

R.W. Ridley

Lost Days

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First Edition

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Acknowledgment

To all the women in my life who, throughout the years, have allowed me to see things from a female point of view, even when I wasn't all that interested. I could not have written this book without you.

Author's Notes

True confession time. I am an avid Bigfooter. That is to say, I love the idea of a large, nonhuman, hairy, apish biped wandering through the woods of North America. I have ever since I was a kid. And I am a believer for no other reason than I think it would be really cool. So, it is not a productive use of your time to ask me to prove that Bigfoot exists. I have no hard evidence. I don't have a picture of the big guy strolling through my backyard. I don't have a letter from him with his return address on the envelope. I simply have an unwavering desire for it to be true. Bottom line, I will tell you he exists because I want him to exist. I am not a reliable source of information. I will repeat what I've heard and read, and I will usually add a hyper sense of enthusiasm in the telling.

So, given my love for the legend of Bigfoot, it was only a matter of time before I would write a novel about the big ape. I've spent years studying reports and watching videos and examining pictures. I know the subject fairly well. The Bigfoot you will find within the pages of *Lost Days* is not the Bigfoot you will find in established folklore. In most cases, the "real" Bigfoot is somewhat docile. It displays very few violent tendencies and avoids human contact of any kind. The Bigfoot behavior described in this book is more in line with typical wild animal behavior. This Bigfoot has a primal survival instinct that leads it to behave rather violently. As a result, people are bound to be maimed and eaten. My apologies to the Bigfoot community, but my job as a novelist is to entertain first and inform second.

For real information on Bigfoot, there are many qualified researchers out there such as Dr. Jeff Meldrum, Loren Coleman,

and the late Dr. Grover Krantz (and many more). These men have filled books and websites with much more reliable information than I could ever provide. I urge you to type their names into your favorite search engine and study the matter yourself. I think you will find that it is a fascinating glimpse into both natural history and human behavior.

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There are two things you should know about me. My name is Hayley Wilkes, and my uncle is crazy. Not fun crazy, but scary crazy. He was in some weird accident when he was a kid and it messed him up. Happened before my mom was born. Before my granddaddy was married to my Nana Taffy, he had a whole other family. Kind of crazy when you think about it. Granddaddy had a completely different life. He had a wife and a kid. His job was different. He even lived in a different part of the country, Washington or Oregon... I don't know for sure because he doesn't like to talk about it, and Uncle Crew (the crazy one), doesn't like to talk about anything at all. All I know is there was an accident on a mountain road and granddaddy's first wife died.

He met Nana Taffy a few years later, married her, and had my mom. Granddaddy shipped Uncle Crew off to other relatives. Hard to believe he'd do something like that if you knew him now, but he didn't just have a whole different life back then, he was a completely different person. The way Nana Taffy tells it, granddaddy drank pretty heavily. Kept to himself. They worked together in a shoe factory. It took him two months to say anything to her, and they worked only five feet from each other. When he did finally talk, all he said was the occasional "Hey" or "Bye."

Everyone thought he was shy, but Nana Taffy knew better. She could see he was hurting... empty. He'd lost something, and he blamed himself for it.

She ended up making him laugh one day. She can't even

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remember what it was she did, but he laughed and that was that. They started eating lunch together. He started walking her to her car. He even drove her home a few times when her car was in the shop.

“I finally asked him if he was ever going to kiss me,” Nana Taffy says. “He just about fainted dead away from the question. He turned around, got in his car, and left. Disappeared for a week. Told the folks at the factory he had a family emergency. Seven days later to the hour he showed up on my front stoop and kissed me without so much as a ‘hello’ or ‘how do you do.’ It was my turn to almost faint dead away.”

My little brother Grover (yep, pretty much the worst name ever) always hated it when Nana Taffy told these stories. He’d moan and groan until she’d let him up from the breakfast table, but I loved them. Mom thinks it’s because I’m a girl, but I think it’s because I’m older and more mature, and he’s mostly the world’s biggest brat.

“What did you do when he kissed you?” I asked. I knew the answer because we had heard it a hundred dozen times, but it was fun to watch Grover’s face scrunch in pain as he realized he’d have to hear it all over again.

“Married him,” Nana Taffy said.

“Right there on the front stoop?”

“Just about,” she said. “Would have if we could have gotten a marriage license and preacher on such short notice. As it was, I had to wait a whole week.”

Mom always shakes her head at this. “That’s insane, mom.” And she looks at me and Grover. “Don’t you two go getting any ideas. No one gets married a week after the first kiss. Your Nana and granddaddy just got lucky, that’s all.”

Mom is kind of bitter about marriage. She and my dad got divorced a few months ago. When she’s not crying about how

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awful men are, she's giving my brother and me the world's worst relationship advice. Never mind that I'm fifteen and Grover's eleven and neither one of us has kissed anyone in our whole entire lives. Mind you, some girls in my class have done... "it" a few times already, and here I am with virgin lips. I'm not saying I want to be like those other girls. I got no interest in... "it," but I think when you're fifteen you should have at least kissed a guy or two... or three even.

But no, not me. I'm about the most socially awkward goof on the planet. I'm the only person in my school that's not in a clique... well, that's not true. My friend Denise is the same way. I guess that's why she's my friend. And then there's Owen Doogan. Not a friend as much as a leech who kind of hangs around because no one else will let him within five feet of them. He's a nerd without the brains. Plays a lot of video games and flunks just about every subject in school. Mom likes him because when he comes over he cleans up after himself.

You should know, despite what Owen says, I'm not pretty. I've got zits, and my nose is kind of big. I'm only pretty to him because I haven't told him to get lost like every other girl in school, including Denise. I've never had my hair done in my life. Nana Taffy trims it for me. I haven't met a trend I don't absolutely despise. Denise is just the opposite. She's way prettier than me. She uses just about every medication on earth to fight acne, and she's even got boobs. She's kissed a guy – Allen Shaw. He lives hundreds of miles away. They met at some church camp. Denise considers him her boyfriend. I'm betting she would have married him a week after their first kiss if her parents and the law wouldn't have been totally against it.

"How long 'til after your first kiss did you and daddy get married," I once asked my mom.

She rolled her eyes. "A long, long, long time."

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“Waiting didn’t work out too well for you,” Grover said. He didn’t mean anything by it. He was just too young and stupid to know he’d said something really, really dumb.

I slapped him on the shoulder. “Nice going, dink face.”

“Don’t hit your brother.”

“But...”

“Your mother’s, right, Hayley,” Nana Taffy said. “Doesn’t matter how big of a dink face your brother is. Don’t ever hit him.”

Dink face stuck his tongue out at me.

That’s mostly how our mornings would go. Me, Grover, mom, and Nana Taffy sitting around talking about how things used to be, and sometimes the way they should be. Nana would cook up biscuits, gravy, eggs, and just about every breakfast food on the planet. We would eat and talk. The food and the stories were always the same.

Granddaddy never joined us. He was up hours before anyone else, tinkering away on some banged up old car he kept in a detached garage he built himself. That’s where Uncle Crew lived. Above the garage in what’s called a FROG (finished room over garage.) I didn’t see much of him. Occasionally he would come in the main house and eat dinner with us, or fix something Nana Taffy needed fixed. He didn’t work. He was too crazy to work. He just sat in his FROG and came out when he needed to. I don’t know what he did in there. I don’t even think he has a TV. He may have a computer. I saw a box from the computer store in the garbage once, and I know it didn’t belong to anyone in the house. Denise thinks he did perverted and creepy stuff on the internet, but she thought every guy did that kind of stuff on the internet.

Mom said he was harmless. He’d never hurt anyone in all the years she knew him, and she knew him for about as long as I’ve

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been alive. Granddaddy just showed up at the house with him one day. Introduced him to the family, and moved him into the FROG. Not a word was said beforehand. Mom wasn't living with them at the time, but she still seemed a little miffed that her father would move a near stranger into the house with her mother. She yakked and complained about it to my dad around the clock. Wanted to know why her father would do such a thing. How could he put a crazy man in the same house as his wife... her mother. Dad assured mom a thousand times over that he didn't have a clue, and she shouldn't be asking him. She should be talking to her father. Mom always balked at that.

"Hank Stanton doesn't talk about such things," my mother would say. "If you can get anything out of him that doesn't have to do with the weather or football, you're performing a miracle that Jesus himself couldn't do."

Still she tried. It took her years to work up the courage, mind you, but she did try. And by the time she tried, Uncle Crew had lived in the FROG for years without incident. It didn't settle mom's nerves one bit. She was convinced that he would snap at any moment and kill everyone within a four block radius.

"He ain't dangerous," granddaddy answered. "He's quiet, that's all."

"I got kids, daddy. How am I supposed to feel with him hanging around?"

"Feel how you want."

"Honey," Nana Taffy said, "Crew's a good boy. He helps out around the house. He's neat. He's not a bother at all."

"But, Momma, I don't want my children..."

"Connie Wilkes," Nana would say sounding all indignant. "Your children are my grandchildren. Do you think I would put them in harm's way?"

"I didn't mean..."

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“Where’s your head, Ms. Britches? Those little ones are every beat of my heart. I’d never let anything happen to them.”

Granddaddy grunted as if to say “Go get ’em, Taf.”

But Nana wasn’t having any of it. “Oh no you don’t, Henry Crew Stanton. Your daughter’s got every right to be concerned about her children. You bring a grown man into the house without word one, and you expect everyone to treat him like a puppy you just brought home. It don’t work that way, Mr. Man. Mark my words, you are going to speak about it someday. Every last detail, to the minute. We’re your family. We deserve to know.”

Granddaddy stood. “In time,” he said as he started to walk away. He stopped and without facing Nana Taffy or mom, said, “Crew is my boy...” He wanted to say more, but he just walked out of the house and headed to the garage to work on his heap for a car.

Nana Taffy put her hand on mom’s. “It may not always seem like it, but your father knows what he’s doing.”

That pretty much sums up the communication skills in my family. A lot of incomplete thoughts and unfinished sentences. All of it designed to shield granddaddy from having to reveal too much of himself. The explanation that Nana said we all deserved... she wouldn’t ever ask for it. Not in a million years. “In time” was never going to come. I was only fifteen and I knew that.

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Yes, I know it's a cliché, but I come from a broken home, although mom says it's not broken. She says she got rid of a useless chunk that wasn't working right and fixed our family. Mom's not interested in making sure she doesn't say anything negative about our dad in front of us. As Nana Taffy puts it, he stepped out on her more than once with several different sluts. Sluts is my word not Nana Taffy's.

"Why should I make sure you respect a man like that?" Mom would say. "You can call a skunk a cat, but it's still going to stink up the place."

It used to bother me when they first got divorced, but as the months went by, dad stopped calling. He'd send an email every once in a while, but even those stopped. He just dropped out. Pisses me off more for Grover that it does for me. I'm practically grown. Grover's still a kid. It'd be nice if he had a father, one who didn't cheat on his wife with every short skirt hussy in town. Mom's words, not mine.

So, I'm like a million other teenage girls. I live with my mom and brother at my grandparents' house. My dad's a total douche. I go to a school I hate with a bunch of over-sexed boys and over-primed girls. The teachers suck out loud. They keep harping on me about wasting my potential. Everybody pretty much annoys the crap out of me.

Except Uncle Crew. And I guess that's why I got so caught up in his story. The guy didn't want anything to do with me. He

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didn't want anything to do with anybody, but I took it personally. If I really thought about it, I'd have to say that being misunderstood is kind of a way to get attention. Uncle Crew not caring that I was misunderstood really bugged me. And after moving in with my grandparents, I made it my mission to get him to notice me, so I could ignore him. Sounds weird and childish, but it is what it is. I'm not sure why it was so important to me. It just was. Don't freak out. I'm not talking about doing anything gross or inappropriate. He's my uncle for crap sake. I just wanted him to care that my life sucked.

Every morning he had this whacked out ritual where he'd go out in the backyard in swim fins and take giant steps across the width of the yard five times. At first, I just thought he was exercising, but he would do it no matter what the weather was. Nobody likes exercise that much.

The first time I sat on the back deck and watched him, he stopped and gave me a sideways glance.

"What do you want?" His voice was thick and gravelly from lack of use.

"Nothing. What are you doing?"

"Why?"

"Looks weird."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's not."

"Uhh, yeah, it kinda is."

"Says who?"

"Says me."

"Who are you?"

"Hayley... your niece."

"Hayley's a weird name."

"And Crew isn't?"

"How'd you know my name?"

"Ahhh, hello, I'm your niece."

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He tilted his head back and thought for a second. “Connie your mother?”

I hesitated. He had to be putting me on. We’d been living in that house for a couple of weeks. He had to know who I was and who my mother was. “Yeah.”

“I know her.”

I chuckled. “No kidding. She’s your sister.”

He nodded and continued with his giant walking. Just as I was about to turn and go back inside. He spoke again.

“Half-sister. Mrs. Stanton’s her mother. My mother is... somebody else.”

That was that. He went back to his swim fin march, and I went back inside to watch him from the kitchen window. Grover was at the kitchen table eating a bowl of Cap’n Crunch.

“Why do you think he does that?” I asked.

Grover got up from the table and walked over to the window. “Don’t know. Maybe he’s practicing for something.”

“Practicing? For what?”

“Company picnic.”

Company picnic? What are you talking about?”

“Remember. Dad’s work had those lame company picnics with potato sack races and the other thing where you put a spoon in your mouth and carry an egg.”

I nodded. “So.”

“So, Uncle Crew looks like he’s practicing for a company picnic race.”

“Dork-o, he doesn’t have a job.”

“So, we didn’t have one either and we went.”

“That’s because dad forced us,” I said as I watched Uncle Crew take his last gigantic step. “Grown-ups don’t go to company picnics unless their bosses make them.”

“Bosses suck.”

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“Hey,” mom said entering the room. “Language, young man.” Grover flinched at the sound of her voice. “Suck is not a bad word.”

“It is if I say it is.” She poured herself a cup of coffee.

I glanced at her and was horrified to see her wearing a pair of my jeans. “What are you doing, mom? You can’t wear those.”

She stood on her toes and stuck her butt out. “Looks like I’m doing a pretty good job of it.”

“No, I mean you’re too old to wear those. It’s gross.”

“Sweetie, you are not going to rain on my parade. I’m in my late... mid-thirties, and I am wearing my fifteen-year-old daughter’s jeans. This is just about the best day I’ve had in a year.”

“Fine, but you’re not going out of the house in those.”

She raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Are you kidding me? I have a list about a mile long of things I have to do outside of the house today, and I am doing them in my age inappropriate jeans.”

“First of all, those are my age inappropriate jeans, and second of all, if anyone from my class sees you, I’ll never be able to wear them to school again.”

“And why not?”

“Because I can’t go to school wearing mom jeans. I’m a big enough social outcast.”

“You’re not a social outcast, honey...”

“You so don’t know my life,” I said.

“Please...”

“Mom!”

“All right, all right. Relax. I’ll take them off.” She unbuttoned the top button.

“Not here...” Before I could finish my plea for her not to undress in the kitchen she was standing in front of me and Grover in her panties. They were even more age inappropriate than the jeans.

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Grover looked away as if the sun was about to burn out his retinas. “Mom... yuck!”

“Not cool, Mom,” I said. I yanked the jeans out her hands.

“How did I get such stick-in-the-mud children?”

“It’s called being normal,” I said. “You should try it.”

We all screamed at the sound of someone knocking on the back door. Uncle Crew stood on the other side of door. My mom screeched and bolted out of the kitchen with her hands covering her butt cheeks.

“That your mom?” Uncle Crew asked through the door.

“Yeah,” I said laughing.

Grover howled and fell to the floor.

“You two all right?” He said pulling the screen door open.

“Never better,” I said catching my breath.

“Mrs. Stanton here?”

“No,” I said. “She and granddaddy went to the VA hospital. Something about volunteer work.”

“Oh,” he said. He stood nervously in the doorway.

“Do you need something?” I asked.

Mom came back into the kitchen wearing a pair of sweats. “Sorry about that, Crew. You startled me. I don’t normally walk around in my underwear. I was just giving the kids a hard time.”

“By walking around in your underwear?”

She waved off his question. “Guess you had to be there. Come on in.”

He looked down at the door jamb and then back at mom. “That’s okay. I just came to talk with Mrs. Stanton. You know when she’ll be back?”

“Around eleven I think,” mom said.

“Oh, okay,” he said. He stood on the back deck rocking from one foot to the other.

“You sure you don’t want to come in?”

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He nodded. "Have to... can't." He nodded and then turned to leave. He stopped and turned back. "Good to see you again, Connie."

"You too, Crew."

He hesitated and then said, "Your kids are safe."

"I'm sorry?" mom said.

"That's what most people worry about with me. Their kids."

"I wasn't worried..."

"It's okay if you were," he said. "I know I'm... not the same as everyone else. It's just that I got these... things in my head... thoughts, I guess. They're not bad. I just know stuff that most people don't..."

Mom moved towards the door. "It's okay, Crew."

Without warning Crew turned and tore out like a bat out of hell toward the garage.

"Crew!" Mom yelled after him, but he didn't break stride. He climbed the stairs to his FROG and disappeared inside.

I looked at Grover. He was bug-eyed and holding his breath.

Mom dropped her chin to her chest. "Don't tell your grandparents about this."

"I won't," I said.

Grover was still holding his breath. I nudged him and he finally exhaled.

"Grover won't either," I said.

He turned and ran out of the kitchen.

Grover and I shared a room so there wasn't anywhere for him to hide from me. He buried his head underneath his pillow. Every time I tried to talk to him he'd yell at me to go away. Uncle Crew freaked him out. He hadn't ever really seen a crazy person go crazy before. I hadn't either, but I was older, and I'd read

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about it in books. I kind of knew what to expect, but still, even I was a little weirded out by the whole thing. We had a real live actual crazy person for an uncle. Knowing it and seeing it are two different things.

There was a soft knock on the door. Mom slowly pushed the door open. Denise was standing next to her.

“You kids okay?” mom asked.

“Fine,” I said.

“Grover?” mom said.

“He’s fine, Mom.”

Grover twisted and huddled closer to the wall.

“Up for company?” mom asked.

“Denise isn’t company. Let her in.”

Mom turned to her and nodded. Denise nodded back and stepped inside the room chomping on a piece of gum. She walked over to my bed and plopped down on the hard mattress. Mom just stood in the doorway not knowing what to do.

“It’s fine,” I said.

Mom smiled and pulled the door shut.

“Geesh,” Denise said. “Someone die?”

I shook my head. “My uncle just wiggled out.”

“No way.” Her eyes opened wide. “Cool.”

“Not cool,” I said.

“Is that what’s wrong with li’l bro?”

I nodded.

Denise stood, blew a bubble, and moved to Grover’s bed. “Buck up, Grove.” She patted his shoulder. “Denise is here to protect you.”

“Don’t need a girl to protect me,” Grover said.

“Cool,” she said. “How ‘bout you protect me.”

“He’s not dangerous,” I said.

“He’s scary,” Grover said.

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“Yeah, but he’s not dangerous,” I repeated.

“How do you know?” Denise asked.

I shrugged. “He told us as much.”

“He told you?” Denise said in disbelief. “You’re such a noodge, Hayley.”

“You weren’t there,” I said. “He’s just a little... confused.”

“I bet he’s a cannibal,” Denise said.”

“What?!” I said.

Grover sat up. The blood drained from his face.

“He eats people,” she said matter-of-factly. “Is he fat?”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Is he?”

“No,” I said.

“Muscular?”

“No,” I said. “He’s normal.”

“That’s what everyone says,” she said.

“What?”

“I had no idea he was a cannibal. He’s so normal. He’s the last person you would think has a taste for human flesh.” She turned quickly and attempted to tickle Grover. He was having none of it. He screamed bloody murder and kicked like mad. Denise was surprised by his reaction. “O-M-G! Psycho much!”

I laughed. “Watch it. He gets like that when he’s scared.”

Red-faced, he barked, “Shut up, I’m not scared!”

Denise stood and sighed. “You’re a little...” she stopped as she noticed something out the window. “Is that him?”

I turned to look out the window. I never noticed before, but it looked across the yard and straight into Uncle Crew’s FROG window. We all knelt down in front of the window sill.

“That’s him,” I said. He was sitting at a table with what looked like a tape measure.

“Hmmm,” she said. “He’s kind of cute.”

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“What’s he doing?” Grover asked.

“Building something maybe,” I said.

“What’s that white thing?” Denise asked.

We all squinted and focused on the white thing on the table in front of Uncle Crew. “Don’t know...” He lifted it and examined it.

Denise gasped. “It’s a foot.” She looked stunned. “He is a cannibal.”

I looked closer. “It’s not a foot. It’s a footprint.”

“Whoa,” Grover said. “It’s big.”

“How can you lift a footprint?” Denise asked.

“It’s a cutout or something. I told you, he’s building something.”

“What? A robot?” Grover asked.

“Who knows?” I said. “He stomps around in the backyard in swim fins. I don’t think making sense is Uncle Crew’s first priority.”

We all screamed and ducked out of sight when Uncle Crew lifted his head and looked out the window.

“Did he see us?” Denise asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“We should tell mom he’s got a foot,” Grover said.

“Footprint,” I said.

“Whatever,” Grover said breathing erratically. “I don’t think he should have it.”

“Why?” I strained to look over the window sill without being seen. “It’s not against the law.”

“Still, I want to tell mom.”

I looked at him sternly. “No. She’s got enough going on. She doesn’t need to worry about her crazy half-brother and his foot.”

“Footprint,” Denise corrected.

“Right, footprint.”

“But...”

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I grabbed Grover's wrist. "But nothing. You'll do what I say, or I swear to god I will wait until you're asleep and shove a live spider in your ear so it can lay eggs that hatch a zillion little spiders that will eat your brains."

"Ewww," Denise winced.

He studied my face to see if I was bluffing. It was too big of a risk to take. "Fine, whatever. I won't tell mom."

Denise craned her neck and looked out the window. "He's gone."

We all slowly stood.

"Cannibal or not," Denise said. "I'm glad I don't live here."

Denise and I conned mom into giving us a ride to the State Street Mall. It wasn't really my scene, but Denise would die of obscurity if she didn't go there at least three times a week. Every teenager from every school within a 50 mile radius hung out there. It was the ultimate gathering of Myspace heads, fall out posers, and G.G. (Gossip Girl) skeezers. If you could catch a bleak and dismal future like you caught a cold, these were the people you would catch it from.

I'm not sure why it was so important to Denise. Everyone ignored us. It wasn't like we were improving our social standing by going. If anything, we were confirming to everyone there that we weren't even good enough to belong to their loser universe. We were the aliens of our generation. It suited me just fine, but Denise didn't like being a Martian. She'd blow up her home planet to fit in. I only went with her to be there when she would have her inevitable breakdown due to mass amounts of shunning.

We sat at a table in the food court as the popular people mingled and socialized. It was a real shame. Some of the guys would have been cute if they had any personality at all. Instead

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they were like black holes, sucking up and ripping apart the souls of everyone around them, leaving a vast void of humanity wherever they went.

