

The Gift

A Tale of Adventure,
Courage and Hope



Written by
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Illustrated by
Johnny Davis

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A Tale of Adventure, Courage, and Hope

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Published by BCB (Brent Coley Books)
Murrieta, CA

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ISBN: 979-8-9856664-0-3

Dedication

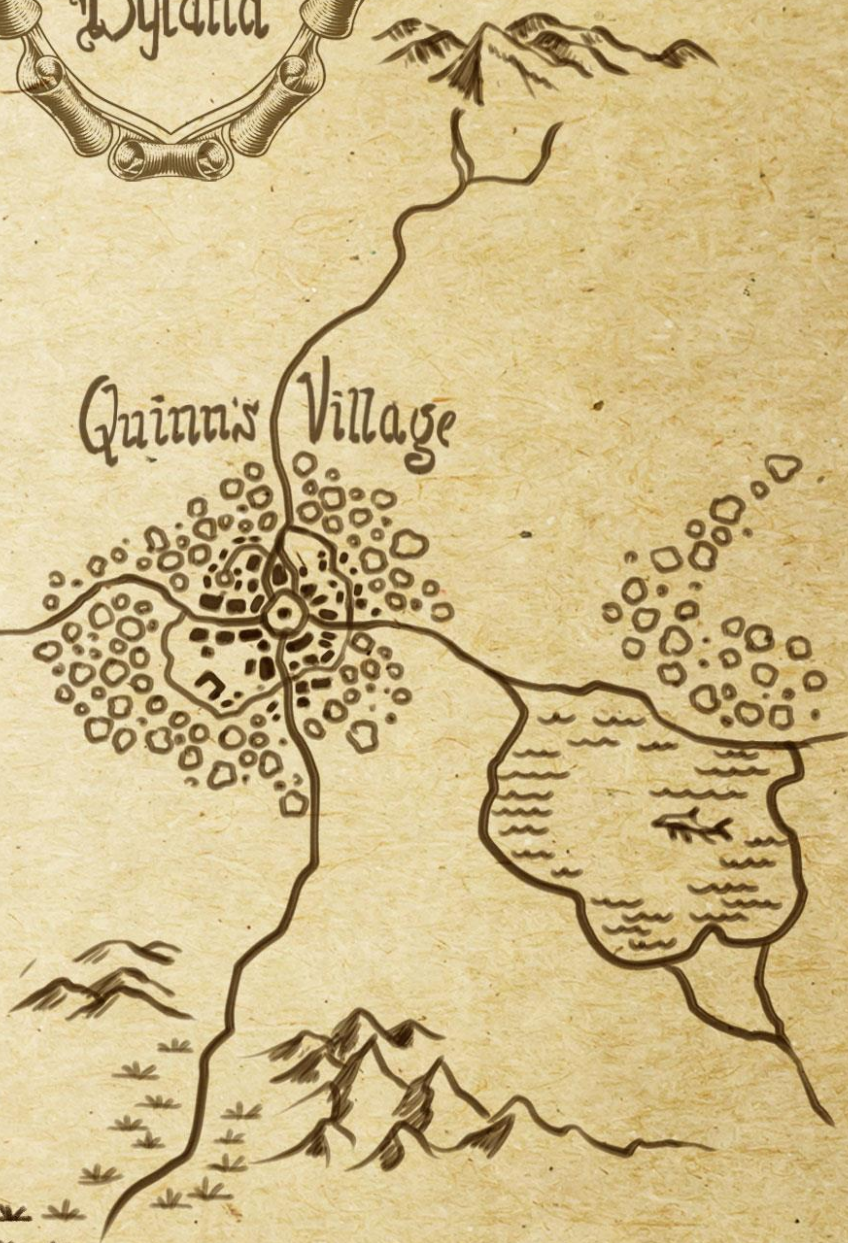
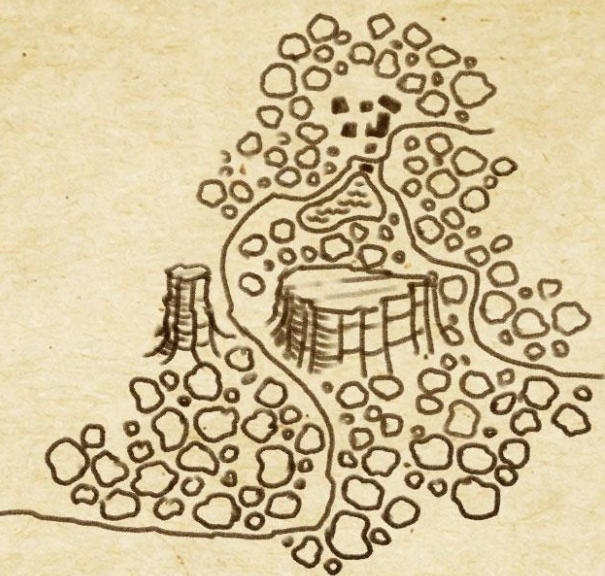
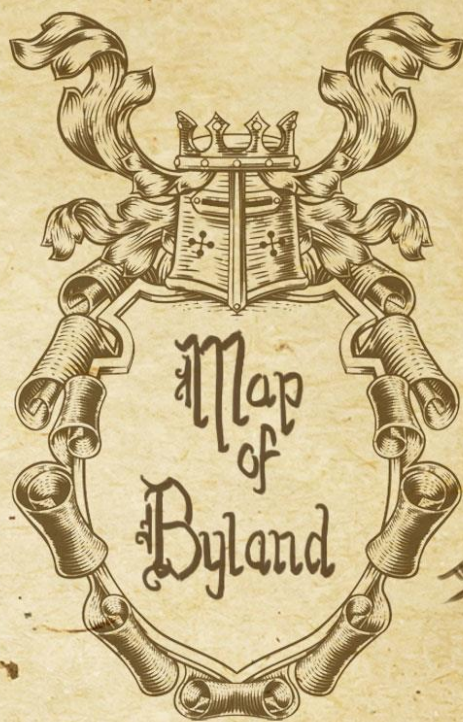
For my children, Meghan and Ben –

