smile from the open doorway of his farmhouse porch. He wore some clean work pants and a plaid shirt and I noticed that his brown hair had turned silver in my absence. He walked a little stiffly with arthritis, but the sparkle remained bright in his eyes.

We talked of old and new and ate apple pie with coffee set on a red checkered tablecloth in the big kitchen. The sun's rays mellowed through the panes of the window, tracing dust in the air as it fell quietly on the table between us. Autumn leaves on the trees outside seemed to turn even

more golden and I sensed an end to day drawing closer. We pushed back our chairs and walked outside crunching through fallen leaves as we toured the yard and orchard together; spirits of good times and family lingered in the place as we walked. I breathed the cool fall air scented with leaf smoke and felt the late afternoon sun upon my face, at once reluctant to leave.

“Uncle Harlan, find me a four-leaf clover?” I asked a little sheepishly, feeling like that shy child of some twenty years ago.

To my surprise, his reply came without hesitation.

“I’ve got one I’ve been saving special,” He said with enthusiasm and turned his steps away from the house toward the old weathered, gray barn.

I followed him almost a hundred yards up the drive and past the barn, where the smell of dust and hay carried on the breeze from its huge open door. By the end of the lane, near the wooden gate, grew wild flowers yellow and gold. He bent down and plunged his hand among them to a familiar deep green shape then smiled a warm triumphant smile as he straightened up and handed me a large, perfectly formed four leaf clover.

His smile stays with me today, locked in that special place one has for such things. And the four leaf clover stays with me as well, placed in a keychain for good luck.

It is a simple piece of evidence, attesting to the fact that even a plain keeper of the fields can be the possessor of a little magic...as a Cloverfinder.



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