“O-M-G, it’s Joyner,” Denise said.

T.J. Joyner was the biggest black hole of them all. He was a rich kid with all the friends he could buy. Every girl wanted to be with him, and every guy... well, wanted to be with him, too. Everybody fell all over themselves to kiss his ass, and that left him with the false impression that he mattered beyond the confines of the food court and Spencer Gifts. He had no idea just how big a tool he was, and that made him an even bigger tool. But that didn’t stop Denise from being completely and utterly in love with him, despite the fact that she had a boyfriend a couple of states away. Joyner is the one guy she’d give him up for, and I couldn’t understand why.

“So what? You act like that’s a big surprise. Joyner lives at the mall. Why shouldn’t he be here?”

“Yes, but look how close he is to us,” she said pulling a small mirror out of her purse. “Do something with your hair and that hat.”

My hair was just the way I liked it, unruly and mostly hidden underneath a tattered baseball cap. I took off my hat and shook my head frantically. My dirty blonde hair twisted and twirled around like I’d just been in a tornado. Even more perfect.

Joyner must have seen me shaking my head. He smiled slyly and stared at me. Denise was too busy primping to notice. She practically jumped out of her skin when she heard his voice.

“Nice hair,” he said as he walked by our table.

Denise looked up at him slack jawed.

Owen appeared out of the crowd and sat at our table. “How’s my honeys?”

“He talked to us,” Denise said.

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“I didn’t know you cared,” Owen said.

“Not you, doofus,” Denise said. “T.J. Joyner.”

I put my ball cap back on. “Hardly worth getting excited about.” I watched him walk through the crowd of teenage waste. Joyner had never given me so much as a glance before. Suddenly he takes an interest in my hair.

“He doesn’t just talk to anybody,” Denise said. “He’s like the most popular person in town... the entire state even.”

Owen rolled his eyes. “He doesn’t talk to anybody because his pea brain has trouble forming full sentences.”

I giggled and high fived Owen. “Good one.”

“You two are hopeless,” Denise said. “Our window of opportunity is running out, people. We have four years to work our way up the social ladder before we become complete and total pariahs for the rest of our lives.”

“How do you figure?” Owen asked.

“Simple math, dumbass. A person has three chances to improve their social status. We all blew the first one, middle school. We’ve got high school and college left. If we don’t start improving by the time high school is over, we might as well forget about getting any momentum going into college. We’re behind enough as it is. Practice makes perfect popular people.”

Owen shook his head. “This is the kind of thing you spend your time thinking about?”

“I suppose thinking about Mortal NFL and Madden Combat is better.”

He laughed. “It’s Mortal Combat and Madden NFL, clueless.”

“Whatever,” Denise said. “Doesn’t change the fact that you’re a loser.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that the only guy in town who will hang out with you is this so-called loser.”

She shot him an evil glare. “Hello, I have a boyfriend...”

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“Right,” Owen said sarcastically.

“What? You don’t believe me.”

“Invisible boyfriends don’t count.”

“He lives in Tennessee...”

“Okay, if you say so.”

She grabbed the skin on his forearm and twisted. “It’s true.”

He yelped in pain. “Lay off.”

“Stop!” I yelled loud enough for everyone in the food court to hear, including Joyner. There was a split second of horrifying silence as all eyes were on me. I heard a single chuckle and then they all went back to their own lives. I rested my elbows on the table and formed blinders over my eyes with my hands.

“Looking for attention?” Owen asked.

“She’s a little stressed,” Denise said. “She just found out her uncle is a cannibal.”

“No way.”

“Yep, we saw him eating a foot.”

“Get out,” Owen said sounding both shocked and skeptical.

“We did not,” I said. “It wasn’t a foot.”

“She is in denial,” Denise said.

“What was he eating?” Owen asked.

“It was a footprint, or something,” I said just a little annoyed that Denise had brought it up. “And he wasn’t eating it. He was... I don’t know what he was doing with it.”

“A footprint?” Owen looked amused. “For real?”

I nodded.

“That is so weird,” Owen said.

“Totally. He’s a little strange.”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Owen stood up from the table. “Wait here a second.” He ran toward the mall entrance and disappeared, only to reappear a few seconds later with a newspaper. “Check this out,” he said smacking the newspaper down on our

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table. He pointed to a small headline above a one-paragraph story. *Trail Workers Find Large Footprints They Can't Explain.*

Owen told us the story before either of us had a chance to read it. "They're building this hiking trail around Bakers Falls. Land's been a protected wildlife area since Teddy Roosevelt was in office. According to the story, there's about 100 square miles that's never been explored. I think it's total BS, but that's not the point. The point is a couple of workers were cutting a trail and they came across these humanlike tracks that were something like eighteen inches long. Tracks went on for a mile and half through some of the roughest terrain you'll ever see."

Denise giggled and then snorted. She put her hand over her mouth and nose to muffle any other weird noises that she may inadvertently let fly. She was sitting in the middle of a pack of esteem vampires. If they spotted a zit or funky noise, they'd ridicule you until they sucked up all your confidence and self-esteem. A few chairs groaned as the teenage monsters sought out the source of the pig grunt. They gave up in short order, but it was a terrifying few seconds for Denise. She breathed easier and whispered, "Are you talking about Bigfoot?"

"I'm not," Owen said. "They are." He pointed to the newspaper.

"What does one thing have to do with the other?" I asked.

Owen shrugged. "Just a weird coincidence, that's all."

I rolled my eyes. "Hokey tabloid crap."

"It's the Chicago Sun Times," Owen said.

I studied his eyes. "Don't tell me you believe this."

He blushed. "No... not exactly... I don't know."

"Believe in what?" I heard a voice say from behind me. I turned to see Joyner sipping on a drink from the designer coffee shop. Owen nervously and awkwardly tried to fold the paper.

I cleared my throat. "Nothing."

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He stood there quietly and looked at all of us. His buddies who were usually attached at his hip weren't anywhere to be seen. "I get it." He smiled. "It's private."

I didn't know what to say.

I heard Denise blurt out, "Hayley's uncle has big feet."

I turned to her, mortified and confused.

"So," Joyner said.

"No... I mean..." Denise said.

"Shut up," I said urgently, but quietly. I took a deep breath and turned back to Joyner. "It's kind of private."

He shrugged his shoulders. "That's cool, but just so you know, my uncle farts a lot." He winked and walked away.

I chuckled.

"O-M-G," Denise panted. "Joyner talked to us. He actually made it a point to come to our table and talk to us. I mean, it's not like he thought we were somebody else and accidentally talked to us. He made eye contact with us and words came out of his mouth that were directed at us."

"Relax, Miss big feet," Owen said. "Given the scintillating nature of the conversation, I'm sure that's the last time he will seek us out to talk."

I shook my head. "He's just a guy. Nothing special." I turned away before they could read my face and tell I was lying. As much as I hated to admit it, it was kind of cool that T.J. Joyner talked to us. He actually talked to us.

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I couldn't sleep thinking about the mall and Joyner. We'd gone to school together since second grade. He had never talked to me before. I wondered what was so different at the mall today. Why did he talk to me? Was this some kind of Carrie thing? Was he making fun of the unpopular girl? Being nice to me to my face and then betting his friends that he can get me to... do things with him? Had to be what was going on. Why else would he talk to me?

I stared at the ceiling. A chill blew in from the window. Grover liked it opened just a crack. Something about the noise outside made him sleep better. Anything that stopped him from whining was just fine by me. He was snoozing away on the other side of the room without a care in the world. He'd already forgotten that he had a crazy uncle living in our grandparents' FROG.

I heard a banging noise outside and sat up with a jolt. Murmuring voices drifted along the cool breeze. I quietly swung my legs over the edge of the bed and tiptoed to the window. Uncle Crew was pulling the FROG door shut. Another man, big, scraggly beard, long hair under a black White Sox cap, was at the bottom of the stairs whispering loudly. I couldn't make out what he was saying. Uncle Crew pulled the key out of the lock and shoved it in his pocket. He admonished the man for being so loud. He picked up a backpack, looped it over his right shoulder, and bounded down the stairs like he was in a hurry. The man turned as Uncle Crew passed him and I could see his face. He

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looked like your average run of the mill friend of a crazy man. He peered up at the window and I fell to the floor like I'd been shot.

Grover stirred and looked out from his covers. "What's going on?" he asked in a groggy voice.

"Nothing," I said.

He looked at me with one eye shut. "You fall out of bed?"

"Yeah," I said backing away from the window on all fours.

"Now what are you doing?"

"None of your business. Go back to sleep."

I didn't have to tell him twice. He closed his eye and fell asleep almost as quickly as he'd woken up.

I stood and took a cautious step toward the window. I lifted my chin and strained to see what was going on without being seen. They were gone. I thought about running to my grandparents' room and telling them Uncle Crew had left, but I wasn't sure if he had broken any rule. He was a grown man after all. Besides the fact that he's a raving lunatic, he should be able to come and go as he pleased, I guess.

I laid back down in my bed and tried to stop thinking about Uncle Crew and his puffed-up Charles Manson looking friend, and Joyner, and any other square peg that didn't fit in my round life, so I could fall asleep. My mind ran through the visuals of the day, and then I started to drift into a light and restless sleep.

I woke up the next morning and stumbled down the stairs. I was so tired I might as well not have slept at all. I wasn't a coffee drinker, but I needed a serious pick-me-up if I planned on being a functional human being that day. Yawning and wiping the sleep from my eyes, I walked into the kitchen and flopped down on the nearest chair at the kitchen table. Granddaddy was reading the newspaper at the other end of the table and Nana Taffy was

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stirring her cup of coffee over the sink. The clinking of the spoon rattled my brain.

Granddaddy bent the corner of his paper down and looked me over. “Goodness me, looks like somebody had a tussle with the sandman last night.”

Nana Taffy turned raising her cup to her lips. “What’s the matter, sweetie, didn’t sleep?”

I shook my head slowly.

“You know what the cure for that is, don’t ya?” Granddaddy asked.

I stared at him waiting for what I’m sure would be a cute, but useless suggestion.

“More sleep. It’s Sunday for Pete’s sake. Go back to bed.”

“Won’t do any good,” I said. “I’ll just lie there and go nuts wishing myself to sleep.”

“How ‘bout I cook you up some breakfast,” Nana Taffy said.

I shook my head. “I just need some coffee.”

Granddaddy furrowed his brow. “You teenagers do that now, drink coffee?”

“In emergencies,” I said.

Nana Taffy looked at me disapprovingly. “I don’t know. It doesn’t feel right.”

“What doesn’t feel right?” Mom asked dragging herself into the kitchen looking more tired than me.

“Hayley wants coffee,” Nana Taffy said.

“God, me too,” Mom said. She opened the cabinet door and retrieved two cups.

“She’s allowed?” Nana Taffy asked with that same disapproving look.

“Relax, mom,” my mom said. “She doesn’t make it a habit. Cream and sugar, honey?” mom asked.

I nodded. “Please.”

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“Caffeine is a drug,” Nana Taffy said.

“Right and TV will rot your brain, and money doesn’t grow on trees, and global warming will kill us all,” mom said as she poured our coffees. “Coffee is one of my greatest joys, mother. It’s been there for me when I needed a jolt of energy and something warm and delicious for my hands and my innards. Please let me share it with my daughter without judging me.”

Nana Taffy looked hurt. “I wasn’t judging you, Connie. I was just saying..”

Granddaddy grumbled. I looked at him. He wasn’t even paying attention to mom and Nana Taffy.

“What is it, dear?” Nana Taffy asked.

Whatever it was, I was glad for it. I couldn’t stand it when mom and Nana Taffy fought. Nana is so sweet and my mom is so annoying. It’s hard to choose a side when mom is actually doing something for me.

“Hmmm... oh it’s that Starling girl. The one who worked in Dr. Thompson’s office.” He was reading a story in an insert in the newspaper as he attempted to talk. I could see the word Extra written across the top of the page.

“What about her, dear?”

“They found her...” his brain was still divided between talking and reading.

“What do you mean they found her?” Nana Taffy was growing impatient with him.

“Was she missing?” mom asked as she handed me my coffee. I took a sip and closed my eyes in ecstasy. It was just what I needed.

“No, no,” Granddaddy said sounding frustrated because we couldn’t read his mind. “They found her body in Little Grand Canyon.”

Nana Taffy covered her mouth to hold back a gasp. “When?”

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“Last night... early in the a.m.” Granddaddy said.

“This morning?” Mom asked after taking a sip of coffee. “It’s already in the paper?”

“It’s an Extra section,” granddaddy said. “They must have stuck them in the newspaper just before they went out for delivery.”

“Amazing,” mom said. “I didn’t know they still did those.”

“Gotta do something to beat the intranet,” granddaddy said.

“What in blazes are you talking about?” Nana Taffy snapped. I was shocked by the tone of her voice.

“Taf...” granddaddy started, but was quickly cut off by Nana.

“A young girl we know has been found dead, and all you can do is go on about how quick the newspaper picked it up.” She sat down at the table. Her hands were trembling. “She was a sweet girl.”

“We knew her?” Mom asked.

“Your father and I did,” Nana Taffy said. “She was Dr. Thompson’s office manager. Pretty blonde thing. Young mother.”

Mom winced. “Oh my god, I don’t want to hear any more. It’s too sad.”

“Tough,” Nana Taffy said. “What happened to her?” she asked granddaddy.

“Found her,” he repeated. “Dead.”

“How’d she die?” Nana Taffy asked.

He shook his head. “You don’t want to know. She was murdered. I’ll say that much.”

“They said that in the paper?” Nana Taffy asked.

“Well, it’s too early to say officially, but they said it in so many words.” He pushed himself away from the table and stood. He folded the newspaper and shoved it under his arm. “Darndest detail about the whole thing,” he said as he made his way to the back door. “Found a bunch of tracks around the body. Feet.”

I stopped mid swallow. I couldn’t have heard what I just

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thought I heard. “Feet?”

“Bare feet,” he said opening the door. “Must have been a big fella, too. One track measured 14 inches.” He shook his head and pulled the door shut behind him.

I stared at the FROG from the backyard. I couldn’t get the image out of my head of my Uncle Crew holding what looked like a cutout of a big footprint. That visual kept intersecting with the fact granddaddy had shared with us about the murdered girl. Large 14-inch tracks were found near the body. Add that with the other known fact, Uncle Crew left here last night with a chubby Charles Manson lookalike. How could I not think he killed Dr. Thompson’s office manager?

I wondered if he was home. Probably not. Otherwise he’d be in the yard walking in his swim fins.

Grover stepped outside. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said without turning to him.

“He home?”

“Don’t know,” I shrugged.

A noise from the garage caught my attention. I approached slowly. Grover joined me out of curiosity. We peeked through the open side door. Granddaddy was banging a fender with a rubber hammer. I pushed the door open. The squeak of it made Granddaddy take notice. Grover and I stood in the doorway as if we’d done something wrong.

“Come in,” granddaddy said.

We both crossed the threshold like we were stepping over a tripwire. For the first time, we saw the car that granddaddy had been working on. It was in bad shape. It was more twisted knots of metal than car. In fact, I only knew what it was because I had heard Nana Taffy refer to it as a car before.

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“Whoa,” Grover said. “What happened to this thing?”

“Fifty foot drop happened to this thing,” Granddaddy said.

“Is it fixable?” I asked.

Granddaddy thought about the question. He looked at the crumpled metal and simply said, “Maybe.”

I walked to the back of the garage and noticed a Washington state license plate. “How long you been working on it?”

“What do you mean working on it?” Granddaddy asked.

“You know... fixing it.”

He scratched his head. “Well, I’ve had it for about 40 years or so, but I wouldn’t call what I’ve been doing to it trying to fix it.”

“Why do you have it?” Grover asked. He squatted and examined the mutilated rims.

“I like to tinker with it. Bang out a dent or two here and there. I want to see if I can ever get it looking like it used to look... when it ran.”

“Kind of like putting a puzzle together,” Grover said.

Granddaddy nodded. “Kind of, yeah.”

“Dad,” I heard a voice say from behind me. I screamed and nearly jumped out of my skin. Granddaddy and Grover laughed. I turned to see Uncle Crew standing in the doorway.

“Holy mother...” I said holding my hand over my heart.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” Uncle Crew said. At least he wasn’t laughing like the others.

“What is it, Crew?” Granddaddy asked.

“I was wondering if you were going into town today. I need to pick up some things at the hardware store.”

I looked at him through the dim light of the garage and tried to find blood on his clothes and hands.

“I’m headed that way later today,” Granddaddy said. “About noon.”

“Catch a ride?” Uncle Crew asked.

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“Sure,” Granddaddy said.

Uncle Crew nodded and turned to leave, but stopped when I asked a question.

“Why aren’t you doing your exercises today?”

“Exercises?”

“That thing you do with your swim fins in the backyard.”

He smiled. “I’m finished with that for now.”

“Why do you have feet?” Grover asked.

Uncle Crew was taken aback by the question. He looked down at his feet. “Born with ‘em.”

“Not those,” Grover said as if Uncle Crew should have understood his question. “The big ones in your room.” He pointed straight up.

Uncle Crew leaned back and looked up.

“Grover,” I snapped.

Uncle Crew stepped back and trotted up the stairs to his room.

“You little runt,” I shouted at Grover.

“Hold on,” Granddaddy said. “No need to grind your brother up.”

“I just wanted to know why he had the feet,” Grover said.

Granddaddy moved to the door and looked up the stairs. He turned back to us. “You kids know your uncle isn’t... well.”

We nodded in unison.

“He collects things.”

Grover and I exchanged concerned grimaces.

“He collects feet?” Grover asked.

“Not exactly... no,” Granddaddy said. “He gets caught up in fantasies. It’s all harmless, but people... have a hard time understanding. I think it’s best if you don’t ask Crew about his... business. He has a hard time sharing. You understand, right?”

Grover nodded and I followed. I understood perfectly well. Uncle Crew didn’t like talking about his fantasies because they

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involved murdering office managers. Granddaddy was protecting him. He didn't have any idea what Uncle Crew was actually up to, but he didn't want to know. He was protecting his son. He was protecting a murderer.

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“She was mutilated,” Owen said looking over his shoulder making sure no one was eavesdropping on our conversation. We were in his basement playing Tiger Woods Golf on the Wii. It wasn’t his favorite game, but it was the only one I would play with him. I hated the zombie and shoot ‘em up monster crap he played almost every other waking hour of the day. His cousin worked for the police department, and he got a firsthand account of the office manager’s murder.

“What do you mean mutilated?” I asked.

He took his swing on the Wii, laid up short of the green, and twirled around in frustration. He stepped away from the TV and said, “My cousin basically said she was smashed to death.”

I swung and hacked the ball into the bunker. “Smashed? Drunk?”

“No, beaten to a pulp. Bones fractured in a million pieces. Nose twisted around. Head swollen like a melon.”

“Ewww,” I said just before I swung. The ball went two feet and rolled back into the bunker. A graphic popped up on the screen “Shot limit exceeded.”

“I don’t know why you like this game,” he said. “I think I’ve seen you finish like three holes. You suck!”

“Do they know who did it?”

He chipped the ball into the hole and pumped his fist. “Sweet!”

“Owen,” I said.

He turned to me. “What?”

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“Do they know who did it?”

He shook his head. “Nope. “ He hesitated. “You heard about the footprints?”

I nodded. I debated whether I should tell him about Uncle Crew. I stood with my mouth half open ready to form the words, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do it.

“You think your uncle did it, don't you?”

I froze. I don't know how he got that from my confused expression, but it was weirdly comforting not actually having to say it out loud.

He forgot about the game and flopped down on a nearby ratty recliner. “Heavy.”

I sat on the arm of the chair. “I don't know what to do.”

He turned to me with a look of concern. “You don't do anything.”

“I have to do something,” I said. “A woman is dead.”

“Yeah, but you don't know for sure that your uncle had anything to do with it. You saw him with something that looked like big feet. That's it.”

“He left the house late last night with some other guy,” I said quickly like I was ripping a band aid off.

“Oh. Still doesn't mean a thing. Maybe they were going out to get a beer or something. Guys do that.”

I shook my head. “Not my uncle. He's not exactly social. He doesn't like public places. Besides they had a backpack. And the guy he was with... Let's just say, he looked like he could smash things.”

Owen leaned forward. He sighed and said, “Look, I shouldn't say this because you're just going to laugh at me, but I think it was...”

He didn't finish his sentence. He sat there staring at the floor. “You think it was what?”

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He stood up. "I'm not going to say it. You're going to laugh."
I slid into the recliner. "I promise I won't."

He rubbed the back of his neck and arched it back. "It's possible that it was... Bigfoot."

I let out a high pitched bark more than a laugh. I covered my mouth.

"You promised!"

"I'm sorry," I said struggling not to let out any other unexpected huffs of laughter. "It's just..."

"Crazy?"

"Well..."

"Look," he said as he began to pace. "My uncle told me about those footprints the trail workers found."

"Yeah?"

"There is evidence of dermal ridges."

"Dermal whatsits?"

"Ridges." He held up his hands, fingers spread apart. "The lines that make up your fingerprints, those are dermal ridges."

"So."

"So, do you know hard that is to fake?"

"No. Do you?"

He considered the question. "Well, I've never tried it, but my cousin says it's nearly impossible."

"Nearly?" I shook my head. "Nearly isn't impossible."

"Yeah, but my cousin..."

"Your cousin has one major flaw that makes me doubt everything he says."

"What?"

"He's related to you."

"Ha ha," he said sarcastically. "I don't understand why it's easier for you to believe your uncle killed some girl than it is that Bigfoot did it."

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I snickered. "I've seen my uncle. I know he's a little nutso. I've never see Bigfoot. And neither has anyone else."

"Not true." He ran to the corner of the basement and came back with a book. "There have been thousands of sightings."

"You have a Bigfoot book?"

He rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you don't believe in books either. I bought it yesterday at the mall. It's written by this anthropologist who's done years of research."

"On Bigfoot?"

"Yes."

"He's a real scientist?"

"Yes. He started in the 80's. Actually worked with gorillas in the Congo before that. The guy's the real thing."

I stood shaking my head. "Sounds like he spent too much time in the jungle." I stepped in front of the television. "Let's play another round."

He was clearly disappointed by my lack of interest in his theory. He pressed 'A' on the Wii remote and started setting up the next game. "There's video," he said without looking at me.

"Of what?"

He turned to me. "Never mind. You're not interested."

I cocked my head to the right and smirked.

He smiled. "There was a film shot in the 60's - in California. This guy named Patterson and his friend... Gim... something, they were riding horses in the woods near this riverbed when... Wham!" Owen clapped his hands together. "There it was. Patterson's horse reared. The other guy pulled out his gun and aimed, ready to fire if it attacked. Patterson grabbed a 16 millimeter movie camera and started shooting while he chased this thing. It's awesome." He was so excited describing the film, he didn't realize that he'd hit the menu button on the remote when he slapped his hands together. He inadvertently hit it again and the game shut

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down.

“You’ve seen it?”

“Yeah. Found it on Youtube.”

“And you think it’s real?”