You are my gifts from above.

May you continue to choose the right path,
even if it means walking alone.

The Castle of Byland





Quinn



In a faraway land, deep within the kingdom of Byland, there was a small village. In it lived a boy. A boy named Quinn.

Like most twelve-year-old boys in the kingdom, he enjoyed riding horses, climbing trees, and hunting squirrels with his sling. But Quinn's life was different. He didn't have the one thing other boys and girls his age took for granted – a family.

Nine years earlier, just after his third birthday, Quinn's mother and father tragically passed away from a deadly fever that swept through the kingdom. Fortunately for Quinn, his uncle Erik took him in to raise as his own. This he did until war fell upon the land. Bound by his devotion to the king, Erik answered the call for soldiers. He left Quinn in the care of Judith and Henry, whose son, Ian, was also leaving to fight alongside the king. Though the king's army eventually rid Byland of its enemies, Erik and Ian never returned.

Quinn's family was gone.

Again.



Although Judith and Henry continued to care for him, their relationship lacked connection. They were kind and treated him well, but there was no warmth, no bond. It was as if every time the grief-stricken parents looked at Quinn, they were reminded of the son they had lost. Though they cared for his needs, they could never fully open their hearts to Quinn. For them, he represented the loss they had endured, the son they would never see again. For them, the pain was just too great.

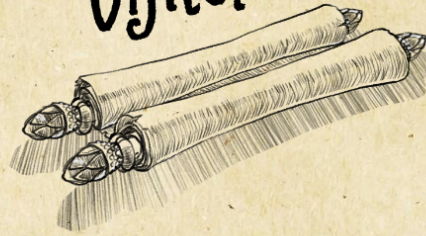
Quinn felt the pain of loss as well, and an emptiness grew within his heart. Seeing his friends go home each day to the outstretched arms of their loving parents was a constant reminder of what he had lost, of the family he longed for.

He spent most nights fighting back tears until sleep and dreams came – dreams of soft laughter floating on a cool breeze. Dreams of lying on his back in a meadow, staring up at the clouds. Clouds shaped like the fading memories of the faces of his mother, his father, and his uncle.

During his waking hours, Quinn would often find himself daydreaming. He had never been more than a mile outside his village, and he wondered what lay beyond the edge of their small community, out in the vast kingdom of Byland. He spent hours imagining the possible adventures that awaited him if he ever had the chance to explore the outside world.

Little did he know his life was about to change.

An Unexpected Visitor



One day just after noon, a lone horseman rode down the dusty trail leading into the village. After being greeted by Tag, the town's blacksmith, the rider dismounted his muscled horse and asked for a drink of water. Tag quickly sent one of his apprentices to fetch the weary traveler something to quench his thirst.

While the water was being drawn from the well, a crowd of curious villagers, including Quinn, began to gather. The community wasn't used to visitors. The mystery man, though dirty from his travels, had a distinguished look about him. His dark hair hung to his shoulders, and his face was clean-shaven. He was dressed in garments suited for royalty. His britches were dark brown, his cloak forest green, and fastened to his belt was a sword. Quinn wondered if the man had ever used it in battle.

When his water arrived, the thirsty visitor drank it down as if his throat hadn't seen liquid for days. After politely asking for another cup and downing it as quickly as the first, he wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand and cleared his throat. The murmurs of the crowd, now made up of nearly half the village, died down.



"Greetings, citizens of Byland!" he began. "I am Nathaniel, and I thank you for your hospitality." The man's voice was noble and confident, just like his appearance.

"For the last few weeks, messengers like me have been traveling throughout the kingdom with a message." He paused to make sure he had everyone's attention. He most certainly did – everyone's gaze was fixed upon him.

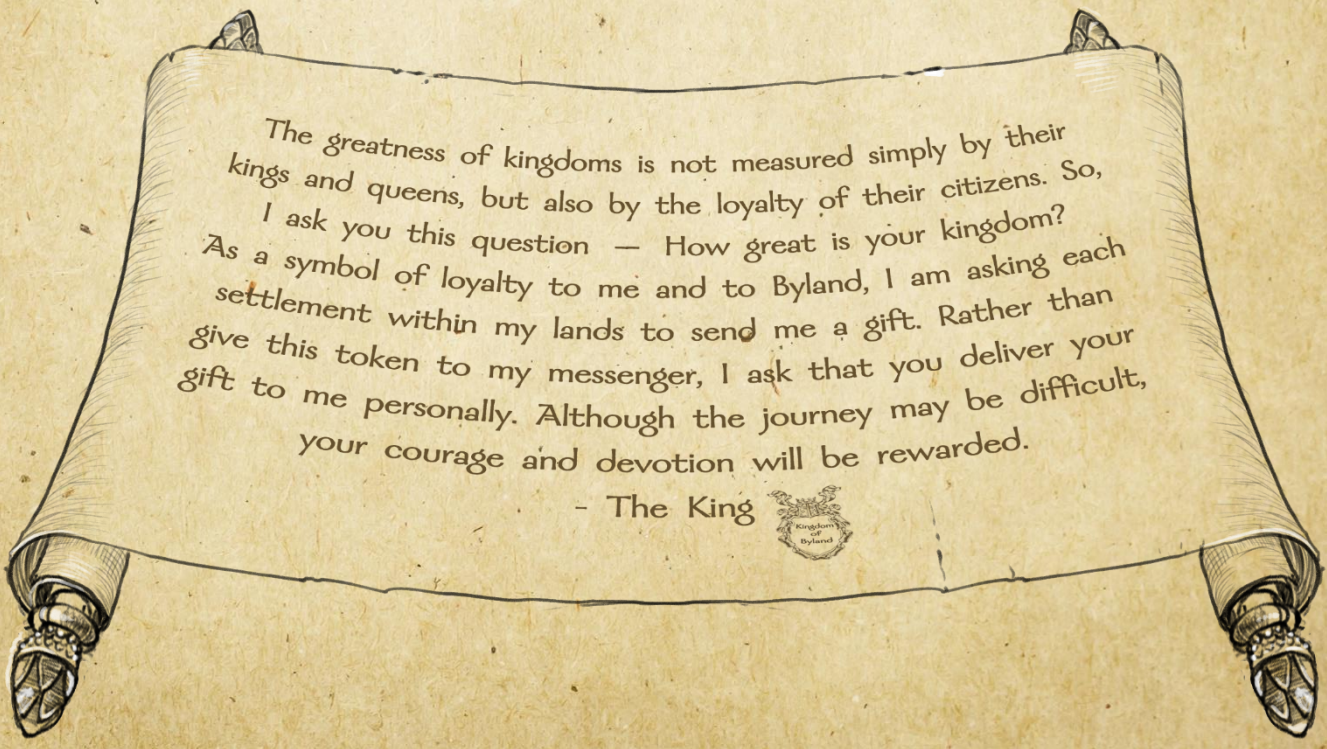
"A message from the king."

At this announcement, the crowd began buzzing with excitement.

"A message from the king?" an old woman whispered to a friend. "What could it be?" Similar comments trickled through the gathering.

Quinn was thinking the same thing. *It must be important*, he thought.

After raising his arms for silence, the king's messenger reached into his cloak and pulled out a small, rolled-up piece of parchment. After slowly unrolling the small scroll, he again cleared his throat and began reading.

A hand-drawn illustration of a scroll, partially unrolled, showing text. The scroll is held by two ornate metal clasps at the bottom. The text on the scroll is written in a cursive, handwritten style. At the bottom right of the scroll, there is a small circular seal or crest with a crown on top and the words 'Kingdom of Byland' inside.

The greatness of kingdoms is not measured simply by their kings and queens, but also by the loyalty of their citizens. So, I ask you this question — How great is your kingdom? As a symbol of loyalty to me and to Byland, I am asking each settlement within my lands to send me a gift. Rather than give this token to my messenger, I ask that you deliver your gift to me personally. Although the journey may be difficult, your courage and devotion will be rewarded.

- The King



As soon as the messenger finished reading, everyone started talking at once.

“A gift?” said a woman under her breath.

“What does our village have that’s worthy of presenting to the king?” asked Tag to his wife who had joined him.

“And who will take this gift?” she responded. No one even noticed the king’s man as he replaced the scroll in his cloak, remounted his horse, and rode off.

I wonder who will go, Quinn thought. What if I could make the journey? His stomach began churning with excitement at the thought. *No, don’t be silly!* he scolded himself. But he couldn’t help it, and his imagination overtook him. As he walked back to Judith and Henry’s to eat lunch and finish up his chores, a smile crept across his face as he pictured himself walking through distant lands, the king’s castle on the horizon.