“Not just me. A bunch of people. Turned a lot of people into believers. They even took it to the Smithsonian to be analyzed.”

“And?”

He sat down. “And nothing. They weren’t able to prove it was real or fake.”

I picked up the Bigfoot book and looked at the back cover. The anthropologist stared back at me through thick glasses in his author’s photo. He looked normal enough. His bio said he was a professor at a university in Montana. He had a normal job. I turned the book over to look at the front cover. This time two glassy brown eyes stared back at me under a thick brow ridge. How could such a normal guy write such a cockamamie book? I tossed it on the couch. “You know what your problem is, Owen?”

“No, but I got a feeling you’re going to tell me.”

“You play too many video games. It’s rotting your brain.”

He snickered. “You sound like my mom.”

I walked to the stairs.

“Where you going? I thought we were going to play another round.”

I waved him off. “Don’t feel like it.”

“Why?”

I placed my foot on the first step and turned to him before I made my ascent. “Because talking to you made me realize one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“My uncle really did kill that woman.” I slowly made the climb upstairs.

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The temperature had dropped a good ten degrees by the time I left Owen's house. I wasn't prepared for the chill that hit me when I headed down Clark Street on my way home. The wind grew in intensity with each step. I folded my arms in front of my chest and tried to pull every bit of me in as close as I could to preserve body heat. I put my head down and picked up my pace, cursing the wind and the cold and anything else I could blame for the stupidity of cold weather.

I turned the corner onto Placid Avenue, excited that I just had two blocks to go. I looked up and stopped suddenly when I saw a beat up pickup truck with more rust spots than paint parked a half a block away from my house. Leaning against the front grill of the truck, smoking a cigarette, was Uncle Crew's friend from the night before. He was even bigger when we were on the same level. He had one foot on the bumper of the truck, and was sucking intently on his cigarette. He didn't notice me at first. I stepped forward and crunched a small pile of dried leaves beneath my feet. He looked up mid-exhale and smiled. Even from this distance, I could see that he was missing a tooth and the rest were a yellowish brown. He nodded as I passed. I was too scared to return the gesture. I passed the truck and sprinted the rest of the distance to my front door. As I turned the knob, I looked over my shoulder and was horrified to discover that he had moved to the back of the truck. His foot now resting on the back bumper, he waved as I practically tore the door off the hinges to get inside and away from his prying eyes and rotting teeth.

I stood in the foyer for a few minutes fighting hyperventilation. I doubled over and placed my hand on my chest, feeling slightly more upset that I could feel the thumping of my heart through my sweater.

Mom came down the stairs and was a little alarmed to see me

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so frazzled. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“Who’s that guy?” I said in between heavy breaths.

“Guy?” She asked moving to the foyer. She looked out the tiny window at the side of the door. “What guy?”

“The guy standing by the truck?”

Mom strained to see every inch of road visible through the window. “I don’t see a truck.”

I joined her at the window. He wasn’t there. “He’s gone.”

She looked at me with even more concern. “Did he hurt you, sweetie?”

I shook my head.

She grabbed my hand. “Are you sure?”

“Mom,” I said sounding critical and disgusted. “God no! He was just creepy looking.”

Mom rolled her eyes. “You think anyone over 30 is creepy looking.”

“Whatever,” I said.

“It’s true.”

“I...” I stopped myself. I wanted to tell her I had seen him the night before with Uncle Crew, but it would start a conversation about the murdered woman, and the feet, and Bigfoot. Frankly, I didn’t have the energy to have that conversation. “Most people over 30 are creepy looking,” I said walking away.

“I cannot wait until you’re 30, and I can throw that back in your face.”

I could feel her eyes on me during the climb up the stairs. I quickened my pace and practically skipped to my room in a feeble attempt to put the whole embarrassing moment behind me. Really, what was so scary about the guy? Sure, he kind of looked like a serial killer, and I bet he’s had a run in or two with the law, but that’s no reason to be scared of him. I mean so what if he was waiting suspiciously in front of my house just as I was coming

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home.

Grover was sitting on his bed when I entered the room. He jumped when he heard me and hid something under his pillow.

“What you doing, squirt?” I asked.

He refused to look at me. “Nothing.”

“What did you put under your pillow?”

He gritted his teeth. “Why you always butting into my business?”

“C’mon, fess up.”

“It’s nothing!”

I approached him, and he darted his hand under the pillow and pulled whatever it was out and hid it behind his back.

“Cough it up or I’m going to tell mom you have one of her magazines again.”

“Shut up! That’s a lie!”

I held out my hand.

He shot me a death glare and then slapped the object into my hand. It was a newspaper clipping. I uncrumpled it and read the headline out loud.

“Stevens County Toddler Still Missing.” I sat down on Grover’s bed and continued to read. “A Stevens county man holds out hope that his missing four-year-old boy is still alive even though the authorities have long since given up the search. For Hank Stanton it has been an especially trying time...” I looked at Grover. “Granddaddy... Where did you get this?”

“The garage,” he said. “In a box under his workbench.” He scooted closer to me and lowered his voice. “It’s a story about Uncle Crew. He’s the toddler. Granddaddy’s wife... the one before Nana Taffy... she was driving on this mountain road. It was icy and she lost control. The car went over a cliff. When the rescue people got there, she was dead, and Uncle Crew wasn’t anywhere to be found.”

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I skimmed the story for more details, but other than Granddaddy being devastated that his wife was dead and his son was missing there wasn't much more to it. The story was written six months after the accident.

"I bet that's why Uncle Crew is crazy. He hit his head or something," Grover said as he gently took the clipping from me.

"How did he survive?" I asked no one in particular.

Grover shrugged. "Wolves or something."

"What?"

"He was raised by wolves or something. It happens."

I took the clipping back from him. "Don't be ridiculous." I stood. "C'mon."

"Where we going?"

"The garage. We're putting this back where you found it."

"Aww, do we have to?"

"Yes. This is private stuff."

"It was in the newspaper. How's that private?"

"Because it is. It belongs to Granddaddy, and we need to put it back before he gets home."

Grover pushed out his bottom lip and pouted as he stood. I stepped back and let him lead the way.

He clomped through the house as if I were making him do the most terrible task on the planet. We passed through the kitchen, avoiding any conversation with mom and Nana Taffy, and marched out the door and to the garage. I was immediately struck by the smell of cigarettes as we entered. Granddaddy didn't smoke, and I was pretty sure Uncle Crew didn't either. I should have turned Grover around and exited the garage immediately, but I passed it off as a harmless phenomenon and followed Grover to the far right corner of the garage.

"Where's the light?" I asked.

"The switch is on that wall," Grover said pointing to the wall

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next to the workbench.

I stumbled through the dark ahead of Grover. The smell of cigarettes was much stronger now. The light suddenly came on and I swallowed a scream when I saw Uncle Crew's friend standing by the workbench, smoking a cigarette.

"That better?" he asked.

Grover grabbed my hand.

I stood frozen. I wanted to yell for help, but my mouth went completely dry. Running was out of the question because my knees were shaking so badly it was a wonder I could even stand. "Who... What...?" I couldn't even decide which question to ask him.

"Jeremy Robinson," he said much cheerier than I imagined a serial killer would sound. "My friends call me J-Rob though. You know like A-Rod, except instead of an 'A' it's a 'J' and instead of 'od' it's 'ob,' J-Rob."

I felt Grover's grip loosen. "You play baseball?"

"Huh?" The burly man asked.

"You know, like A-Rod," Grover said.

The man put one hand on his hip and scratched his wooly beard with the other. "Nope, but I see how you could be led to that conclusion. My fault. My fault. No sir, I do not play baseball. Can't even stand the game if you want to know the truth."

"What are you doing in here?" I asked.

"Waiting for Crew. Me and him, we're friends. He calls me J-Rob. I told you that was my name, didn't I?"

Grover looked up at me. I tried to give him a reassuring smile.

"My grandfather doesn't like people in his garage," I said.

"Hank?" J-Rob asked.

"You know him?" I asked.

"Sure," J-Rob said. He took a drag from his cigarette. "Known Hank almost as long as I've known Crew." He looked at my hand.

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“What’cha got there?”

Momentarily confused, I lifted the hand up and examined the piece of paper I was holding. I had completely forgotten why we came into the garage. “This? This... it’s nothing. We just came down here to put this back.”

“It’s a newspaper article,” Grover said.

I jerked on his hand and scrunched my face in disgust.

“Newspaper?”

“It’s just some old story,” I said. “Not very interesting.”

“Were you raised by wolves, too?” Grover asked.

I jerked his hand even harder. “Oh my god, you’re such a spaz.”

“Wolves?” J-Rob held out his hand. “Let me see that article.”

“I don’t...”

“C’mon, I’ll give it back.”

“It doesn’t belong to us...”

“Please,” he said.

I had never heard of a serial killer using the word “please” before. Could I have been wrong about this monster of a man that stood before Grover and me? I’m not sure why, but I felt compelled to give him the clipping. I slowly placed the article in his hand. I watched in amazement as he held the piece of paper a foot away from his face, and his eyes darted across the words on the clipping with almost lightning speed. He held the lit cigarette between his index and middle finger as he read, and squinted against the smoke that drifted across his field of vision. He handed the clipping back to me.

“Terrible and wonderful thing that was,” he said.

Ignoring the oddness of his statement I said, “You know about this?”

“Sure. Told you, me and Crew are friends. I know everything about him.”

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“He was missing for six months?” I said in total disbelief.

“More like thirteen or fourteen months. Can’t remember exactly. Crew knows. Knows from the second the car accident happened ‘til the day he was found by a group of whitewater rafters on the Kettle River.”

“How...” I started.

“How did he survive?” J-Rob asked for me. “That’s the million dollar question. That’s the question that you don’t ask unless you really, really, really want to know the answer.” He twirled his hand with the cigarette high in the air as if he were conducting an invisible orchestra. “That’s the question you ask only if you’re prepared to flip your life upside down.”

Grover and I looked at each other. J-Rob was twice as crazy as Uncle Crew.

“Is that what happened to you?” Grover asked. Normally I would have punched him on the shoulder for asking such a stupid question, but I wanted to know the answer myself.

J-Rob thought about the question and then let out a mucus-laden laugh. I could practically see his over-taxed lungs deflate in his chest. “I came to the party like this. I wasn’t surprised at all by what happened to Crew. You know why? Cause I seen them, too. I heard them. My dog was killed by one of them when I was a kid. Long before I met Crew. My life was flipped upside down and back again and upside down again about a dozen times before I had the pleasure of meeting your uncle.”

“Who killed your dog?” Grover asked. I could hear the concern in his voice.

“You sure you want to know the answer?” J-Rob asked. “You can’t go back once I tell ya.’ Simple science. Once you know a thing, you can’t unknow a thing.”

“We better get back in the house,” I said.

“No,” Grover barked. “I want to know.”

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“No...” I said. “I mean I shouldn’t be letting you talk to a stranger and...” I looked at J-Rob. “No offense.”

“None taken. Ain’t nobody stranger than me.” He smiled and winked.

I smiled weakly and nodded. I was just about to turn and leave when I remembered why we came in the garage in the first place. I handed the clipping to Grover and said, “Put it back where you found it.”

He took it from me and stepped toward J-Rob. He stopped and looked up at him. “You’re in the way.”

J-Rob threw up his hands. “Sorry. Don’t mind me.” He stepped away from the workbench. Grover hurried to a wooden toolbox underneath the bench and opened it. I saw dozens of clippings before he put the article in the toolbox and closed it. He stood quickly and rejoined me.

“Well...” I said. “We need to go.”

“Fine,” he said. “Pleasure meeting you. Don’t worry. I won’t say a word about the... you know.” He pointed down at the toolbox.

I grabbed Grover’s hand and quick stepped it out of the garage. I came away from the encounter with one thought. As nice and harmless as he seemed to be, J-Rob was big enough to beat a woman to death.

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The next day at school something much weirder happened to me than talking to a giant, jolly Charles Manson lookalike in my grandfather's garage. Joyner talked to me again.

I was talking to Denise outside homeroom before the bell rang, and Joyner actually yelled my name from the other end of the hallway. It didn't register at first because Lee Holmes was standing behind me, and I actually thought he was saying "Hey, Lee!" Denise had to convince me that he was saying "Hayley!"

"Dufus, are you going to say something back?"

"Me?" I turned and looked for Lee Holmes, but he was gone. "Are you sure he's talking to me?"

"Talking to you, and headed this way. What is your deal?" Denise pulled out a compact and touched up her makeup. She reached for my nose with the powder puff, but I jerked back. "You're shiny."

"I don't care," I said as I nervously watched Joyner approach. What is he doing? Why me? This is definitely some sick Carrie-like joke.

"Relax," Denise said. "Laugh at whatever he says, and play with your hair like you don't have a care in the world. Guys don't like girls with baggage. Look disinterested in a very sexy way."

"Shut up," I grunted.

"Hey," Joyner said leaning against the row of lockers next to my homeroom.

"Hey," I said. Denise darted her eyes up and started twirling

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her hair. For some dumb reason I mimicked her.

“How come you never say ‘Hello?’”

Denise positioned herself out of his line of sight and mouthed the word, “Laugh.”

I sneered and shook my head.

“What do you mean no?” He asked.

“Oh,” I said. “No, it’s just that I say hello all the time just not... to you.” *Smooth as a brick sidewalk.*

“Ha ha,” he said sarcastically.

I laughed, but far too loud and exaggerated.

Denise waved her hand in a downward motion, telling me to tone it down.

He scratched his head. “I tell you what. I’m going to give you plenty of chances to make up for all those times you didn’t say hello to me.” He held up a piece of paper. “I had my spies give me your class schedule so I am going to make it a point to be outside the door of all your classes when they end so you can say hello. If you don’t feel comfortable with hello you can say hi or at the very least acknowledge my existence with a simple head nod. Deal?”

I smiled. “And if I say no?”

“Then you will be responsible for the cost.”

“The cost of what?”

“The cost of the therapy my parents will have to pay for to mend my shattered heart.” He held his hand over his chest, winked and walked away.

Denise did a little happy dance when he was out of site. “O-M-G! O-M-G! He’s totally into you!”

Without any sense of humility I said, “Yeah, but why?”

As promised, Joyner was waiting for me after each class, and I

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said hello. It was hard to concentrate in class while I sat at my desk wondering if he really would be there. I never allowed myself to believe it. No matter how many times he was waiting for me, I never entered the next classroom thinking that he would actually be there when the class was over. But he was. We never said more than hello. He made it a point to smile after I returned the greeting and then vacated the area. I liked that. Actually having a conversation with him would have ruined the... charm of our little game.

Owen got wind of the 'hello' conversation from Denise during second period Spanish, and he accosted me as soon as he saw me in Chem class.

"Hear you're flirting it up with Joyner," he said a little too loudly.

I gritted my teeth and gestured for him to keep his voice down. "I'm not flirting it up with anybody."

"What do you call it then?"

"I..." I cleared my throat and searched my brain for a plausible description of what Joyner and I were doing. I finally gave up. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

"He's a player, Hayley."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not on anyone's playlist, Owen."

He was about to respond, but stopped himself.

"Look," I said. "I don't know what Joyner's doing, but I can assure you, he'll get tired of it by the time first bell rings tomorrow."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll be stuck saying hello to T.J. Joyner until I graduate. Big whoop."

Of course, it was a big whoop. T.J. Joyner had taken an interest in me. The guy didn't intentionally rule the school. He was too cool for something like that. He was the guy all the popular kids sought out. High school is a very complex series of factions that

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coexist by the most tenuous set of social conventions. One wrong move, a misguided hand gesture, an unpleasant glance, a simple nod to the member of the opposite sex in the wrong clique could cause complete and total anarchy. The potential for world war is a much greater long shot than the all out destruction of every inch of your typical high school on any given day. Joyner is the one guy who moves freely from group to group in our school. He keeps the peace without even trying. Without him, I'm sure the halls would erupt into brawls and shouting matches every hour on the hour. It was kind of like it was his high school experience, and none of us wanted to screw it up for him.

And as Denise said, he was into me. The truth is I would be devastated if he forgot all about the hello thing the next day. I tried to convince myself that he was just playing a game, yanking the awkward girl's chain, but as the day wore on, I started to believe that he was actually trying to charm me. Nana Taffy would say he was courting me. I didn't know why, but by fifth period, I decided to just enjoy the attention and stop trying to figure it out.

After I said hello to Joyner outside of sixth period Advanced Algebra, he handed me a note and then joined a group of boys waiting for him by the gym door. I waited until he was out of sight and then opened the note.

“HELLO! I want to move this relationship along, so tomorrow we have to tell each other something we'd only tell our best friends. – TJ”

Relationship? I read the note again. He called what we were doing a relationship. But he used the term best friend. He just wanted to be friends. Or was he just being coy? Afraid to call it what he really wanted it to be?

Denise stormed down the hall. I saw her eyes darting from

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one end of the corridor to the next. "Where is he?" she asked.

I folded the note and stuck it in my algebra book. "He's gone. Football practice, I guess."

She looked at me with great anticipation. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Did you talk? Did he ask you out?"

"I said hello." I turned away from her so she couldn't read the excitement in my face.

Denise hounded me for information on the walk home. Did I think Joyner really liked me? What was I going to wear to school tomorrow? Did I think one of his friends would be interested in going out with her? Blah, blah, blah. It was annoying as hell, but it was much better than Owen's reaction to the whole thing. He walked with us in monk-like silence. Normally he's boring us with some inane video game news, but he was mad. He may be the only guy in the entire county who doesn't like T.J. Joyner, and I suddenly couldn't understand why.

We cut through the Burtons' yard to get to my grandparents' house. As soon as we rounded the hedges, I gasped at the sight of a police car parked on the street. Granddaddy was talking to a young, lean officer. I wanted to hide. I don't know why because I hadn't done anything wrong, but I immediately felt guilty just by the cop's mere presence.

"Doug?" Owen said.

I turned to him. "You know him?"

"That's my cousin."

I looked at the officer and then back at Owen. The conversation we had in his basement played over in my head. "You told him, didn't you?"

He gave me a look of terror. "I didn't know it was a secret."

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I set my jaw and seriously thought about punching him. “You idiot,” I groaned.

“I told him I thought you were crazy. I told him that I didn’t think your uncle did it. C’mon... I didn’t know... he didn’t seem to be interested when I told him. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“What’s going on?” Denise asked.

“Owen’s an über douche, that’s what’s going on.”

“Hayley,” my grandfather yelled. He was using his calm voice. It was completely contrived and controlled. You could tell that there was a little ball of anger hiding in his tone. He was doing everything he could to hold it back. “Come here, honey.”

Honey? He never called me honey. I walked the green mile with Owen on my left and Denise on my right.

Granddaddy was clenching his jaw so hard I could see his jowls quiver. In a scary, even tone, he asked Owen and Denise to run on home because I was going to be tied up with a few things for the rest of the day. I dreaded to find out what those few things were. Owen and Denise said their goodbyes. When granddaddy and the officer weren’t looking, Denise gestured for me to call her.

Granddaddy spoke. “Do you have something to tell me, Hayley?”

I unveiled my doe-eyed look and said, “No.”

“Nothing about Crew you want to tell me?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

He sighed. “Which is it, no or I don’t know?”

“Sir,” Owen’s cousin said. “May I?”

Granddaddy nodded.

“Ms. Wilkes, my name is Officer Doogan. I’m Owen’s cousin.”

“I know,” I said.

“Good. Last night Owen confided in me that you had some concerns about your uncle’s activities recently. In particular, two

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nights ago. Is that correct?”

“What do you mean concerns?” I asked.

He remained patient. “Did you or did you not witness your uncle leaving the premises with a suspicious looking gentleman late in the evening?”

I looked at my granddaddy, but he was so disgusted with me he turned away. “I... It was my uncle and his friend J-Rob.”

The officer pulled out a small pad of paper and pen, and started writing. “And how do you know this J-Rob?”

“I met him yesterday... in granddaddy’s garage.”

The officer peered over at my granddaddy. “Mr. Stanton?”

“Don’t look at me,” my granddaddy said. “I didn’t know J-Rob was in town.”

“But you know him?”

“I do. He and my son were...” Granddaddy hesitated. I could see the wheels in his brain turning. He was looking for the best way to explain Uncle Crew and J-Rob’s relationship. “They were roommates in a mental health facility.”

The officer sounded out mental health as he wrote it down. “Why would these gentlemen need mental health care, sir?”

“They’re good boys, Officer.”

“I have no reason to doubt that, sir. But I would be negligent in my duties to serve and protect if I didn’t ask why your son and his friend needed such intense psychiatric care.”

Granddaddy rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I’m not a doctor. All I can tell you is that they had some rough times. They were never a danger to others. Just themselves. The facility helped them cope. They both completed the treatment program. I can’t speak for J-Rob, but Crew is on his meds. Never misses a pill.”

“Meds?” The officer asked.

“For depression.” Granddaddy forced a laugh. “Hell, half the country’s on them these days.”

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The officer nodded. “And is it unusual for your son to make late night trips like the one your granddaughter observed?”

I wasn’t so sure granddaddy was going to still claim me as his granddaughter after this.

“No,” granddaddy said. “It’s not unusual. He does it quite often.”

“But your granddaughter’s never observed it before.”

“She hasn’t been here long enough.” He scolded me with his eyes. “Crew has an... eccentric hobby.”

“Eccentric? What would that be, sir?”

Granddaddy’s shoulder dropped. His whole body seemed to shrink. “He’s a Bigfoot researcher.”

The officer stopped writing. He eased the tip of the pen off the paper and examined granddaddy’s face. “I’m sorry, sir, but could you repeat that?”

“Crew is a Bigfoot researcher.”

“He hunts Bigfoot?”

“No, he doesn’t hunt Bigfoot...” Granddaddy ran his callused hands through his gray hair and took a deep breath. “I know it sounds strange, but my son studies Bigfoot... only he doesn’t call it Bigfoot.”

“What does he call it?” The officer was fighting a chuckle.

Exasperated granddaddy said, “Don’t know. I’m not the one who researches it.” He took a second to collect himself. “You’re going to have to ask Crew if you really want to know.”

The officer raised an eyebrow as if surprised by the suggestion. “Is he here?”

“He is,” granddaddy said. “In his room.”

The officer looked at me. “Do you have anything to add, Ms. Wilkes?”

I thought about the question. “Just that I’m going to strangle your cousin for opening his big mouth.”

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He smiled. “Don’t be too hard on him. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but he did the right thing.”

I thought about screaming my head off about what a disloyal boob Owen was, but I decided against it. It wouldn’t get me anywhere. In fact, as mad as I was, I was sure to lose control and turn it into an all-out hissy fit, a surefire way to wind up in handcuffs in the back of the police cruiser. I smiled much too broadly and walked away while granddaddy and the officer made their way to the backyard.

Once in the house, I got the third degree from mom and Nana Taffy. They wanted to know what the police wanted with me. Was I in trouble? Why did they go to the backyard? I didn’t have the nerve to tell them that I basically called Uncle Crew a murderer, and because of my big mouth, they were probably going to arrest him, and he was going to spend the rest of his life in jail or worse. I was madder at myself than I had ever been. I made a huge leap from Uncle Crew leaving in the middle of the night with his weirdo friend to them being responsible for killing a woman in Little Grand Canyon. On top of that, I was idiotic enough to say something to Owen. The guy had only two friends for a reason. He’s a big fat jerk most of the time. He has no concept of discretion. The only thing preventing me from killing him was that I made the bonehead move of announcing to his cousin the cop that I was going to strangle him. Kind of takes away your option of homicide when you tell the police beforehand what’s on your mind.

I stayed in the kitchen talking to mom and Nana until I couldn’t stand the barrage of questions any longer. I grabbed a soda and bolted up the stairs to my room. Grover was looking out the window when I entered.

“Cops,” he said.

I didn’t answer.

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“Talking to Uncle Crew about something.”

I dropped to my bed and kicked my shoes off.

“Think it’s got anything to do with that J-Rob guy?”

I still wasn’t answering.

He turned to me. “What’s wrong with you?”

I took a swig of my drink and shook my head. “Does anyone in this family mind their own business?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m sick of being asked questions.”

“Who asked you questions?”

“Gover,” I groaned. “You’re doing it right now, you goof.”

“No I’m not.”

“Do you not know what a question is? Because you’re really getting on my nerves.”

He turned back to the window and watched the officer question Uncle Crew and granddaddy. “They’re looking up here,” he said.

I put the soda can on my nightstand and lay down. “Great.”

“Granddaddy doesn’t look happy.”

“He’s not.”

“This does have something to do with J-Rob, doesn’t it? He and Uncle Crew are in some kind of trouble.”

I sat up. “What makes you say that?”

He shrugged. “Not hard to figure out. Crazy guy in the garage. Cops talking to Uncle Crew. What else could it be?” He kept his eyes peeled on the activity in the backyard. “Bet they robbed a bank or something.”

“I wish,” I said.

His head snapped around. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“You know something,” he said.

I closed my eyes. “Shut up, Gover.”

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“What did they do?”

I sat straight up and shot him a furious look. “They killed someone, all right! They went out to Little Grand Canyon and killed that office manager woman!”

His mouth dropped open. “They did?” he asked in utter shock.

I clenched my fists and punched my thighs. “No... I don’t know. You saw J-Rob. Do you think he’s the type of guy to do that?”

Grover nodded. “Totally.”

“Uncle Crew, too?”

Grover looked out the window and then back at me. “He is pretty crazy.”

“Then it’s not that bizarre to think they would do something like that?”

“It’s almost bizarre to think they wouldn’t do something like that.”

I smiled. “Thank you, little brother. I needed to hear that.”

He blushed and smiled back.

I lay back down and quickly realized no matter how justified Grover felt I was in thinking what I thought about Uncle Crew and J-Rob, granddaddy was still going to be mad at me. I shouldn’t have blabbed to Owen. I could blame the big skunk all I wanted, but in the end, I was the one who made the accusation. I called granddaddy’s son a murderer without one shred of evidence. Being creepy didn’t make you a killer.

I turned toward Grover. “They still out there?”

“Yeah,” he said. “They’re going up to Uncle Crew’s room.”

“Great,” I said sarcastically. “It just gets better and better.” I was about to roll over and try to take a nap when I stopped. “Did you know Uncle Crew was a Bigfoot researcher?”

Grover’s eyes opened wide. “No way! That’s so cool.”

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“You would think it’s cool,” I said rolling over.

“Bigfoot is way cool. Tommy Dixon told me he saw Bigfoot at the dump a few years ago.”

“Please,” I said closing my eyes, hoping to drift away in a nice relaxing sleep that would help me forget the last fifteen minutes of my life.

“He’s completely serious. His dad had to go out there one night.”

“Why would anyone have to go to the dump at night?”

“I don’t know, but he did and Tommy went with him. He and his dad both saw it. Tommy said it was nine feet tall.”

I laughed. “Nine feet tall. I think Tommy was dizzy from the smell of rotting garbage.”

“He swears it’s true,” Grover said.

“Then it must be,” I said. I took a deep breath.

“I bet those are the feet thingies,” he said excitedly. “Bigfoot prints.”

I groaned. “Grover, please, shut up. There is no such thing as Bigfoot. Tommy Dixon never saw one. Tommy Dixon’s father never saw one. And I can promise you, without a doubt, that Uncle Crew has never seen one. He’s crazy. Don’t you get that?” I spotted my iPod on the nightstand and retrieved it as quickly as I could.

“But...” Grover started, but I shoved the buds in my ear and turned the music up as loud as it would go. With my eyes shut, I could almost pretend that I was somewhere else, far from the insanity that had become my life.

My mother woke me about an hour later. She tried to get me to come down to dinner. But I couldn’t face granddaddy so I told her that I wasn’t feeling very well and asked her not so nicely to

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leave me alone. She tried to insist, but I got bratty enough that she just gave up and shut the door behind her as she left the room.

I think that was the first time I cried about all the trouble I had caused. Granddaddy hated me. I was sure of it. Uncle Crew probably didn't want to have anything to do with me either, but I have to admit, I wasn't all that upset about that. I didn't have any business spreading rumors about him, but that didn't make him any less crazy.

I hid my face under the covers. I heard the door to my room open followed by the clomp, clomp of booted feet.

"Your mother says you're sick," granddaddy said.

I kept my face hidden. "Uh-huh," I said.

I felt him sit on the end of my bed. "I see. Want some soup?"

"No thanks," I said.

"Sure?"

"Yes."

He cleared his throat. "About your uncle."

I winced but he couldn't see me. I dreaded to hear what he had to say.

"I know it's hard adjusting with somebody like him around. He's got his special... ways about him. I know better than anyone that it's not easy accepting him for the way he is." He sniffled. "I did about the worst thing a father could ever do to a child, I abandoned him." His voice cracked. I knew then that he was crying and it made me tear up all over again. I could feel the lump forming in my throat. I knew a little something about being abandoned by your father. I felt like an even bigger heel. Granddaddy composed himself. "Crew would never hurt anyone. He is a gentle soul... like his mother. He'd rather give his life than cause harm to another human being. You understand?"

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“Yes, sir.”

He patted my leg. “He doesn’t want you up here feeling bad for what happened with the police. Neither do I.”

I kicked off the covers and threw my arms around him from behind. “I’m so sorry, granddaddy. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know. I know. Don’t fret about it. And don’t you be too upset with your friend Owen.”

I growled playfully. “I’m going to kill him...”

“Honeypot, you didn’t give him much choice. He had to tell his cousin. I’d expect you to do the same if the situation was reversed.”

I let him go and settled back down on the bed next to him. “I guess. You promise you forgive me?”

“I never held anything against you.”

“You gotta let me make it up to you,” I pleaded.

“Fine,” he stood. “Come to dinner. We’re doing things a little differently tonight.”

I smiled and nodded. He helped me up from the bed and I followed him to the kitchen. It was empty. I could smell Nana Taffy’s pork chops, fresh baked rolls, and cream corn spinach casserole, but there wasn’t so much as a plate on the table. Granddaddy continued out the kitchen and walked toward the garage. I stopped and watched him go up the stairs to Uncle Crew’s room. He sensed I was no longer following and turned.

“C’mon,” he said.

“Up there?”

“I told you we were doing things a little differently tonight. Crew’s hosting.”

I scrunched my forehead. “Hosting?”

“Figured, in light of what happened today, it was about time you and your brother got to know your uncle better.”

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I didn't move. The last thing I wanted to do was face the man I accused of being a murderer.

"Hayley," granddaddy said, "It will be okay."

I balled my hands into tight fists and continued to follow granddaddy.

Uncle Crew opened the door before granddaddy reached the final step. He was unusually clean. His hair was slicked back and his ratty blue oxford shirt was buttoned all the way to the top. He stepped back and let us enter. Mom, Grover, Nana Taffy, and J-Rob were sitting at two card tables pushed together. J-Rob had not bothered cleaning up.

The kitchen was illuminated by a naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. The room was tiny, barely enough space to fit all of us at the table. The rest of the FROG wasn't much bigger. A well-worn couch and second-hand recliner took up most of the space in the living room. There was a small television, but I got the sense that it wasn't digital ready, and probably hadn't been used in a long time. And next to the television was an ancient VCR. There were boxes upon boxes stacked on the far side of the FROG, each marked with a date and location, Montana, Oregon, Washington. There was a small table with a laptop computer at the end of the rows of boxes. There was a door on the far right corner of the room, what I assumed was the bathroom.

I squeezed in past Grover and sat between him and Nana Taffy. Granddaddy and Uncle Crew sat at the other end of the table. Mom looked at me and mouthed the words "Thank you."

"Let's eat," granddaddy said.

"Wait," Nana Taffy said. "Grace first."

"Taf," granddaddy began to protest.

"Zip it, Hank. This is a special occasion. We should have the Lord bless it."

Granddaddy rolled his eyes.

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“Mrs. Stanton,” J-Rob raised his hand, “Can I do the honors?”
“Certainly,” Nana Taffy said smiling.

We all clasped our hands together except for granddaddy. He and I were the only ones not to close our eyes as J-Rob spoke.

“Dear God, thank you for the meal, and thank you for the people I am about to share it with. If you ever have to just bless me with one or the other, I’ll take the people any day.” Mom and Nana Taffy cooed. J-Rob blushed. “Amen.”

The closing word was like a bell going off at a horse race. Granddaddy plopped a glob of casserole on his plate and J-Rob went straight for the pork chops. Uncle Crew gently took a roll and handed the plate to Grover.

“So,” mom said. “Are you in town for long, Jeremy?”

“J-Rob, ma’am,” he said scooping up some casserole. “I generally move on once there’s no more activity.”

“Activity?” mom asked.

He pointed over his shoulder with his fork. “Over to the Shawnee National Forest. Loads of activity right now. Most I’ve seen in a decade.”

“I don’t understand,” mom said.

“It’s not important,” Uncle Crew said. His voice was just as gravelly and raw as I had heard it the other day.

J-Rob looked at him pensively. “I’m not supposed to talk about it?”

Uncle Crew simply shook his head.

“Talk about what, Bigfoot?” Grover asked.

A dreadful silence settled over the table.

“You help Uncle Crew look for him, don’t you?” Grover continued.

Another flash of silence followed by short bursts of laughter by granddaddy and J-Rob.

“It’s probably best you talk about it,” granddaddy said. “No

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sense in trying to ignore the white elephant in the room when it's about to step on ya'."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Uncle Crew said. He didn't see the humor in the situation that granddaddy and J-Rob did.

Granddaddy reached over and put his hand on top of Uncle Crew's. "The kids have questions. I think the best thing to do is answer them."

Uncle Crew hesitated and then gave a tentative shrug of approval.

J-Rob stuffed a hunk of pork chop in his mouth. He jacked an eyebrow up and motioned to Grover with his knife. "What was your name again?"

"Grover."

The other eyebrow went up. "Named after the great Grover Krantz?"

"Named after his father's father," mom said.

J-Rob stopped chewing. He thought about this new piece of information. "Don't matter. Still a good name. Grover Krantz was one of the very first honest to goodness anthropologists to study the North American ape seriously."

"Really?" Grover said.

"Yep," he said shoveling casserole in his mouth. "You see, scientists have a duty to hold judgment until they've studied a thing. They can be skeptical and have theories, but until they've actually combed through the evidence and run tests and do all the whatnot science calls for, they shouldn't ever express an opinion on a subject one way or the other. Grover Krantz did all that. Did that when all his colleagues laughed at the very idea of giant bipedal apes living in this county. Takes a hell of a man to do what should be done when all his buddieess are laughin' at him, don't you think?"

Grover nodded. You could tell he was growing prouder by

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the minute for sharing a name with a man that J-Rob revered so much.

“Darn tootin’,” J-Rob said. “He got a few things wrong, like advocating the killing of one of the apes for the sake of having proof, but overall he done great work.”

“So you and Uncle Crew are like him?” I asked despite myself. I didn’t believe for a second that Bigfoot was real. I thought the whole thing was silly. I was more interested in what drove my uncle and J-Rob to waste time on such an obviously ridiculous notion.

“Nope,” J-Rob said. “We’re field researchers.” He sopped up some of the casserole on his plate with a roll. “Crew and me know the apes are out there. Proving they’re real ain’t our priority. We study them.”

“Study?” mom asked.

“Yeah,” J-Rob said with a mouthful of bread. “Like Jane Goodall studies the chimps. Or Dian Fossey studied the mountain gorillas. Like that.”

I snickered.

“What?” J-Rob asked.

“Nothing,” I said. I looked around the table at everyone else to see if they thought this was as amusing as I did. They were all stoned face and waiting for me to justify my laughter. “It’s just that... Jane Goodall, she can actually see the things she’s studying. Same with Dian Fossey when she was alive.”

“So,” J-Rob said. “You saying we can’t see our apes?”

“Duh,” I said sarcastically.

“We can see them just fine,” J-Rob said.

I shook my head and ate a forkful of casserole.

“Tell ’em, Crew,” J-Rob said.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

“C’mon, you’ve had more interaction with them than anyone

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alive,” J-Rob said.

“Are they monkeys?” Grover asked.

J-Rob laughed. “Not by a long shot. They’re apes. Only way different than gorillas and chimps. They’re what scientists call Hominini. Means they walk on two feet... bipedal.”

“Like humans,” Grover said.

“Exactly,” J-Rob said. “They’re more like humans than apes in a lot of ways. They got a language. They live in monogamous pairings, but maintain a territorial group structure...”

“Mono-gus?” Grover asked confused.

“Monogamous,” J-Rob corrected. “It means they find a mate for life. Like people.”

This time mom laughed. “What people?” Everyone looked at her. “Sorry, go on.”

“Males find a mate around the twelfth year, as best we can figure, and stay with her until death do they part. They have babies and such, but the kids always grow up and leave. Not too far, they form a loose grouping and help each other hunt and gather, and provide everyone in their bloodline with protection. But at the end of the day, they always go home to their own little piece of the territory.”

Mom looked impressed. “So this is what you do? This is how you earn your living?”

J-Rob chuckled. “Nah, I wish. I live off of disability. Can’t work.” He pointed to his head. “On account of the old noggin. Got a few wires loose.”

“No kidding,” I said.

“Hayley!” mom barked.

I put my hand over my mouth. I couldn’t believe I’d let that slip out.

“It’s okay,” J-Rob said. “I’m used to it.”

“It’s not okay with me,” mom said. “You apologize right now,

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young lady.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He waved me off. “Sure... okay... no problem.”

There were a few minutes of silence while we all tried to figure out how to get back into the conversation. Silverware clanked against the porcelain surface of the plates. I finally spoke up.

“So, do you have pictures?”

“Of the apes? Nah, your uncle here won’t let us take any.”

I looked at Uncle Crew. He was still obviously pained by the conversation. “Why not?”

“I don’t want anyone to know about them,” he said.

I asked the same question, “Why not?”

He sipped from his glass of water and swallowed deliberately. “Because people don’t have a very good history of leaving a thing alone once they discover it.”

“Meaning?” I asked.

He sat back in his chair. “Meaning the apes are thriving without people knowing about them. Once people know, there will be those who want to kill them because they are afraid of them. There will be those who want to study them in order to understand them, and there will be those who want to preserve them in order to protect them. All of which will only change and eventually drive the apes to extinction. These things are no more animals than you or me.”

I considered his explanation and then said, “Why are you studying them?”

He tilted his head. “For that day when they are discovered. It is inevitable. And when it happens, I want to be sure that they are understood before they are observed. So they can be seen for what they really are.”

“And what are they really?” mom asked.

Uncle Crew seemed to be readying himself for a laugh. “A

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separate nation that shares our land without disturbing us. They need nothing from us, and they take nothing from us. Without them, our forests and woods would be unbalanced and changed.”

“A separate nation?” Grover said. “So do they have elections and armies and taxes and stuff?”

“He didn’t say corrupt nation, kid,” J-Rob laughed.

“Honey,” mom said jumping in quickly. “I think what Uncle Crew means is that they are a group of... people who share a common language and lifestyle.” She turned to J-Rob. “Are they people? Is that what you call them?” I rolled my eyes because it sounded like she was buying into this crap.

“Not as such,” J-Rob said. “They’ve got a lot of...apish ways. They’ll fling a crap ball at ya’ if they get irritated with you, and they do nothing but eat, look for food, and sleep. Pretty scary looking canines, too...”

“But you said they talk,” Grover said.

“I did?” J-Rob said rolling his eyes back, trying to recall what he said.

“You did say something about a language,” Nana Taffy said. I looked at her disapprovingly. Surely she didn’t get sucked in.

“Ahhh, yeah, right. I did say that.” J-Rob put his knife and fork down. He worked hard to chew the food in his mouth quickly and swallowed it. “Ahhh-wooo-poggg,” he said with a deep guttural delivery. “Of course I can’t actually get the pitch down. It’s much deeper than most men can go.”

“Ahhh-wooo-poggg,” Grover said doing his best to imitate him.

Mom joined in, “Ahhh-wooo-poggg.” She giggled.

“Oh, my,” Nana Taffy said. “What does that mean?”

J-Rob picked his knife and fork back up. “Best as we can determine, it means ‘They’re back’ or ‘they’re here.’ They say it every time they see Crew and me.”

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“Do more,” Grover said.

“Sure...”

“That’s enough,” Uncle Crew insisted softly. “We should eat before the food gets cold.” It was clear he was uncomfortable with the conversation.

“It’s okay, son,” granddaddy said. “They’re just curious.”

“It’s not talk for the dinner table,” Uncle Crew said a little more sternly.

“Crew,” J-Rob said with his mouth stuffed with pork chop. “Don’t sweat it. We don’t have to talk about the accident.”

Uncle Crew slapped his hand on the table. His glass jumped and tipped over, spilling water all over the place. Everyone but granddaddy flinched and gasped at his display. He quickly stood and walked into the living room.

“Oh, man,” J-Rob said standing and following after him. “I’m sorry, Crew.. You know me. I run off at the mouth sometimes.”

Granddaddy stood and placed his napkin over the spilt water. “Eat,” he said as he left the table to join J-Rob and Crew in the living room.

Nana Taffy erased the shocked expression from her face and asked Grover to pass her the rolls. I picked at my food and watched the freak show in the living room with one lingering thought. Maybe it was a good thing that Owen told his cousin about my uncle. Suddenly, I didn’t feel so bad for what I’d done.

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Lost Days in paperback.

The next morning I grabbed a piece of toast and some juice and headed out the door on my way to school. I had to escort my little dweeb brother to the bus stop at the corner. He was a pain. He was never waiting for me in the front yard like he was supposed to. I searched every inch of the front of the house and grew more and more impatient with each second that ticked away. He was making me late, and today was one day I didn't want to be late. I wanted to be early. Joyner was expecting me to tell him something I would only tell my best friend. I had no idea what that was going to be, but I didn't want to miss this opportunity. If I did... well, let's just say Grover might want to move out of our room, maybe even the house.

I turned up the driveway and was relieved and irritated to see him standing in front of the garage talking to granddaddy.

"Grover!" I shouted. "C'mon, butt wad, it's time to go."

Granddaddy looked up. "Language, Hayley Wilkes."

"Sorry. It's just that I have things to do this morning at school." I said as I approached.

"You got my backpack?" Grover asked me.

"Why on Earth would I have your backpack?"

He shrugged.

I stuck out my chin and shook my head. "Grover, I swear to God... Go get it!"

He tore out for the kitchen door.

Granddaddy smiled and started tinkering with his wreck for a

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car. “Got a test?”

“Hmm, me? No,” I said. “I just got things to do.”

“Those things involve a boy?” he asked. He talked while he examined one of the fenders.

“A boy?” How could he know?

“About the only time your ma was ever in a hurry to get somewhere when she was growing up was to go see a boy. You are a carbon copy of her, too. I expect if I could rewind your mother’s life and watch it from the beginning to now, I’d know just about everything you were going to do before you did it.”

“It’s not a boy, if you must know. It’s a test.”

He stopped and turned to me. “I thought you said it wasn’t a test.”

“It’s not a regular test. That’s what I meant.”

He squinted. “It’s an irregular test?”

I nodded nervously.

He chuckled. “Good luck with that then.”

I heard heavy footfalls on the wood stairs. I turned to see Uncle Crew step onto the lawn. He stopped, studied me for a minute, and then dropped his chin to his chest as he walked past me to the front of the house.

“He’s embarrassed about last night,” Granddaddy said.

I wanted to say *Well, yeah! No dub!* But I stopped myself. Instead I said something almost as equally stupid. “Do you believe him, granddaddy?”

He stood up and grabbed a dirty rag lying across the fender. He slowly wiped his hands. “That’s the wrong question.”

“What do you mean?”

“Took me a long time to figure out that it’s not important that a man believe in what his children believe in. It’s important that a man believe in his children. The question you want to ask is do I believe in him?”

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I didn't ask him. I didn't have to. I had the feeling granddaddy was the only person who believed in Uncle Crew. Well, with the exception of J-Rob, maybe, but he was too crazy to count. Nana Taffy loved him, and would do anything for him, but she had her doubts about him. Mom, too.

Grover burst out the back door. "Got it!" He jumped off the back steps and zoomed around the house. "See ya', granddaddy."

"See ya', squirt."

I turned to chase after Grover, but stopped when granddaddy called out my name.

"Good luck on your irregular test."

I grinned sheepishly and ran after Grover.

I avoided Denise and Owen when I arrived at school. It was the first time I didn't seek them out as soon as I stepped on school grounds. I headed for the gymnasium by way of the backdoor, and felt my heart thumping against my breast bone as soon as I saw Joyner. He was standing next to a vending machine drinking a Red Bull. He actually smiled when he saw me.

"You made it," he said.

"Duh," I said. "I go to school here." I didn't mean for it to come out that way. I had been hanging out with Denise and Owen for so long that everything I said made me sound like an inconsiderate smartass.

"Nice. Glad to see you, too."

I laughed and punched him playfully on the shoulder. I'm not sure why exactly. It was just a reflex.

"So," he said. "Did you come up with something?"

"For what?"

"My note," he said. "Remember. Something.."

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“I would only tell my best friend. I remembered,” I said. “But I want to hear yours first.”

“Ah-ha, that’s the way it’s going to be done.” He tilted his head back and sucked in a deep breath before revealing his deepest, darkest secret. “I have an uncle who’s in jail.”

“What?” I practically screamed. I put my hand over my mouth to conceal my excitement. I couldn’t believe it. We had something in common. Our uncles were our families’ biggest embarrassments. This was the greatest coincidence ever. I could not have asked for a better bonding moment.

“I know,” he said. “It sucks.”

“What did he do?”

He hesitated. “Robbed a convenience store.”

“No way!”

“The worst thing is he only got \$20. He could have borrowed that from my dad. Could have borrowed ten times that much.”

It’s true. I didn’t know much about Joyner’s family, but I did know they were rich. They owned a lumber company or something.

“Your turn,” he said.

I hesitated. I had an uncle that was interviewed by the police for a murder I accused him of committing, and it went perfectly with Joyner’s uncle who is serving time for robbery, but I couldn’t bring myself to betray granddaddy again. I still wanted to use the uncle angle so Joyner could see we had something in common. That we were meant for each other. I almost laughed at myself for being so intoxicated by him. “My uncle is a Bigfoot researcher,” I blurted.

“A what?” he asked rubbing his ear and peering down at me from his towering height advantage.

“My Uncle Crew is a Bigfoot researcher. He studies Bigfoot... you know, the ape-thingies.”

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“Bigfoot?”

“Yeah, weird, right?” I said.

He thought about it and then snorted a series of laughs. “No kidding? That is wild. Has he seen one? I mean, how do you study something that isn’t real?”

“That’s exactly what I said.”

“Does he have pictures?”

I shook my head. “Can’t take a picture of something that doesn’t exist.”

He drained the last drop of Red Bull and tossed the can in a nearby recycle bin. “Dude, that is so freaky. We both have wacked out uncles.”

I smiled like I had just won the lottery. He got it. He saw that connection that meant we were supposed to be together. “Seriously wacked out,” I said. “Only I guess Uncle Crew is harmless. I mean he’s crazy in a way that doesn’t hurt anyone or breaks the law.” That guilty feeling was back. I didn’t say anything about the murder, but I still made granddaddy’s son look like a bozo.

“Are you kidding me?” he said playfully squeezing the back of my neck with his huge hands. I never realized he was so big before. I felt like a helpless little girl standing next to him. “Your uncle hikes through the woods at night looking for an imaginary ape.”

“Yeah... wait, how did you know he goes out at night?”

He shrugged. “Isn’t that when Bigfoot comes out? Thought he was nocturnal or something.”

“I guess,” I said.

“I saw it on the History channel or something,” he said. “Pretty sure that’s when the big guy comes out. Anyway, your uncle’s twice the nutcase my uncle is. At least my uncle robbed something that was actually there.”

I smiled and nodded. It was getting less and less funny to me.

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I felt dirty for bringing it up. “You can’t tell anyone,” I said.

He formed an ‘x’ over his chest with his finger. “Cross my heart. That’s in the best friend safe. Something we share with no one else but each other.”

A bell rang and a herd of kids poured in from the west corridor door. The hallway immediately filled with chatter. Joyner leaned in and for a second I thought he was going to kiss me. My heart jumped, and I opened my mouth slightly to prepare for his lips on mine. Only I had never really kissed anyone before so I wasn’t sure how wide to open my mouth, or if I should stick my tongue out before our lips touched, or if I was supposed to hold my breath or breathe through my nose. But instead of kissing me, he whispered in my ear. “Do you want to go for pizza Friday?”

I pulled back and shut my mouth before he noticed that I’d totally misjudged what he was going to do. “Pizza, with you?”

“No,” he said in a very charming, but sarcastic way. “I thought you might want to go with Principal Claymeyer. Of course, with me, silly.”

“No, that’s not what... I meant just you and me.”

“Unless you want to invite...”

I saw Denise approaching and screeched. “Yes, I would like to invite someone else.”

He saw me looking at Denise and said, “I get it. A chaperone. That’s cool, Debbie can come.”

“Denise,” I corrected.

“Denise. Should I bring a date for her?”

He said the word. He said date. We were going on a date. I nodded.

He winked and turned to leave just as Denise reached us. “See ya’, Denise.”

Her eyes opened wide. “See ya’, Joyner.” As soon as he was out of earshot she fell into me, mocking a fainting motion. “O-

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M-G, he knows my name.”

“Of course he does, dufus. He’s setting you up with one of his friends.”

“What?”

“You, me, Joyner, and one of his friends are going out for pizza this Friday.”

“Me?”

“Yes... I mean if you don’t want to because of Allen, I can tell him to forget it.”

“Allen who?” she asked, and then quickly remembered. “No, no, that’s okay. Allen and I have an understanding. I can go out for pizza... Who’s he setting me up with?”

“Who’s setting who up?” Owen said as he slinked up beside us. He gave me a cautious look. He expected me to lash out at him.

“None of your bee’s wax, nerd boy,” Denise said.

He smirked at her and then said to me, “We okay?”

I tapped my foot. “We shouldn’t be. No one would blame me if I punched you right in the mouth and knocked all your teeth out.”

“Do it,” he said. “I swear to God, just do it. I feel like a big schmo.”

I rolled my eyes. “Relax. Everything turned out okay. I felt like a complete ass for most of the night, but granddaddy forgave me, and told me I shouldn’t hold a grudge against you.”

“Really?” he said excitedly. “Too cool... so does this mean you don’t think your uncle is a killer?”

I mulled over the question. “Let’s just say, I’m going against my gut on this one and going with my granddaddy.” I wanted to tell Owen about the Bigfoot stuff. It would’ve meant more to him than anyone else, but I had put it in the best friend safe with Joyner. There was no way it was coming out.

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I have a faint memory of attending classes that morning. My teachers stood at the front of the room, and I assume they went over various lessons, and spoke in bright and brilliant tones that enlightened everyone within the sound of their voices, everyone except me that is. They could have stood in front of the class naked and quacked like ducks for all I knew. I had Joyner on the brain. I was beside myself with... disbelief.

I was happy, don't get me wrong. But I was more confused than anything else. Why me? At one point I asked Denise for her compact, and I sneaked a long look at myself in the tiny mirror. At best, I am plain. At worst, I am gawky looking. My nose sticks out on my face like a ski slope and one eyebrow is higher than the other. I had bags under my eyes. Not too big, but they were there. You couldn't help but see them. And my hair, I can't even begin to tell you how ratty and dry my hair is. The more I stared at myself in the mirror, the more unbearable I thought I looked.

Maybe Joyner is partially blind. Maybe he has trouble seeing certain spectrums of light, the spectrums that highlight all my ugly. Should I tell him? After all, he has a lot to lose by being seen with the wrong girl, and every unfortunate flaw in my face told me I was the wrong girl. I could ruin his high school existence.

These were the thoughts that occupied my mind for the first three periods of school. By lunch, I was a shattered mess of a human being. But at lunch, my spirits were lifted a bit. Joyner bypassed his normal group of Ken doll cronies and G.G. skeezers and sat at a table with Denise, Owen, and me.

I smiled and said, "Hi." Not very creative, I know, but I was still new to this... whatever this was.

"Hello," he said with a wink. He took a bite out of a french fry, and turned his attention to Denise. "You know Danny Perry?"

She stopped mid gulp of a diet soda. A little trail of the dark

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liquid leaked out of the corner of her mouth. She reached up, wiped it away, and nodded.

“I know he’s no great catch, but do you think you could stomach an evening with Danny if I pay for the pizza?”

She stared at him blankly and didn’t answer.

“Hayley and I will be there,” he said.

She still didn’t answer.

“Owen can come, too,” Joyner prodded.

Owen looked shocked. “Me? You know me?”

Joyner laughs. “Of course. We’ve only gone to school together since kindergarten.”

“Denise,” I said.

She slowly shifted her gaze from Joyner to me.

I snapped my fingers in front of her face. “Do you want to go with Danny Perry for pizza on Friday?”

She nodded very methodically.

Joyner smiled. “Excellent.” He turned to a group of students sitting three tables over. “We’re on, D. Friday. Pizza.”

A boy with short blond hair and sparkling blue eyes shouted, “Sweet!”

Joyner turned back to us. “What about you, O? Want me to set something up for you?”

“Don’t do that,” Owen said.

“Do what?”

“Call me by the first letter of my name. My name is Owen.”

I bit my lip. Owen had a right to be called whatever he wanted to be called, but I hated him for being so sensitive.

Joyner took it in stride. “My bad. I didn’t mean anything by it. I just do that with all my friends.”

Owen cocked his head to the left. “Friends?”

“Yeah, friends. So, what do you say, should I set you up or not? Lindsay Gray? Stephanie Little. Name your poison.”

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Lindsay and Stephanie were two of the biggest G.G.'s in school. I hoped to god that Owen would say no.

Owen sank in his chair. "I'm busy Friday."

"C'mon," Joyner said. "It'll be fun."

"I've got... things to do."

"Suit yourself," Joyner said. "Maybe next time."

"Yes," Denise finally said.

"What?" I asked.

"Yes, I'll go... I mean I would be happy to have pizza with Panny Derry... Danny Perry."

I reached out and grabbed Joyner's forearm as I laughed uncontrollably. I gathered my composure, and said. "Didn't you hear Joyner tell Danny we were on? It's all set, Denise." That's when I looked down and saw my hand resting on Joyner's arm. His skin was warm and soft. I could feel the tiny hairs and rippling muscles. My heart actually fluttered. I thought it was an old wives' tale. I didn't know your heart could actually flutter. I pulled my hand back quickly before I fainted from sheer delight.

We spent the rest of lunch talking about everyone in the lunchroom. Joyner was dishing the dirt on all the popular people. He let us know what rumors were true and which ones were total bull crap. A lot more of them were total crap than true. We were disappointed to find out some weren't true. It was always kind of nice thinking that Amy Harper had actually given birth to a two-headed mutant the summer before eighth grade. She was a horrible human being who treated everyone like they were second class citizens just because her father served one term in the U.S. Congress. The truth was she did go into the hospital that summer, but it was just to have her tonsils removed. And it turns out that Anderson Crane wasn't really a thirty-year-old undercover cop. Despite his mustache and sideburns, he was only 16, and was not in fact a narc.

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“And then there’s Ginger Starling,” Joyner said shaking his empty soda can.

“What about her?” I asked.

Owen looked at me confused. “Starling,” he said. “As in daughter of Elizabeth Starling.”

I still didn’t get it.

“The woman who was killed?” Denise asked.

Owen tapped the end of this nose with his finger signaling that she hit the nail on the head.

“Oh,” I said. The news tumbled around in my head. “I didn’t know she had a daughter.”

“She’s two grades ahead,” Joyner said. “Not very sociable. Only has a couple of friends as far as I know.”

I wondered if Joyner realized who he was really talking to. Denise, Owen, and I were about the three most unsociable people in school. Him sitting with us was pretty much like when Jesus hung out with the lepers.

I felt a physical pain in my gut for Ginger. I didn’t know her, but to hear Joyner describe her, I felt a deep kinship with her. She didn’t have many people in her life that she trusted. She was probably closer to her mother than anyone else on the planet. Now that person was ripped from her life by a cruel, evil creep. I felt a catch in my breath when I realized a small part of me still thought my uncle could be that cruel, evil creep.

“That’s awful what happened to her mother,” Denise said.

I listened to the words coming out of her mouth and felt angry because she said something so obvious in such an insincere way. It felt like she said it just so she could be heard by Joyner.

“I just wonder what she was doing out there at night,” Joyner said.

“Maybe the killer dragged her out there,” Denise said.

Owen grunted. “Her car was out there. She had hiking

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equipment and photographic equipment in the trunk. She went out there on her own. My cousin..." he looked at me to gauge me level of irritation at the mention of his cousin. I gave him an awkward look of indifference and he went on. "My cousin, he's a cop," he said for Joyner's benefit. "He says her camera is missing. Case was there, tripod, whatever, everything but the camera."

The first bell rang to signify that we had five minutes to clear out of the cafeteria and get to our next class. I started to pick up my tray, but Joyner grabbed it before I had a chance.

"I got it," he said. "See you after 6th period again?"

I smiled uncomfortably and nodded.

He smiled confidently and walked away.

Denise let out a big sigh when he left. "That is so exhausting having him around. Trying to be perfect all the time is hard work."

Owen snickered. "That was you being perfect?"

She flipped him off.

"I don't get why you're so mesmerized by the dink. He's just a dude."

"If by 'just' you mean exquisite, then I agree with you," Denise said.

"You going to let her talk about your boyfriend like that?" Owen asked.

"He's not my boyfriend," I snapped.

"Take it easy," Owen said. "Just making conversation."

I stood up from the table, and said, "I've got something to do before English. I'll see you later."

I could feel them watching me as I walked away. They thought I was mad at them, but I wasn't. My mind was still bouncing Ginger Starling's name around in my head. I had to know more about her. I headed to the principal's office formulating a plan to get her home address.

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I walked into the glass-walled room and stepped up to the counter. Mrs. Jolly struggled to lift herself from her chair. She peered at me over her bifocals as she swept her gray hair off her forehead. She placed her hands on her chunky hips and said, "What's your business?"

I chewed on my lower lip before I spoke. "I'm supposed to get Ginger Starling's address."

"Supposed to, why?"

"Oh," I said. "I'm with the Spanish club. We wanted to send her family some flowers... you know for her mother."

Mrs. Jolly pursed her lips together and examined me with a suspicious eye. "Spanish club, you say?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She walked over to a folder on the counter and opened it up. "French club was in here a minute ago looking for the very same thing."

"Really?" I squeaked.

"Guess she's a multilingual little gal.

"I guess."

She found a business card in the folder and handed it to me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Family doesn't want flowers. They want you to send donations there."

I looked at the card and read it out loud. "Illinois Bird Watch, Protecting Threatened and Endangered Birds in Illinois since 1954." It had an address and phone number.

"Birds," she squawked. "People dying of diseases left and right and the Starlings want to save some lousy birds in honor of their dearly departed. Doesn't seem right."

"But we already bought the flowers," I said.

"What'cha do that for?" she asked.

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“Can’t I please have the home address? It would mean so much to Ginger.”

Mrs. Jolly thought it over and then finally agreed. She shuffled to a filing cabinet and rifled through some files. She chose one, pulled it out and carried it to the counter. I watched her every move. She jotted the address down on a notepad, ripped off the sheet of paper, and handed it to me, “Better than giving money to some god awful birds.” I snatched the paper from her hand and left the office as quickly as possible.

Strangely enough, I could concentrate in English. It was like my brain had flipped into hyper focus, and for some reason I got what Ms. Lane was saying about Harper Lee. She was brilliant. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the greatest coming of age novel written, and I was totally jealous of Scout because she had the world’s greatest father. She got Atticus, and I got an asshole.

I made it through the rest of the day with the same kind of concentration. For whatever reason, knowing that Ginger Starling, a girl like me, with few friends, limited social skills, and an overall pathetic existence, had lost her mother in such a tragic way made me see things I hadn’t seen before. Life can change in an instant. I should have known it the way my dad left. He just wasn’t there one day. But for some reason that didn’t shake up my world like discovering Ginger was alive and suffering the same life I was, only worse. She was going through it without her mother now. I nearly cried at one point waiting for the fifth period bell to ring, thinking about how much pain she was in. By the time the sixth period bell rang to end my day at school, I knew for sure that I was going to her house. I didn’t know what I would do when I got there, but I was going. I had to see it, the life like mine. I had to see the devastation first hand. Maybe I wanted to know if I

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could survive it. Maybe I wanted to know that as tragic as her loss was, that it's still possible to go on with your life. Maybe I was just losing my mind.

I gave Joyner a vague and confusing excuse for why I couldn't stay and talk to him after school, and I told Denise and Owen to go on without me. They assumed I was staying to talk to Joyner.

When I was sure they weren't looking, I pulled out the address to Ginger Starling's house and headed in that direction. Luckily, in her world that was parallel to mine, she lived closer to the school than I did.

I stood in front of the house and soaked in every square inch of it. It was yellow with green shutters, two stories, a big wraparound porch that had a swing, and three rocking chairs. I could picture the family sitting there, watching the breeze come down the street and ruffle the leaves in the trees. They were happy once. Not anymore. That was all gone.

I made my way down the front walk and up the wide wooden steps. I hesitated before I stepped onto the porch. It seemed sacred. A flash of Harper Lee's Alabama flashed through my head. I could almost hear Scout's bare feet slapping against the wood planks.

I heard the front door open and stared at the red, blotchy, tear-stained face of Ginger Starling. She was a chubby girl. Her hair was a kinky mess of strawberry blonde curls. She was wearing a dress, but I could tell by her posture that she hated it. She didn't like dresses. My guess was that once her mother was buried she'd never wear one again.

She sniffled and said. "The school send you?"

"What? No," I said. "I'm Hayley Wilkes."

"I know," she said. "Why are you here?"

There it was. The question I knew would be asked, but I hadn't prepared for it. I shifted my weight from one leg to the

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other and fidgeted with my fingers. I opened my mouth to say something, but instead, I started blubbering like a baby. Snot started flowing from my nose, and my chest hurt because I was crying so hard. I covered my nose with the back of my hand and placed my other hand over my chest. She looked stunned at first, afraid almost. She took one step back.

“I’m just so sorry,” I managed to say.

The sound of my voice eased her fears enough for her to take back the last step. “Did you know my mother?”

I didn’t know what to say so I said the closest thing to the truth. “My grandparents go to Dr. Thomas. She was always very sweet and nice to them.”

She half-smiled and nodded. “Everyone loved her at Dr. Thomas’ office.” It was her turn to break down in tears. There we stood, two strangers, five feet apart on a wraparound porch, both of us balling our eyes out.

“Do you have tissues?” I asked after determining there was too much mucus and overall wetness to wipe on my pants.

She laughed in between sobs and motioned for me to come into the house. I did and fought the urge to stare at every family photo on the walls and tables. I wanted to see them together. It was important for me to know that they were a happy family, no divorce, no crazy uncle, no annoying mixture of generations. Just a mother and a father and Ginger and maybe some siblings. I just wanted them to be different from my family. The less like me she was, the less I had to feel bad for her, and the less I had to worry that the same thing could happen to me.

We sat on the couch in the living room and she handed me a box of tissues. I took a half dozen and started pulling myself together. “Are you home alone?” I asked.

“My brother’s upstairs. He’s taking it really hard. Dad’s at the funeral home.” Her voice cracked.

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I breathed a small sigh of relief. She had a father.

“Kind of weird having him back in the house,” she said.

“Your dad?” I asked feeling the tension returning.

“Yeah,” she said. “They’ve been divorced about five years now... I guess... I mean they had been divorced, don’t I?”

She didn’t expect me to answer. I don’t think she was even talking to me. If I could read minds, she was asking herself how many times she was going to make the mistake, talking about her mother in the present tense.

“I had to come,” I said. I don’t know what possessed me to say it but I couldn’t help myself.

“What?” she said in a daze.

“You asked me why I was here. I had to come.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I... I think it’s because I love my mother and... I can’t imagine... I had to come.”

She looked at me as if she understood. “Would you like something to drink?”

I giggled at the absurdity of her hospitality. I couldn’t imagine that I would care if someone was thirsty if I were in her shoes. But the awful truth was I was glad she asked because I was painfully thirsty. The sudden draining of tears and snot must have dehydrated me. “Water would be nice.”

She stood and went to the kitchen. I began to stand, but paused. I wasn’t sure if she wanted me in the kitchen, but I couldn’t bring myself to let her wait on me given what she was going through, so I entered her kitchen shortly after her. She wasn’t expecting me, and almost dropped the cool glass of water. I took it from her and drank quickly. It was as if I had been in the desert all day without a drop to drink. I surveyed the kitchen and saw her mother’s presence everywhere. This was her room. She loved it. I saw a stack of steel bowls on the counter, one bigger

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than the next, and I knew baking was her thing. That's what she did to relax.

Ginger hugged herself. "This used to be my favorite room. My mom loved it. She was always making something, cookies, bread, cakes... but mostly cookies. That's why I'm so fat. She could have opened up her own bakery."

"My mom doesn't cook at all," I said for myself more than her. Our lives were different. Weren't they? I finished the last drop of water and placed the glass in the sink. I noticed a small ceramic owl on the window sill. I carefully picked it up, "Your mom liked owls?"

Ginger rolled her eyes. "She was a freak about owls."

"That's cool," I said. "They said at school that you didn't want flowers. You wanted people to make donations to some bird thing."

"The IBW," she said. "The Illinois Bird Watch. Mom was on the board. They help to protect threatened and endangered species of birds in Illinois. Mom joined when she found out some owl was on the list of endangered species. She practically ran the thing."

"How do they help? I mean what do they do to protect the birds?"

"They raise money. Complain to politicians when public lands are encroached upon by developers and the timber industry. Mom lives on the phone some nights doing IBW business... Lived, I mean." Her eyes went vacant. She was keeping score. That's twice she'd put her mother in the present.

I put the owl back on the sill. "I should go," I said.

She nodded.

"I'm sorry I came here," I said.

She shrugged. "I don't mind. You're the only one who has."

"I just don't think people know what to say," I said trying to

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make her feel better.

“They don’t have to say anything,” she said. “It would just be nice...” She stopped herself. I got the feeling she didn’t think she had a right to complain that none of her classmates cared enough to comfort her in her hour of need. She wasn’t popular enough.

“I could stay,” I said.

A single tear escaped the corner of her eye. “I’d like that.”

We walked back into the living room and sat back down on the couch. Ginger Starling, a girl I didn’t even know existed that morning, laid her head on my shoulder and cried herself to sleep. I sat rigid and uncomfortable, afraid to disturb her. Her father returned from the funeral home accompanied by a mountain of man with a shaggy beard and a name that sounded like A-Rod.

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J-Rob did odd jobs for the funeral home. That was his story anyway. He came back with Ginger's dad to pick up a suit to bury Mrs. Starling in. I was more than skeptical. When I saw him walk through the front door of the Starling's house, it felt like somebody had punched me in the gut. J-Rob knew I was freaked out by it because he pulled me aside once Mr. Starling handed him the suit.

"You all right?" he asked.

I nodded nervously.

"Don't go off all half-cocked about this. It is what I said it is. I'm just picking up the suit."

"S-s-sure," I said. "What else would it be?"

He gave me the stink eye. "You got your ideas about me and Crew. I'm crazy, not ignorant."

"That? That was the other day. Granddaddy cleared all that up. I was just being stupid." I was pretty sure he could tell I was lying. It was too much of a coincidence seeing him in the house of the woman I accused him and my uncle of killing.

He eased back and breathed deeply. "Okay, then. Good to hear."

We stood by the doorway for a few uncomfortable seconds until I couldn't stand it anymore. "I got to go. Mom is expecting me." She wasn't, but if I was expected somewhere he may think twice about killing me.

I went back into the living room and said goodbye to Ginger. She looked at as if she didn't want me to go, but I couldn't bring

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myself to offer to stay. We were strangers after all, and this was too much for me. I felt bad for being so selfish, but I honestly felt like I was going to vomit from the sheer sadness of it all.

When I opened the door and stepped on the porch, I was crushed to discover it was pouring rain. J-Rob brushed past me and studied the distance he would have to cover before he made it to his truck.

He grunted, “C’mon, I’ll give you a ride.”

“What? No,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I can walk.”

He stuck his hand out to gauge the ferocity of the rain. “I don’t think so. I wouldn’t be surprised if it started to hail. Can’t have Hank’s granddaughter getting pelted by chunks of ice while I’m enjoying the cozy cabin of my truck.”

“But...”

“But nothing,” he said. “You’ll either come with me or stay here with the Starlings until it clears up.”

I looked back at the house. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go back inside and watch Ginger cry herself to sleep again. I ambled to the edge of the porch, examined the slippery steps and then nodded to J-Rob. He smiled, stuffed Mrs. Starling’s suit under his coat, and zipped it up. We both leapt into the driving rain, landing in a half-inch of water on the sidewalk. I easily beat him to the truck and opened the passenger side door, practically diving onto the well-worn seat. I slammed the door and examined the contents of the cab. There were coffee cups from practically every fast food restaurant in town. The ashtray was open and full of cigarette butts. Newspapers, magazines, and books occupied every other bit of free space.

J-Rob jerked the driver side door open and maneuvered his large frame into the seat. He was wheezing. “Got to quit smoking,”

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he said pulling his door shut. He unzipped his coat, pulled Mrs. Starling's suit out, and gently placed it on the seat between us. "Good thing she was a tiny woman."

I nodded politely. I didn't want to engage him in any kind of conversation. A silent ride to my house was all I wanted. And that's what I got until we were stalled in traffic because of an accident.

J-Rob said they obligatory, "People just don't know how to drive in the rain."

Again I nodded politely.

He waited a few minutes, and then couldn't take the silence anymore. "You go to the public school, do you?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Sophomore, Junior, Senior, what?"

"Freshman."

"Freshman? Really?" He squinted and thought about it. "Girls look older now than when I was your age."

"You think I look older?" I asked. I was flattered.

"Yeah, sure."

Maybe he wasn't so bad. "Did you go to public school?"

"For a time. Spent most of my time in JD."

"JD?"

"Juvenile Detention."

The word scared me. "Oh, is that where you met Uncle Crew?"

"Nah, Crew and I met a few years after school."

"In the hospital... or facility... what do they call it?" I asked.

He looked at me strangely. I guess he didn't know I knew about that. "We called it the pill palace. All they did was pump us full of meds, and lock us in our room most the day."

"You shared a room?"

"Yeah, that was the only cool thing about it. Your uncle saved me from that place."

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“So he’s like your best friend?”

“He’s my brother,” J-Rob said sharply.

I tried not to look offended by his tone. I knew he didn’t mean anything by it. “Is that where you met granddaddy, too?”

“Yeah, Hank didn’t come around much. By then he’d moved half way around the county, but I always liked him. Things were rough between Crew and your granddaddy for a long, long while. It’s hard to get over a thing like they went through. Would ruin a lot of perfectly good people.”

“You mean the accident,” I said.

He scanned my face. “Crew wouldn’t want me talking about that.”

I smiled playfully. “I won’t say anything.”

“Can’t,” he said. He ducked down and peered out through the windshield. “Wish they’d clear the road and let us pass.”

“C’mon, J-Rob, tell me,” I pleaded.

He closed his eyes and sighed. “Alright, but not a word leaves this truck.”

I held up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

He adjusted himself in his seat and half-turned. “Looks like we’re going to be here a while anyway. The year was 1968...”

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1968

Crew and his mother, Maggie, were headed home from the Cascade Mountains in Washington. It was a long trip back to their house in Bossburg, Washington. Against the advice of friends and family, Maggie left early in the morning in a snow storm, mostly at Hank's insistence. He hadn't seen his wife and son in two days, and he was anxious to have them home. He had outfitted the car with snow tires and maintained it himself. He was sure it was snow storm worthy. So early in the A.M., before the sun was even up, she buckled her four-year-old son in the passenger seat and they headed down the mountain.

Maggie was navigating the roads fine during the first 20 minutes of the trip. The sun was starting to rise, but the snow fall started to pick up, too. There were times when she couldn't see past the beams of her headlights. During one of those times, she took a wrong turn and ended up on an old abandoned lumber road. By the time she realized it, she couldn't find a place to turn around. She started backing out the way she came. She didn't know that the road was built on the edge of the mountain. One miscalculation and they would be sent over the side of a steep cliff.

She made the miscalculation when she noticed that Crew had managed to unbuckle his seatbelt and was standing up in the seat. She reached over to buckle him back in, and turned the steering wheel just slightly to the left. The front wheel went over the edge of the cliff. She screamed, jerked it back to the right and caused

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the back wheel to go over the edge. They balanced long enough for her to believe that if she could just carefully crawl over to the passenger side, she could distribute the weight just enough to keep it from plummeting to the forest below. Just as she was visualizing exiting the car with Crew in hand, he hopped over to her lap. The car swayed gently and then slowly tumbled over the side.

It free fell for fifty feet until it rammed into towering ponderosa pines, bouncing through the treetops like a pinball. Crew says there are two memories from the crash itself that he cannot shake. One, the horrible crunching sound the car made as it plummeted through the trees. The other was the site of his mother being decapitated by a jagged, fractured section of the windshield.

The car soared downward, and was headed for a fatal collision with the forest floor when the axel snagged on a freakishly strong branch and jerked the car against the gravity that was pulling it down. The violent connection sent Crew sailing through the now glassless windshield. His limber frame plunged twenty feet and then landed in a pile of fallen and decaying pine needles. He was alive, and thrown into circumstances he could not comprehend. He lay on the forest floor for several minutes in shock staring at the mangled car swaying in the trees above him. His mother's severed head stared back down at him, her hair caught on the deformed steering wheel.

It was a huffing sound that brought him out of his stunned state. He rolled over and pushed himself up with his chubby little arms. He was dazed, and had trouble keeping his feet once he was able to stand. His head was throbbing, and his vision was now blurred as the blood rushed to his head. A brown blob appeared from behind a row of trees. It sauntered toward him, lumbering, making the huffing noise that first stirred Crew. The dizzying effect slowly died and his vision cleared. The brown blob

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was a bear of gigantic proportions. At the age of four, he had no idea what kind of danger he was in. He staggered across the uneven ground and approached the animal with an unconcerned curiosity, even feeling a little hopeful. All he saw was something big. Something with more of a chance to reach his mother than him.

The bear stopped when it saw the small boy fearlessly approaching. It sniffed the air. The sound of the crash had stirred it from its slumber. It was as confused as the boy. The bear gave a warning grunt. The boy did not stop. The bear stood on two legs and extended its front paws. Still the boy approached.

“My mommy,” he said. “Get her down.”

The bear roared.

This was sufficient enough to frighten the boy. He began to cry. He took a tentative step back.

The bear got back down on all fours, shook its head violently and charged. It didn't bite or claw at Crew. It head-butted him and sent the boy flying through the air.

Crew rolled across the ground. He massaged his ear, the part of his body that had taken the brunt of the impact. He stuck his bottom lip out and pouted in pain.

The bear swatted a massive paw in Crew's direction, missing him, but only by the smallest of margins. It raised up again, and prepared to bring the full weight of its body down on Crew. Then the giant beast grunted and fell to the ground with an animal of equal size attached to its back.

Crew scrambled to his feet and ran to the nearest tree. Even at his age, he knew he should hide himself, but curiosity got the best of him. He wanted to see the two massive animals fight. He hugged the tree and watched the bear right itself. The other animal rolled across the rugged terrain and crashed into the underbrush. It grunted and made a strange warbling sound. The bear roared

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and pinned its ears back. It stood on two legs. The other animal emerged from the underbrush also standing on two legs. Then it walked on two legs. At first Crew thought it was a man, but it was covered in a thick pelt of hair. The shoulders were wide, and the neck was non-existent. It had a flat wide nose with very pronounced nostrils, and its head ended in a point. It was an ape, an ape that walked on two legs.

The bear, standing on two legs, was a good foot and a half taller than the ape. The two monsters squared off. The bear relaxed its posture and started to revert to an all-fours stance. The ape seemed to know that it had to act quickly. As long as the bear was on two legs, it had no balance. The ape charged, threw its shoulder into the bear's ribcage, knocking it to the ground on its back. It flailed and frantically swiped at the cold air. The ape moved fast. It pounded the bear's chest fiercely with its fists. The bear roared intensely as it rolled onto its feet and charged the ape. The ape moved to the side and grabbed a grapefruit-sized stone. It raised its hand in the air and smashed the stone down on the bear's head in the blink of an eye. The bear yelped in pain. The ape repeated the death blow with lightning quick speed. The bear's yelps now sounded like screams. Crew turned away just before the ape delivered the final blow.

Seconds after the forest grew silent, Crew slowly turned to watch the ape lifting the bear's front leg and letting it fall, lifeless to the ground. He did it over and over again. The ape sniffed the bear's paw and hoot-growled. He grabbed the dead bear by the scruff of the neck and started dragging it into the bush. Crew stepped away from the tree.

"Get my mommy down," he said pointing up at the mangled car dangling in the trees.

The ape stopped. It looked at Crew and let out a short low-pitched whistle that ended with a pop.

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Crew pointed up again. “Mommy.”

The ape looked up. It examined the object in the trees with great curiosity and then returned its attention to Crew. It grinned comically and nodded its pointed head.

Crew’s lower lip started to shake. He rubbed his eyes with his chubby little fingers and said “Mommy” for the last time.

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Present

“Wait, wait,” I said. “Are you going where I think you’re going with this story?”

J-Rob turned the truck into the driveway and coasted to a stop. “Don’t know where you think I’m going with this story.”

“The ape... the Bigfoot thing... you’re saying it took care of Uncle crew the year he was lost in the woods?”

“More like 13 or 14 months.”

“Whatever! Is that what you’re trying to say?”

J-Rob frowned and shook his head. “Ride’s over. Story’s over.”

I groaned in frustration and placed my hand on the door handle. I turned to him before I pushed the door open. “Do you honestly believe in this Bigfoot stuff?”

“Don’t have to,” he said.

“Why? What does that mean?”

He held up his hand and spread his fingers. “How many fingers I got?”

“Why?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Five,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“Because... they’re right there. I can see them.”

“Exactly,” he said. “I don’t have to believe in what I can see.”

“Show me,” I said.

He seemed startled by my request. “I... Crew wouldn’t ever

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allow that.”

“He’s not the boss of Bigfoot.”

“Sorry, I can’t do it. Crew wouldn’t ever talk to me again. A guy like me doesn’t have many friends. I don’t need to go around pissing off the ones I have.” He shifted the car into reverse. “Get on out so I can get Mrs. Starling’s suit to the funeral home.”

I stepped out of the truck, and he eased out of the driveway, and pattered down the road. The rain had eased to a drizzle. I stood and watched J-Rob’s truck until it was out of sight. I contemplated his outrageously ridiculous story and realized I hungered for more. I had to know what happened. I trotted to the garage. Granddaddy’s car was gone, which meant he wasn’t home. I ran to the side door and stealthy entered the garage, careful not to arouse the suspicions of Uncle Crew who I was sure was upstairs in his room surfing the internet looking for information on Bigfoot. I didn’t even dare turn on a light. I stood in the doorway, waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark, and then made my way to the toolbox. I planned to grab a few articles, stuff them in my backpack and then race upstairs. I opened the tool box, and marveled at the number of articles and notebooks inside. I scooped up as many articles as I could and gasped as I heard Uncle Crew walking around above my head. With my heart beating a million miles a minute, I carefully put the articles in my backpack and shut the toolbox. I was tempted to take one of the notebooks, too, but I felt like I was already pushing my luck. I stood, exhaled to calm myself, and headed toward the door. I was just about to exit when one of the tires on granddaddy beat up chunk of car caught my attention. Something about it suddenly intrigued me. I stepped in for a closer look and then suddenly knew what that something was. It was a snow tire. This was the car that plummeted over the mountain and killed granddaddy’s first wife and turned his son into a raving lunatic. He’d kept it.

R.W. Ridley

There weren't many places I could be alone in my grandparents' house. I couldn't trust Grover to keep his mouth shut about the newspaper clippings, and I would have to explain too much to him anyway. There was only one place I could go. I stuck my head in the kitchen and told Nana Taffy I was going to Owen's to study. She insisted I take a sandwich with me. She couldn't let me skip dinner. I tried to argue, but she wouldn't let up. I finally relented and nervously stood behind her in the kitchen while she prepared me a meatloaf sandwich. My stomach turned at the thought of it. She packed it in a baggy and handed to me. I nearly knocked Grover to the floor as I bolted out the door and headed toward Owen's house.

When I arrived at his door, he answered holding a plate of bean burritos. He was surprised to see me.

"What's the matter, your boy friend have an ass-munch meeting?"

"Downstairs now!" I commanded.

He took a bite of one the burritos and considered my tone. "Why?"

I grabbed his arm by his flimsy bicep and pulled him to the door leading to his basement. "Going downstairs with Hayley, ma!"

"Ask her if she's hungry?" his mom yelled.

At the bottom of the stairs, Owen asked "You hungry?"

I didn't answer. I tossed my backpack on the couch. "Look, you have got to swear to me that what I am about to show you and tell you, you will never tell anyone, ever!" I jabbed my finger in front of his face to emphasize how serious I was.

He swallowed a mouthful of burrito and looked at me as if frightened for his very life. "Okay... sure."

I closed my eyes and mapped out what I was going to say.

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“My uncle is a Bigfoot researcher.”

“I know,” he said. “My cousin told me. Said he had a bunch of cool crap in his room.”

“You’re not hearing me,” I said. “My uncle believes in Bigfoot. He thinks he’s seen it. Observed it like some scientist or something.”

“Cool.”

I placed my hands on my hips. He wasn’t getting it. “It’s not cool. It just proves that my uncle is crazy.”

“Why?”

“Because he thinks Bigfoot is real.”

“It is,” Owen said chomping down on another burrito.

“What...no, listen to me. I think my uncle believes he was raised by Bigfoot.”

Owen nearly choked on his food. “What?”

I sat down on the couch and unzipped the backpack. “He was in this accident when he was a kid. His mother was driving, and their car went over a cliff. She was killed, and Uncle Crew was thrown from the car.” I couldn’t bring myself to continue. It was too ridiculous.

“And?” Owen finally said.

“And,” I started. “There was this bear, and it was about to... eat Uncle Crew... I guess, and this thing... attacked it. Killed it actually.” It sounded so stupid I chuckled involuntarily.

“You’re saying your uncle was about to be mauled by a bear and Bigfoot came to his rescue,” Owen said dropping down on the couch next to me.

“I didn’t say it. J-Rob said it.”

“Who’s J-Rob?”

“My uncle’s friend.”

“I don’t get why this means your uncle was raised by Bigfoot.”

I pulled out the newspaper clippings. “My uncle was missing

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for over a year. They found the car and granddaddy's first wife." I looked intently at Owen. "Who, by the way, was decapitated in the accident."

Owen rubbed his neck and said sarcastically, "That's pleasant. Thanks for that."

"Welcome to the image that's burned in my brain. Anyway, J-Rob didn't say it out right, but I think he was trying to say that this... Bigfoot thing took care of Uncle Crew that year or so that he was missing." I placed the small stack of clippings on my lap, and handed him the one Grover had shown me. "Check it out." His eyes zoomed across the article. I started to read the next one.

Campers Find Child's Mitten Near Colville – Authorities are baffled by the discovery of a mitten that was identified as belonging to a missing Stevens County boy. The boy has been missing for 52 days, and most had given up hope that he would ever be found alive. The discovery of the mitten has given his father, Hank Stanton, hope that his son is alive somewhere in the Colville National Forest.

Owen retrieved a clipping from my lap and began to read. "Footprints," he said.

"What?"

He turned the clip toward me. "They found giant footprints around the site of the crash."

I took the clip from him and read in disbelief. "There's no way... Yep, see, I told you this is all a bunch of BS. Says here that a forest ranger in the area said that people often times misidentify bear tracks as human tracks. Something about the back paw overlapping the front paw." I held up my finger. "It says, and I quote, 'This coupled with the presence of melting snow can cause bear tracks to take on a distinctly human shape.'"

He shook his head. "What is it going to take to convince you it's real?"

"When there's a big hairy ape standing on two legs with giant

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feet staring at me two inches from my face,” I said. I picked up another article and read about some kids driving through some old country roads and swearing they saw a little boy standing on the side of the road, another article about the dangers of driving on lumber roads, citing the accident as a perfect example of what can go wrong, and a bunch of clippings about articles of clothing and torn fabric that reportedly belonged to my uncle. I could imagine granddaddy suffering the emotional rollercoaster that the whole ordeal must have caused him. He would probably just get to the point where he was ready to let go, and accept the fact his son was dead, and then evidence would pop up that suggested he was still alive. The authorities never had a plausible explanation as to why the evidence would appear in various spots in some of the most remote areas of Washington and British Columbia.

“Bingo!” Owen yelled. He started to read. “Two teenage boys claim to have spotted the mythical monster of the woods, Bigfoot, in Colville National Forest with what appeared to be a small boy.” He handed me the clipping. “There’s a picture.”

I looked at the article and examined the picture. It was of a blurry, large dark mass standing between two trees. It could have even been the shadow of one of the trees. “How surprising, a fuzzy picture of Bigfoot,” I said sarcastically.

“That’s not the point,” Owen said. “Your uncle’s friend said that Bigfoot saved your uncle from a bear.”

“So.”

“So, here’s confirmation that your uncle was seen with Bigfoot.”

“By two teenage dweebs. C’mon, that doesn’t prove anything.”

We went through all the articles and found more of the same stuff. All of it was interesting, but none of it shed light on what really happened to Uncle Crew during the time he was missing. I don’t believe he could have survived by himself for that period of

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time, and I sure as hell didn't believe Bigfoot helped him.

"Have you seen the film yet?" Owen asked.

"What film?"

"The Patterson film I told you about."

I groaned. "Owen..."

"C'mon," he said standing. He made his way over to the computer in the corner of the basement. I reluctantly followed. He grabbed the mouse and opened the web browser. Within seconds he had the clip on the screen. I watched as the image shuddered and shook. Then it stabilized. A large ape-like creature walked along a creek bed and behind some fallen timber. The creature looked back at the camera and continued on until it was out of frame.

"Well?" Owen said. "What do you think?"

I shrugged. "Looks like a guy in a gorilla suit."

It was Owen's turn to groan. "Are you kidding me?" He restarted the video and stepped through it. "Look, you see the muscle flex in its thigh. You can practically see the tendon in the knee, and do you know what these are?" He pointed to the chest as the ape looked at the camera.

I squinted and looked closely. "What?"

"Boobs!" Owen said. "It's got breasts!"

"It does?" I asked and moved in closer to the monitor. "Yeah, it does," I practically shouted.

"What do you say now?"

I shrugged again. "Big deal. I've seen a million costumes in movies as good as this one."

He shook his head in disgust. "Sure you have, today. This film was shot in 1968. Have you seen Planet of the Apes from back then? That make-up doesn't even come close to this, and it was a big Hollywood movie."

I patted him on the back. "Owen, don't get me wrong. I

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think it's cute that you believe in this stuff, but you might want to dial it down a notch or two. You're about to drift into the J-Rob and Uncle Crew crazy zone."

His cheeks became flushed. He angrily pushed himself back from the computer and stood up. "You..." he started in a high-pitched voice, cleared his throat and dropped it an octave. "You're just being stubborn for stubborn's sake. If you want to know what happened to your uncle, you're just going to have to break out of your comfort zone and accept the fact that some of the things you thought weren't possible just might be possible." He turned in a huff and went back to his plate of burritos.

I sat down at the computer and looked at the blurry face of the ape on the screen. How could anyone seriously believe this stuff was real? "Okay," I said. "Let's say that this is real... Bigfoot, I mean. How could it care for a four-year-old boy? It's just an ape. Apes can't take care of humans."

Owen sniffed a burrito and took a bite. "'A,' they're not just apes. They're pretty smart. Smart enough to remain a mythical animal in North America even though there have been people here for thousands of years. Twenty percent of people believe in them, and the other eighty percent think that the twenty percent is crazy. And 'B,' there is such a thing as feral children you know. Children raised in the wild by wolves or dogs or whatever. Other animals have done it. Don't see why a Bigfoot couldn't."

The door to the basement opened and Owen's mother yelled down. "Hayley, honey, your mother just called, she wants you to come home. Should I drive you?"

"No, Mrs. Doogan, that's alright. I can walk." I collected the newspaper clippings and placed them in the backpack. I slipped my right arm through the strap and draped it over my shoulder. "Not a word of this to anyone, Owen. Not even Denise."

He chuckled. "Especially not Denise."

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I started up the stairs, but stopped when Owen called out my name.

“Hayley, why are going out with Joyner on Friday?”

“Why...” I shrugged my shoulders. “He asked me.”

“Do you like him?” he asked.

I thought about the question. “I want to like him,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because life’s easier when you hang out with a guy like Joyner. People look at you differently. Treat you nicer.”

He shook his head. “Didn’t think that stuff mattered to you.”

“Kind of surprised me, too.”

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I don't know how I ended up in my uncle's FROG. I waited until everyone had gone to sleep in the house, and I snuck down to the garage to return the clippings to the toolbox. When I reached the door to exit the garage, Uncle Crew and J-Rob came barreling down the stairs. They threw some things into the bed of J-Rob's truck and then left. The temptation was too strong, I had to snoop around in Uncle Crew's room and get more answers.

So there I was, breathing so heavily that I was almost hyperventilating, staring into the dark room. I didn't even know where to begin to look. I was new at this. Up 'til then, taking the clippings was the worst thing I had ever done. Now I was breaking and entering. I tried to convince myself that it was alright because the door was unlocked. I wasn't breaking. I was just entering. That made it okay, didn't it?

"You're a jerk," I whispered. I said it out loud in an effort to admonish myself with more authority. Maybe if I heard myself say it, I would turn around and leave. It didn't work.

I spotted the boxes in the corner of the room and decided that was as good a place as any to start. I opened the first box and found a dozen or so plaster casts of footprints wrapped in bubble wrap. I carefully unwrapped the one on top and examined it. It was huge, four times the size of my own foot. I turned it over and found the measurements written in marker. Eighteen inches long. Eight inches wide. At the bottom, someone had written, "Sample of a total of 1,536 tracks found near Missoula.

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Average stride, 63 inches. Estimated weight of ape, 650 pounds. Height unknown. 'Tom Slick Group.' I carefully rewrapped it and put it back in the box.

I went through three more boxes and found more of the same. The fourth box contained baggies full of hair strands, bags of dried mud labeled "Scat," and one bag that contained a tooth that was as big around as my thumb.

It was all very interesting, but did nothing but confirm that Uncle Crew was completely insane. I stood and scanned the room for something else to investigate. I stepped forward and accidentally kicked a black thigh-high two-door metal filing cabinet. I tugged on the handle of the top drawer. It didn't budge. Same with the second drawer. I immediately assumed that since it was locked that it held some deep dark secrets that would clarify the mystery that was Uncle Crew. I searched the immediate area for the key. I went to the desk and opened all the drawers. Each one was full of a hodgepodge of office supplies, candy, and folded maps, but nothing that even remotely resembled a key. I was about to give up when I remembered once watching granddaddy reach under the kitchen table and pulling out a key to his liquor cabinet. I stooped down and looked under the desk hoping that it was one of those like-father-like-son traits that people always talk about. The room was dim, but I could make my way around. Under the desk, there was virtually no light. I ran my hand across the underbelly of the desk and felt for a... key. It was there. I quickly pulled it free from the tape and stuck it into the keyhole in the filing cabinet. I felt the lock tumble free and I opened the top drawer. My eyes zeroed in on an expensive digital camera sitting in an otherwise empty drawer. I pulled it out and fumbled for the power switch in the poor lighting. It clicked on and I started pushing buttons until an image popped up on the small screen. It was a shot of some trees punctuated by a beautiful sunset. I

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thumped a button and jumped to the next picture. Another outdoor landscape, cliffs this time. I advanced to the next picture and the next, all nature shots. I stopped on one that was of an owl in a tree. An owl. I swallowed. I thought about the ceramic owl in the Starling's kitchen. The next image made me gasp. It was a picture of a smiling Ginger Starling. This was her mother's camera. Uncle Crew had Elizabeth Starling's camera locked in a filing cabinet. I could think of only one reason why.

My mind started to race. What was I supposed to do with this information? I had to tell someone, didn't I? He had a murdered woman's camera. A camera the police said was missing. I took a deep breath. "Get a hold of yourself, Hayley. This doesn't prove anything." I exhaled.

I stared at the image of Ginger for a long time before I worked up the courage to click the advance button again. It was another landscape. Then another owl. Another owl. And then... a picture of Uncle Crew. It was taken from a distance. He had no idea she was taking his picture. He was bent down looking at something on the ground. The next image was Uncle Crew and J-Rob. They were going through their backpacks. I was about to click the button again when I heard someone walking up the steps. I froze. I stood and rocked on my toes. I had no idea what to do. I needed to hide, but where. Everywhere I looked seemed like a bad idea because I would be trapped in the room until Uncle Crew left the next day. I headed toward the bathroom, but stopped when I saw a window. I hurried to it and looked out. There was a tree just a few feet away with a branch that looked big enough to support my weight. I stuck my head through the shoulder strap of the camera and opened the window. The footsteps were louder, and I could hear voices. I quickly crawled through the window and felt around in the darkness for a firm footing on the branch. It was big, but still relatively narrow. I found my footing

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and turned back to shut the window. I heard the door open and pulled the window down just before the door snapped shut. Then I heard a voice. It was a man, but it wasn't Uncle Crew or J-Rob. It was a voice I had never heard before.

I stooped down and scooted back on the branch. Beams of light criss-crossed the FROG. There were three men dressed in black. It was impossible to make out their faces. They were whispering. As I reached the trunk of the tree, I heard one of them say "Teddy was right. This nut job is into Bigfoot."

I stayed in the tree, trying to catch a glimpse of the three men, moving as close to the window as I dared. They were as discreet as I was. They chatted quietly, too quietly for me to hear most of what they were saying. Occasionally I would hear a word or two, but not enough to make sense of what they were looking for. It was clear they didn't know Uncle Crew, but they did know of him.

They left after a good thirty minutes. I crawled back, opened the window, and entered the FROG, expecting it to be ripped apart. It was as neat and tidy as it was before they came. Whoever they were, they didn't want Uncle Crew to know they were there. Judging by the frustrated tone of their whispers before they left, they didn't find what they were looking for. I could only assume that they would be back.

I was faced with a real dilemma. Did I tell Uncle Crew that I saw three strange men in his FROG and did nothing while they rummaged through all his belongings, putting myself in the position of having to explain why I was in his room myself? Or did I keep my mouth shut about the whole thing to save my own skin?

I absentmindedly reached up and adjusted the camera that was hanging around my neck. That's when I remembered that Uncle Crew had a dead woman's camera. The camera police were looking for. That didn't exactly make him a boy scout. In fact, I

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was pretty sure it made him the bad guy in this whole thing. Why would I want to help him out by telling him there were men in his room going through his things?

The next day I was sick. At least that's what I told my mom. I knew going to school would be a waste. Between J-Rob's story about Uncle Crew, the camera, and the three thugs who broke into his room, I would have been a useless zombie at school. Mom wasn't happy about leaving me at home. She still felt guilty about moving in with granddaddy and Nana Taffy. Leaving me with them was just one more thing she was asking them to do for her because she couldn't keep her husband. They assured her that they didn't mind. They were both retired and had nothing better to do. Nana Taffy planned on pumping me full of soup and granddaddy was sure ice cream would do the trick. The last thing they wanted was mom worrying about being a bad mother because she was leaving her sick daughter with two crotchety old folks.

"We saw you through plenty of sniffles and lady pains," Nana Taffy said. "It will be good to get a chance to do it again with our granddaughter."

I looked at mom confused. "Lady pains?"

Mom's eyes rolled back and she shook her head. "Don't ask."

With more coaxing from Nana Taffy and me, mom left for work, and I was relieved when she did. The longer I was in her presence, the stronger the urge grew to tell her about last night. Keeping it to myself was tearing me up inside. It was a huge secret. I actually found Mrs. Starling's camera in Uncle Crew's office. I believe that's what people refer to as the smoking gun.

As soon as Nana Taffy left me alone in my room, I got the camera from under my bed and clicked it on. I quickly went to the menu and found the picture count – 102 images. I exhaled. I

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was actually afraid of what I might find. But it was too important for me not to look. I quickly went through the first half dozen or so images that I had already seen and found one I hadn't seen. It was one of J-Rob stooped down next to a creek bed. Again, he had no idea his picture was being taken. He was looking off camera to his right, talking to someone. I clicked to the next image, J-Rob in the same position. He was talking in the direction of a tree. I saw a figure standing in the shadow of the trees, large, dark... I shook my head. "Not what you're thinking," I whispered. Not possible. It was the shadows of the trees playing tricks on me.

I clicked through ten more images with the same shadowy figures in the background. Uncle Crew was in some of the pictures. J-Rob was in others. There were a few with both of them in the picture. There were a series of pictures of owls. They were really very beautiful birds. The way Mrs. Starling took the pictures, I could see that she really loved them.

With a dozen pictures to go, the scenery changed. She had taken a picture of a black nondescript sedan parked near some picnic tables. I can't explain it, but it looked sinister. It didn't fit. She was trying to say something with this picture. I clicked to the next picture. It was the license plate of the black sedan. She was definitely trying to say something. "Bad guys," I whispered and pictured the three guys in my uncle's room. I grabbed a pen and pad from the nightstand and wrote down the number.

The last three images were the most disturbing. They were blurry. The previous pictures had been taken with care and with the skill of someone who took a lot of pictures, someone who took pride in her talent. The last three were chaotic and fuzzy. The stars in the sky looked like streaks of light painted on a black canvas. One of the pictures was taken below a platform. There may have been the dark figure of a person looking down from

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the platform, but it was really impossible to be sure. The very last picture actually made me scream. It was Elizabeth Starling's bruised and bloodied chin. I only knew it was her because of a few strands of strawberry blonde hair that fell into the frame. It was almost as if she took a picture of herself after she had been beaten.

By noon I was going stir crazy hanging out in my room. Nana Taffy had stuck her head in a few times. Thankfully I had heard her coming and jumped in bed just before she'd opened the door. Granddaddy even knocked and entered once. That was the worst. I felt so guilty about not saying anything about the men breaking into Uncle Crew's room the night before that I think I managed to make myself really sick when he checked in on me. I was a terrible granddaughter.

I was looking out the window staring at the garage, reliving the night before. The camera and its pictures were never far from my thoughts. The stress of keeping it a secret was becoming too much to bear. I turned in a huff and snuck out of my room. I had to do something... anything. I tiptoed down the steps, through the kitchen, and once again found myself standing at the door to Uncle Crew's FROG. I knocked, lightly at first. Then I summoned up the courage and knocked louder. Uncle Crew opened the door, and didn't seem all that surprised to see me.

"Come in," he said.

I did, but only two steps, enough to close the door behind me.

"You still got the camera?" he asked avoiding eye contact with me.

My chin dropped, and I tried to regain the muscle control in my jaw so I could talk.

"You left the drawer to the filing cabinet open," he said.

"What camera?" I asked, trying to act as innocent and uninformed as I possibly could.

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“Elizabeth Starling’s camera. I had it in my filing cabinet. It’s gone. I-I-I figured you took it.” He looked mortified by his stutter.

“I don’t... and what are doing with it anyway? Isn’t that evidence or something?”

“You didn’t take it?” He allowed himself to look me in the eyes, but only for a fleeting moment.

“No, how could I? I don’t have a key to your filing cabinet?”

He smirked. “How did you know my filing cabinet was locked?”

I tried to hide my face. I was thinking hard, trying to come up with a reasonable response, and I was sure my face was contorted and twisted as I searched my brain. “Guessed,” I said. “That’s what people do with filing cabinets, right? Lock them?”

“Do you really think I killed that woman?”

He surprised me with the question. By the looks of him, I think he surprised himself, too. “No,” I said quietly and with very little conviction.

He nervously took a step back. “I... it’s hard for me to deny something like that... it’s just the furthest thing from something that I would ever do... but if you need to hear me say it, I guess...” He was looking down at his hands, picking at his fingernails. “I didn’t do it.”

I instantly felt bad. It killed him to even have to stoop to denying it. “Did you know her?”

“Yes,” he said. “J-Rob and I were helping her.”

“With the owls?”

His face seemed to brighten. He stepped forward. “Yes. She was looking for proof that there were Short-eared owls in the area.”

“Proof?”

“The feds are selling off some of the public lands. There’s a

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lot of debt.” He paced while he talked. “National forests and parks cost money. Developers are willing to pay big bucks for that land. The government sells off little pieces of it here and there and pays down the debt. Everyone’s happy. Except, little by little, we lose protected lands. Our national forests disappear.”

“The owls?” I asked.

“The Short-eared owl is an endangered species. If there’s proof they’re in an area... well, it doesn’t matter how much money the developers are willing to pony up, the federal government wouldn’t sell the land.”

I sat down at the kitchen table. “So this Bigfoot stuff..”

He sat down at the table with me and shrugged. “A hobby. It’s more for J-Rob than me. He gets excited by it. Gives him something to keep his mind from getting cluttered.”

“So, you don’t believe in it?”

He leaned in, rested his elbows on the table and clasped his fingers together. “I want to believe in it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

“That means I see things that aren’t there because I’m looking for them. That’s what people do. They see a mildew stain on a piece of tile and find the face of Jesus. Or they see a ghost when a passing car’s headlights shine through the window. People see what their minds tell them to see.”

“But the accident...” I stopped myself.

“What about it?” He asked with more than a hint of aggravation in his voice.

“Nothing... okay, promise not to be mad?”

He stroked his stubbly chin. “What about the accident?”

“J-Rob told me...”

He held up a hand to stop me. “He told you that I was rescued by Bigfoot, right?”

I nodded.

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He shook his head and chuckled. "It's true, as far as he knows. I made it up."

"Bigfoot didn't kill a bear?"

He chuckled harder. "Not to my knowledge."

I joined him in a good laugh. I was relieved, but I wasn't exactly sure why. "I still don't understand something."

His laughter trailed off and he said "What?"

"How did you survive for so long in the woods all by yourself?"

He sighed. "Not everybody is on the grid."

"Grid?"

"Sometimes people choose to live outside the watchful eye of big brother and society. Lucky for me, some of those people were within earshot of the crash. They took me, patched me up, and cared for me."

"Really?" My shoulders dropped.

"Disappointed?" Uncle Crew asked.

"No, it makes sense," I said. "Although, I have to admit the Bigfoot story was more interesting."

He smiled. "The truth is very rarely interesting."

I bit my lip and studied his face. He wasn't who I thought he was. The man sitting across the table from me was normal. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't a murderer. He was my uncle.

He caught me staring at him. "Is there something on your mind?"

I cleared my throat. "Some men broke into your room last night."

His face turned serious, "What?"

I held back some tears and talked a million miles a minute. "I saw some men break into your room last night. I... I do have the camera, alright? I saw you leave last night and let myself into your room, and I found the camera. I heard these three guys coming up the stairs, so I crawled out the window and hid in the tree."

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You should really lock your door, by the way.”

He sensed that I was about to wail, and spoke in a cool, calm voice. “Take it easy. Nothing to get upset about. What did these three guys look like?”

“Couldn’t see them. I heard them say something about some guy named ‘Teddy.’”

“Teddy? I don’t know anyone named ‘Teddy.’” He turned and looked around the FROG. “They must have been looking for the camera.”

“Why?”

“Because they killed Mrs. Starling.”

I gulped. “What?”

“Well, somebody had to do it. Nothing else appears to be missing. They obviously didn’t want me to know they were here because the only thing that was out of place was the filing cabinet drawer you left open. Which means they didn’t break in to rob me. They broke in to find something.”

“The camera,” I said as I put the series of events together in my head.

“The camera,” Uncle Crew said.

“What should we do?”

Uncle Crew stood up and walked from one end of the kitchen to the other. He nervously tapped his thigh as he walked. He had no idea what to do either. “Nothing,” he finally said.

“We can’t do nothing,” I said looking at him curiously. “We should tell granddaddy... and the police. I could call Owen. His cousin could come over right away.” I went from vowing to myself that I wouldn’t tell anyone about the camera to wanting to tell the whole world.

“No,” he barked. He quickly gathered himself and spoke calmly. “I will take care of this. Bring me the camera, and I’ll get rid of it.”

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“Get rid of it? But...”

“It’s not safe to have it here. J-Rob and I will take it out to the Little Grand Canyon tonight and leave it where they found Mrs. Starling’s body. The police will find it and that will take care of that.”

“But your picture is on it,” I said. “The police will ask questions.”

He shrugged. “I’ll just tell them the truth. No big deal.” He sat down and looked at me intensely. “You have to promise me not to tell dad or your mom or anyone else.”

I nodded knowing full well it was a promise I wouldn’t be able to keep. When I did, I saw him do something I can’t recall ever seeing him do before. He smiled.

As soon as I got back to my room, I locked the door and retrieved the camera. I fiddled with it until I found the memory card. Just because Uncle Crew wanted the camera, didn’t mean I couldn’t make copies of the files and save them on my laptop. It would be stupid not to.

Denise and Owen dropped by the house after school to bring me my homework. That was their excuse anyway. Most of my teachers had a class work page on the school’s website. All I had to do was log into the homepage and get the assignments there. Besides having to live through the social humiliation and barely edible lunches, I’m not really sure why it was necessary to go to school at all.

Denise had dolled herself up, as granddaddy would say. She always dressed nice, but she was wearing heels, something she never did. She also went a little overboard with the makeup. I

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wasn't with her at school to save her from herself. She looked desperate and ridiculous, and by the way she and Owen were arguing, I had a feeling he let her know more than once that he felt the same way. She wanted to be part of the "in" crowd in the worst way, and she seemed determined to go about it in the worst way.

I went through the papers they brought me, and felt honestly sick for the first time all day. Missing a day at school was like missing seven days in real life. I had to make up two pop quizzes and write a 500 word paper on the history of the quadratic formula that was due the next day. How knowing the history of the quadratic formula could help anyone, I didn't know. But since I wasn't in class, I got stuck with the loser paper. I wanted to pull my hair out.

"Joyner ate lunch with us again," Denise said.

"Really?" I said sounding more shocked than if she'd told me she had discovered a cure for cancer.

"Yeah," Owen said. "Yippee for us."

"All he did was talk about you," Denise said. "Couldn't shut up about you. Wanted to know everything we know about Hayley Wilkes. That boy is so in love with you." She was bordering on giddy.

I felt a surge of static electricity go through my body. "What did you tell him?"

"That you're a nerd," Owen said. "You're smart, and you think you're funny, even though you're really not. And that you collect stamps."

"I don't collect stamps," I said.

He smiled. "Now you do."

Denise grunted. "We didn't tell him you collect stamps. I told him all the good stuff." She winked.

"What good stuff?" I asked feeling really afraid of her answer.

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She rubbed her hands together as if she was about to dazzle me. “Well, you weigh 100 pounds. Your teeth are naturally straight. You love to shop. You were once asked to be a model for Crowley’s Department Store, and your shoe size is six.”

I cleared my throat and counted off all things she got wrong. “One – I weigh 105 pounds. Two – I wore braces for three years. Three – I hate to shop, and four – I was two when Crowley’s asked my mom if I wanted to model a Halloween costume.”

She held up her finger. “But you do wear a size six shoe.”

“Looks like I have some damage control to do when I get back to school tomorrow.”

“Please, he wanted to marry you when I got through with him,” Denise said. She stood and went to my closet. “Be sure to wear something sexy and black tomorrow.”

“Ahh no,” I said. “I’m not changing the way I dress just because Joyner may or may not like me.”

“It’s not for Joyner... well, maybe the sexy part is, but the black part is for Ginger Starling’s mother.”

“What?”

“The school is letting us off at noon to go to the funeral. They want as many students as possible to show up so they’re letting us have the afternoon off. Can you believe your luck?” Denise asked. “You get to show Joyner how fantastic you look in a little black dress.”

“Plus, score,” said Owen, “you can get all teary and he can comfort you in your time of utter despair.” He shot Denise an evil look.

“Relax, dork-o. It was terrible what happened to Mrs. Starling, but we didn’t know her or Ginger for that matter. Nothing wrong about using a tragedy to our advantage.”

“Oh my, God!” Owen yelled. “You are an awful, awful person. Our classmate’s mother was murdered.”

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“O-M-G! Overly dramatic much?” Denise said flippantly. “Besides, you said your cousin said they weren’t so sure it was a murder now.”

“I said maybe, maybe it wasn’t a murder,” Owen said gathering himself.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “She was beaten. How can that not be murder?”

“My cousin said the coroner thinks there is a real possibility she fell from an extreme height, 200... 300 feet. That’s why the body was so badly battered.”

I breathed easy, almost smiled. There was no murder. Uncle Crew was wrong. It was an accident. She got lost because it was dark and fell. It didn’t explain the three men who broke into Uncle Crew’s room, but that didn’t make any difference. That could be figured out later. The important thing is if she had an accident and fell, that removed the word murder from the conversation. I liked that a lot. “That makes sense. I mean the place is called Little Grand Canyon, right? That means there are cliffs. Pretty high ones at that.”

“The problem is they found her next to a picnic table just past the parking area.” Owen said.

“So,” I shrugged.

“So the parking area is at the highest point,” Owen said.

“How could she fall at the highest point?” Denise asked.

“Exactly,” Owen responded. “If she fell, that means someone moved her body.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

“No, it doesn’t,” Owen agreed. “You don’t just move a body like that.”

Without really understanding the implications of what she was saying, Denise spoke next. “Not unless you have to.”

“Why would you have to move a body?” Owen asked.

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Denise smiled and batted her eyelashes. “Maybe she fell on someone’s secret stash of drugs or buried money from a bank robbery.”

Owen furrowed his brow. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about moving the body so nobody will nose around where she actually fell,” she shrugged. “The last thing you want on top of your buried treasure is a major crime that the police will investigate with all their fancy CSI technical crime fighting crap.”

Owen thought of an insult he could throw her way, but he considered her theory and finally said, “Damn, you might be on to something.”

She smiled. I couldn’t bring myself to join her. My emotions were a wreck. I was as conflicted as ever. Was Elizabeth Starling murdered or wasn’t she murdered? If she wasn’t, what were those three guys doing in my uncle’s room? I felt my stomach turn in knots. For the first time in a long time, I wished I could go back to my old life when my mom and dad were married. Back in our house, miles away from this drama. Same town and same school, but the crazy uncle in the backyard was out of the equation. He might not be a killer, but he was definitely bad news. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time seemed to be the story of his life, and I was getting the feeling it was starting to be mine, too.

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I tried not to think about dressing sexy the next day, but Denise's voice just wouldn't stop yapping in my head. I took longer than I had ever taken to get ready for school. I tried on six different outfits and even tried my hand at putting on makeup, something I had rarely done. After several failed attempts, I washed my face and settled on a modest amount of lipstick. Denise would have something to say about my lack of face paint, but she could eat it. It just wasn't for me. As for the clothes, I settled on a black sweater over a white blouse and black slacks that I'd worn to one of my parents' divorce proceedings. Some family court mediator wanted to assess the children's well-being, blah, blah, blah. Anyway mom made us dress like we cared. It was not sexy because I wasn't sexy. I was a dorky kid who wouldn't know sexy if it punched me in the face. I did sneak into my mom's room and swipe a pair of black high heeled boots. I had worn high heels a few times in my life, and I had some training walking in them, but I still wasn't as fleet of foot as I usually was. They made me feel helpless. I kept imagining scenarios where I would have to run from danger, and I would be in deep trouble because running was not an option in my mom's boots. I would have taken them off, but I was surprised when I liked the way they looked in the full-length mirror. They really took my outfit to the next level. I looked tasteful with just the hint of... 'Whoa.' I was anxious to see Joyner's reaction. I hated myself for thinking like Denise. Owen was right. Poor Ginger's mother was dead. It seemed insensitive

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to use the occasion of her funeral as an opportunity to seduce the hottest guy in school with a pair of high heeled boots, but there I was prepared to unleash all my underdeveloped feminine wiles on the guy of my dreams. I was a bad person.

“Whoa,” was what Owen said when he saw me walking across the school parking lot. He yelled it without even thinking.

“Shut up,” I yelled back feeling really stupid for trying so hard to look good.

“What... no,” he said as I stopped in front of him. “It’s just that... you know, whoa. You look... you look...”

“I look like I’m going to a funeral, right?”

“Sure, sure,” he said. “Me, too.”

“Those are your regular clothes,” I said. It was true. He didn’t dress up at all. He wore an un-ironed oxford over a Halo t-shirt, a ratty pair of jeans, and black canvas Converse shoes.

He pulled a crumpled red tie out of his backpack. “Got this.”

“Owen” I said disappointedly. “You should have at least ironed your shirt. I can’t believe your mom lets you leave the house like this.”

“Look,” he said. “Just because you look hot in your fancy clothes doesn’t mean you can tell me how to dress.”

We both stared at each other in disbelief. He’d just said that I looked hot. He didn’t expect to say it, and it was the last thing on earth I thought that Owen Doogan would ever say to me. We were saved from the completely uncomfortable moment when Denise screeched.

“O-M-G, you look amazing,” she said. “Oops, except for the makeup. What’s up with that? You should totally borrow my eyeliner and blush.”

“Forget it,” I said sharply.

She looked somewhat shocked by my tone. “No, biggie. The rest of it works. The sweater...” she reached out and touched it.

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“What is that, cashmere? Nice, nice. Your butt looks incredible in those pants. I am impressed. You look like you actually have a figure, and...” another squeal. “Those boots. O-M-G...”

“I’ve got to go,” Owen said. He turned and trotted away without giving Denise and me a chance to say goodbye.

“What’s his problem?” Denise asked.

“Not sure,” I said watching him enter the school.

“He probably doesn’t know how to act with two babes like us.” She held open her coat and showed off a form-fitting gray dress. “What do you think?”

I gulped. “Ahhh, it’s not very funerally.”

“But do you think Danny Perry will like it?”

I nodded. “Unless he’s gone blind in the last 24 hours.”

She grinned and hopped on her toes. “It’s finally happening, Hayley. We’re moving out of freaks and geeksville, and settling in very nicely into popular town.”

I smiled politely. I wasn’t sure if I was all that happy about leaving geeksville. It was a pretty easy place to like. In geeksville, all I had to know was the quadratic formula to fit in. In popular town, I had to wear boots that were killing my feet.

“Nice,” was the first thing Joyner said to me. He met me at the front entrance to the school and walked me to my first class. He was wearing a suit. I was a little surprised because I wasn’t sure if someone of his stature would actually be going to the funeral. But by the looks of everyone in school, they were all planning on going, probably to get out of afternoon classes. It was almost like the school was buying mourners for Elizabeth Starling. I hoped it would make Ginger feel loved. I had a feeling she was smart enough to see it for what it really was. “You feeling better?” he asked.

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“Yeah,” I said. “Nothing serious.”

“Can I give you a ride to the funeral?”

I nodded.

“Got any crazy uncle stories for me today?” he asked.

I chuckled. “No. He might not be as crazy as I thought he was.”

“Really? That’s kind of disappointing,” he said jokingly. “What changed your mind?”

I looked at him. Should I tell him about Uncle Crew and Ginger’s mom? I cleared my throat and only told him half of the story. “He’s not into Bigfoot. He’s into owls.”

“Owls?”

“Short-eared... something.”

“He hunts them?” Joyner asked.

“No,” I said. “He takes pictures of them. Studies them. He says they’re endangered. He’s trying to preserve their territory.”

“Cool,” he said.

“I guess,” I responded.

“He takes pictures of them... where?”

I shrugged. “Shawnee National Forest. Little Grand Canyon. Just around.”

“And he’s got pictures?”

I thought about it. “I saw some owls, but I’m not sure if they’re the endangered ones.”

“Can I see them?” he asked with unexpected enthusiasm.

“You want to see pictures of the owls?”

“Why not?” he asked. “Is that so weird?”

I smiled playfully. “Kind of.”

He smiled back and squeezed the back of my neck. Shivers went down my spine and I could feel goose bumps pop up all over my body. As corny as it sounds, it felt like I had never been touched by a boy before, and honestly at that moment, I couldn’t

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remember if I had been. “I’ve just never seen an endangered animal before... I mean close up. I think I’d like to get involved with the cause.”

I looked at him cockeyed. “Okay, but Uncle Crew isn’t really the type who works well with others. You might have to help the owls without helping Uncle Crew.”

“I was hoping I could meet him. Pick his brain, you know.”

“Not a good idea.”

We stopped in front of my class. “Okay, I’ll settle for the pictures for now,” he said.

The bell rang, and I turned to go into the classroom when he grabbed my arm. “When?”

“When what?” I asked.

“When can I see them?” he asked pulling me closer.

I resisted, but he kept pulling. “Wow, you really want to see those pictures.”

“So, shoot me for caring about one of God’s creatures.” His tone was hard to read. I think he was trying to be funny, but he sounded a little frustrated.

I was a little unnerved by his sudden keen interest in owls. “I have them on my laptop.”

“Cool, I can swing by your house after the funeral and look at them.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that would be such a good idea.”

“Why?” This time I knew he was frustrated.

“It’s just that it’s my grandparent’s house, and I really shouldn’t have any uninvited guests over.” I was pretty sure that Nana Taffy and granddaddy wouldn’t mind if he came over, but I was really unsettled by his need to see the pictures.

He shrugged. I think he sensed my tenseness. “Cool, Friday then. I’ll pick you up a little early for pizza.”

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I nodded. "Friday. That'll work."

Danny Perry ran by and yelled out, "I, we'll be late for Mr. Hammond's class. He'll have coach all over us."

"Coming," Joyner yelled back. He smiled and said, "You look really good today."

I blushed and walked into my class when a bell went off in my head. 'I'

I saw Owen outside my second period class, and pulled him to the side. "What is Joyner's first name?" I asked.

He mulled over the question. "T.J.," he said.

"His first name isn't T.J. Those are his initials. What's his first name?" The frantic timbre of my voice was coming off as angry.

Owen became defensive. "I'm not the one in love with him. What do I care what his first name is?"

I bit my lip and then broke my promise to Uncle Crew. "Three guys broke into my uncle's room last night. I heard one of them say something about somebody named Teddy?"

"You heard them?" Owen said.

"It's a long story." I leaned against a row of lockers. "I told Joyner that Uncle Crew was a Bigfoot researcher yesterday. One of the guys who broke into Uncle Crew's room said 'Teddy was right. This nut job is into Bigfoot.'"

I thought I detected a faint smile on Owen's face. "Wait a minute... you think the guys who broke into your uncle's room know Joyner... T.J. Joyner... Teddy Joyner."

"If that's his name," I said. "What else am I supposed to think?" I thought of the implications. "Oh my god, what if Joyner sent them there?"

He smirked. "Why would Joyner send three guys to your uncle's place?"

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“To find the camera,” I said without thinking.

“What camera?”

I placed my hand over my mouth. “What camera?” I asked because I didn’t know how else to respond.

“That’s what I asked,” Owen said.

The bell rang, and I immediately backed away. “Gotta go.”

He looked at me suspiciously. “If I find out what the ‘I’ stands for in T.J. Joyner, you have to tell me about the camera.”

“I’ll just ask Joyner,” I said confidently.

“No,” he snapped. “If he is Teddy, and he did send three guys to your uncle’s, then I don’t want him thinking you’re on to him.”

“You don’t want?” I asked.

He fumbled over his words. “I... you know... It just isn’t a good idea. Let me find out.”

I reluctantly nodded and then disappeared into my second period class.

To my disappointment, Owen was not waiting for me after class. I thought for sure he would be anxiously standing by the locker ready to tell me what Joyner’s first name was. In fact, I didn’t see him for the rest of the day at school. Joyner either. I began to imagine horrible things. Owen got too nosy. Joyner caught on. He got his three goons to keep Owen quiet, permanently. I tried to tell myself that I watched too many movies, that I was inventing crazy conspiracies about Joyner that couldn’t possibly be true. He was a high school kid. What would he want with Elizabeth Starling’s camera? I chuckled to myself as I walked the halls. What did I think, that Joyner was some crime boss, some kingpin who had people killed? He was popular, sure, but I was pretty sure that he wasn’t running some criminal organization after

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school.

Denise found me after third period. Those of us planning to attend the funeral had been given the green light to leave an hour earlier than planned because of the anticipated turnout. My guess was the administration was starting to regret letting the students attend the funeral. The crowd was going to be large and given the maturity level of most of those in attendance, there was sure to be some embarrassing behavior. I could see Dr. Claymeyer wringing his hands as he watched the students walk by his office.

Joyner and Danny Perry caught up to Denise and me as we exited the school. I wanted to be happy to see Joyner, but I couldn't quite manage it. As ridiculous as it seemed, I had the lingering feeling that he was more than a high school kid. He was the leader of a crime syndicate.

"I'll drive," Joyner said.

"Oh," I said. "I promised Owen that we'd ride with him."

"He'll get over it," Denise said with a grotesque smile.

"Owen left, anyway," Joyner said. I tried to detect something sinister in his tone, but it was flat.

"Left?" I asked.

"Saw him checking out in the office right after second period," Joyner replied. He held up a set of keys. "Got my dad's truck. King cab. Satellite radio." He winked.

Denise grabbed my hand. "Of course we're riding with you."

"Well, alright!" Danny screamed like an idiot. He put his arm around Denise and guided her to the truck.

Joyner looked at me with concern. "Are you okay?"

I shrugged. "I don't like funerals."

He nodded and just said, "Yeah." He reached down and took my hand in his. "Sure you want to go?"

I shivered from his touch. I couldn't decide if it was fear or desire. "No, but I have to... you know, for Ginger."

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He grinned. "That's why I like you. Every other kid in this rotten school is going to the funeral to get out of class. You're actually going to support Ginger."

"What about you?" I asked. "Why are you going?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Because you're going." He kept hold of my hand as we walked to his father's truck. The shiver came back, and I was pretty sure it wasn't fear this time. I closed my eyes and prayed that he wasn't a bad guy.

Ginger looked beautiful. I'm sure I was the only one who thought so because as far as I could tell no one seemed as fixated on her as I was. She was still... dumpy, her posture, her build, her overall demeanor was no different than she had been before. It was her eyes that were somehow different. They were big, and bold, soaking in the sadness of the moment, and not letting it go. It was a look of total devastation, and while that shouldn't have been beautiful to me, it was. She loved her mother so much it damaged her knowing she would never see her again. I found it reassuring that someone could love another person so much. I thought I loved my mother and little brother that much, and even Nana Taffy and granddaddy, too. But I knew I wouldn't ever be sure until I stood in a cemetery staring at one of their caskets. That's the hell of it, as my granddaddy would say. You don't know how much you love somebody until they can't love you back. Realizing this, I started to cry in big painful sobs. Everyone around me assumed I was crying for Ginger and her family, but I wasn't. I was crying for me, and when that thought occurred to me, I cried even harder for being such a selfish brat.

After Ginger's little brother threw his rose on top of the casket, the family walked away in a huddled mass. Ginger caught a quick glance of me and attempted a smile. I nodded and attempted

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one back. I was sorry the school had let us all attend. Everyone but me was there for the wrong reason. You wouldn't think a thing like that mattered, but it did.

Joyner put his arm around me and led me across the cemetery grounds towards his father's truck. It felt good being nestled up against him. Someone who felt this good couldn't be bad.

I saw someone approach out of the corner of my eye and was relieved to see Owen. He was wearing a pressed black suit. I did a little double take when I saw him. His eyes were puffy and red.

"You been crying?" Danny Perry asked Owen holding back a giggle.

"No," Owen insisted.

He had been. I knew it. Anyone with half a brain knew it. "You changed," I said.

"Figured you were right," he said. "Called mom from school and she brushed off my one and only suit for me. Doesn't really fit." He tugged on the collar.

"Looks nice," I said.

"Yeah," Denise said. "You look like a normal person."

"Normal person who cries," Danny said.

Joyner slapped his shoulder. "Shut up, dude."

Danny flinched and rubbed his shoulder. "Jeez, I'm just jerking his chain."

"Well, don't," Joyner growled.

Owen looked appreciative but confused by Joyner's action. He cleared his throat and said, "I gotta go." He looked at me. "Saw your grandparents. They asked if you were here. Maybe you can catch a ride home with them." He gave me a very serious look. "Unless you're riding home with Teddy."

My heart began to thump.

Joyner didn't even acknowledge that Owen had referred to

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him as Teddy. He just said, "Sure I can give you a ride home."

"Yeah," Denise said. "Let's ride home with the guys."

"No," I barked. "We'll get my grandparents to take us home."

Denise grabbed my arm. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

I gently released myself from her grasp. "In the car..." I turned to look for Nana Taffy and granddaddy.

"Over there," Owen said pointing to my right.

I followed his finger and saw them talking to some people in the neighborhood that I had seen a few times before. I had to keep myself from taking off in a dead sprint towards them. I awkwardly said goodbye to Joyner and yanked Denise along with me as I stumbled in my high heels across the uneven grass to join my grandparents. I glanced over my shoulder once and noticed Joyner staring at me with a raised eyebrow. Somewhere in my panicked flee, Owen managed to leave without me noticing. He was nowhere to be seen. When we reached Nana Taffy and granddaddy, I wanted to collapse into their arms. I felt as if I had narrowly escaped with my life. I wanted them to hold me and tell me everything would be alright. Instead, I greeted them as if nothing was wrong. The guy I was falling for had something to do with the three goons who broke into Uncle Crew's room, and could very well have something to do with the death of the woman whose funeral we'd attended. But I couldn't tell them any of that. I just smiled and for the first time in my life wanted desperately to see Uncle Crew.

Uncle Crew wasn't home. I changed into a pair of sweats and a Chicago Cubs t-shirt shortly after my mom chewed me out for borrowing her boots without asking. I was so shaken by the funeral that I wrapped my arms around her and begged for her forgiveness. She agreed after looking at me like she'd just found

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out I had a brain tumor.

I decided to crawl in bed and sleep for the rest of my life. The covers had barely settled over me when Grover and Owen walked in. I yelped in surprise.

“Owen’s here,” Grover said.

“I can see that, dink,” I said sitting up.

Owen, still dressed in his suit, examined me wide-eyed. The way I reacted when he walked in, he must have thought he caught me in the nude.

“You okay?” Owen asked.

“Hold on,” I said. “Get out of here, Grover.”

“No,” he said. “It’s my room.”

“It’s my room,” I said. “I just let you sleep here.”

“Says who?”

“Get out!”

He folded his arms over his chest and grimaced. I was never going to get him to leave. “Okay, you can stay, but it just means that I have every right to beat the living crap out of you if you repeat one word of what we say.”

He put on a stoic face and nodded.

I returned my attention to Owen. “I’m fine. Pissed off, but fine.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“Wait for Uncle Crew to get home and talk to him.” I noticed my laptop on the night stand, and suddenly remembered what it contained. “The pictures,” I said opening it and turning it on.

“Pictures?” Owen said sitting on the bed.

I looked at Grover. “Last chance to leave because I promise you, I will give you the beating of your life.”

“I won’t say nothing,” he said.

I clicked on the image viewer and opened the album of pictures from Elizabeth Starling’s camera. I handed the laptop to Owen

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without telling him where they came from. He started to click through the images. He turned to me when he got to the picture of Ginger Starling.

“Is this...?” was all he could bring himself to say.

I nodded.

“Where did you...?”

“Uncle Crew,” I said.

Grover looked at us dumbfounded. “Stop talking in code.” He walked over and sat next to Owen. “Who’s the girl?”

We didn’t answer. Owen continued to click through the pictures. He didn’t make any comments. He got to the last one and started scanning through them again. At one point he pursed his lips together, and I could tell he was going back and forth between a series of pictures. He turned to me with a furrowed brow. “There are some pictures missing.”

“What?” I said darting forward and looking over his shoulder.

“You see this file name?” He asked as he pointed to the upper left hand side of the screen.

“Yeah,” I said.

“It’s IMG00012,” he said.

“So.”

“Yeah, so,” Grover said.

Owen clicked to the next image. “This one is IMG00026.”

“So,” Grover said again.

“It should be IMG00013,” I said in a haze.

“Right,” Owen said. “It’s the default naming protocol. Images have sequential numbers.”

“Sesquent-what?” Grover asked.

“In order,” I said. “The images should be numbered in the order in which they were taken. It jumps from 12 to 26.”

“Which means someone deleted 14 images,” Owen said.

“Oh,” Grover said yawning. “Guess they were bad pictures.”

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He stood. "I'm leaving because, for top secret stuff I'm not supposed to tell anyone, it's pretty boring." He stomped out of the room.

"Image number 12 is a picture of your uncle," Owen said. "Picture number 26 is of that other guy."

"J-Rob," I said.

"Which means 13-25 were probably of them, too."

I turned and sat back-to-back with Owen, pressing my feet against the wall. "Uncle Crew deleted them."

"Looks like." I could sense him turn his head toward me. "You okay?"

"That's the second time you've asked me that since you got here."

I heard a car pulling into the driveway. I jumped up and nearly knocked Owen to the floor. I darted out of the bedroom and headed down the hallway to a window overlooking the front yard. Owen wasn't far behind. It was a police car. Owen's cousin was helping Uncle Crew out of the backseat.

"What's going on?" I asked Owen.

He looked at me dumbfounded and simply shrugged.

I ran down the hall and bounded down the stairs. I was on the front porch so fast I wasn't even sure how I got there. I looked to my left and Owen was standing right beside me. He hopped off the porch and made a beeline for his cousin. Uncle Crew made brief eye contact with me and then quickly dropped his head. He stomped awkwardly down the driveway toward his FROG.

I heard the door to police cruiser shut and turned to see Owen climbing back up the porch steps. "Well?" I begged.

Owen looked at me sheepishly. "My cousin brought your uncle in for questioning. There was a call to 911 the night Mrs. Starling... died. The server crashed and they thought they lost it

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so nobody heard it until this morning when some IT guy was able to recover the call from one of the corrupt hard drives.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying someone called 911 about Mrs. Starling the night she was killed?”

“Yes. The best they can determine the caller used Mrs. Starling’s cell phone to make the call. My cousin said the second he heard the voice he knew who it was.”

“Uncle Crew.”

Owen nodded. “Apparently, he wouldn’t talk, and they didn’t have enough to hold him.”

I leaned back against the porch railing and folded my arms over my chest. “They think he killed her,” I said to no one in particular.

Owen rested on the railing next to me. “Do you blame them? I thought you were leaning that way, too.”

“I was... this is all my fault. I should never have said anything to anyone.” I grabbed Owen’s arm and squeezed. “You can’t tell anyone about the pictures.”

“Okay, but honestly, Hayley, it’s not looking too good. The three guys last night, the camera, the missing pictures, your uncle is mixed up in something. And, even if he didn’t kill Elizabeth Starling, it’s pretty clear he’s involved in some way. You’re going to have to tell someone sooner or later... someone besides me.”

I didn’t say a word. I knew he was right. I didn’t want him to be, but there was no sense denying it. Uncle Crew was hiding something. I couldn’t stand by and do nothing. I felt an obligation to Ginger Starling to find out what he was hiding because I was pretty sure it would lead to the truth of what really happened to her mother.

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“What do you mean we can’t go out with Danny and Joyner?”

Denise was screaming.

“It’s complicated,” I said into the phone. “Just trust me.”

“Trust you?” There was panic in her voice. “You’ve been acting really weird lately, Hayl. How am I supposed to trust you?”

I sighed. “I can’t really go into it now..”

“No,” she roared. “I’m going. This is my one chance to get out of the social dungeon I’ve been in my whole life. I’m not passing it up just because you have cold feet.”

“You’re not going, Denise,” I was so stern I almost convinced myself I could prevent her from going.

She wasn’t buying it. She laughed. “What? You can’t tell me what to do. I’m going. Be a bitch and stay home!” She hung up the phone.

I looked at the receiver for a few seconds before I hung it up. My grandparents didn’t have anything as high tech as a cordless phone, so I’d been tethered to the kitchen wall throughout the entire conversation. Nana Taffy was at the sink washing dishes. She was dying to know what was going on, but to her credit she didn’t ask. She pretended to be so wrapped up in removing the grease from a frying pan that she didn’t have time to take interest in my squabbles with my silly friends.

I jumped when the phone rang shortly after I hung up. I picked up the receiver. “Hello.”

“Comet?” a familiar voice said.

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“Dad?” I asked, but I knew it was him. He was the only one in the world who called me comet. I hated it, and I hated him. I was in disbelief when I heard his voice.

“Yep, it’s me. How are you, comet?”

“Fine,” I said not really caring if it was the truth or not. I didn’t like discussing any part of my life with my father.

“I tried calling your cell phone a couple of times, but I could never get through.”

“Maybe because I don’t have a cell phone,” I said gritting my teeth together. I couldn’t believe how little he knew about me.

“Really? Since when?”

“Since never,” I said.

“Really?”

“Is there a reason you called,” I snapped.

“Yes, I’m your father. That’s why I called.”

“Whatever,” I said.

“Don’t get smart with me, young lady. Your mother called me. She’s concerned about your living situation. She thought it might be a good idea if you and your brother stayed with me for a while.”

I was too busy processing what he said to answer.

“It’s just not a good time for me, honey. I’d love nothing more. It’s just with work... things are really crazy.”

I laughed. I was confused, relieved, and devastated all at once.

“Tell your mother for me, will you? I have to go, comet. I love you.” He hung up.

I stood against the kitchen wall with the phone to my ear long after the call ended. He didn’t even ask to talk to Grover.

Mom walked into the kitchen and looked at me with a puzzled expression. “Who are you talking to?”

I didn’t understand the question until I heard the dial tone. I slammed the phone on the cradle. “You’re stuck with us,” I said

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trying to sound like I didn't care that she was trying to pawn us off on dad.

"What?" she asked.

"Dad said things are too crazy at work right now. He can't take Grover and me off your hands."

"That was you father?" she asked.

I nodded and attempted to leave the room, but mom stopped me.

"Sit down, young lady."

"I've got homework," I said as she grabbed my arm.

"Sit down and hear me out," she said as if she were begging.

"Fine," I said in as snotty a tone as I could muster. I flopped down on the nearest chair and rested my elbows on the kitchen table. Nana Taffy finally gave up the charade that she was too into cleaning pots and pans to care what was going on. She joined mom and me at the table.

"I called your father because I was concerned," mom said.

"I bet," I said sarcastically.

Nana Taffy didn't like my tone. She raised her voice at me for the first time that I can remember. "That's enough, Hayley Wanda Wilkes."

I blushed, partly because I was embarrassed that my grandmother had just scolded me and partly because I hated hearing anyone use my middle name.

Mom closed her eyes to gather herself. She let out a quick breath, opened her eyes, and continued. "The police have been here twice in the last week. I don't feel comfortable exposing you and Grover to that sort of thing. I just thought it would be better if you stayed with your father for a while, until your uncle can sort this out."

"You think Uncle Crew did it?"

"No," she said. "That's not it. Crew would never hurt anyone."

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I know that. I just don't want you and your brother to have to worry about this sort of thing. It's an unusual situation, and to be honest with you, I'm completely confused by it, and I'm an adult. This can't be fun for you and your brother."

I leaned back in the chair. "Doesn't matter, anyway. Dad's too busy to take us."

She gently placed her hand on my thigh. "Honey, your father is an... asshole."

"Connie!" Nana Taffy shrieked.

"It's true!" mom said.

Nana Taffy's face was beet red. "Of course it's true, sweetie, but I don't approve. Call him a jerk or butt nugget even... I just don't... please don't use the 'A' double 'S' word."

Mom looked at Nana Taffy cock-eyed. "Butt nugget?"

"Is that not a term?" Nana Taffy asked apologetically.

Mom turned to me and we both busted out laughing. We laughed until we started crying, and then mom wrapped me in a bear hug. "Honey, I just want to do what's best for you."

The emotions from the funeral came back in full force. "You're what's best for me," I said sobbing like a baby.

Nana Taffy couldn't take it any more. She left her chair and placed a strong hand on both our backs. "My girls," she said. "No one goes anywhere."

After I caught up on my homework, I went out on the front porch to get some fresh air. The sun was long gone, and there was a chill in the air. I wasn't exactly dressed for it, but I didn't care. I folded my arms and sat on the steps.

J-Rob's truck pulled up in front of the house. The gigantic man extracted himself from the cab, and started walking to the back of the house. When he saw me, he stopped to talk.

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“You’ll catch your death dressed like that on a night like this,” he said.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You should at least have a sweatshirt on.”

I shrugged.

“Crew gave me a good talking to, by the way.”

“What for?” I asked.

“For telling you about the accident. He wasn’t pleased. You ain’t much on keeping secrets are you?”

I chuckled. “I guess not. Doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Why because he told you it wasn’t true?” J-Rob said kicking the ground in front of him.

I looked surprised. “You know it’s not true?”

It was his turn to chuckle. “I know he tells people it’s not true.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, right, I get it.”

“You get what?” he asked.

I shivered as a gust of wind blew through me. “Nothing,” I said. “Uncle Crew was raised by Bigfoot.”

He took his jacket off and threw it over my shoulders. “Not quite, but close.”

His coat smelled like cigarettes and coffee, but it was just what I needed. I grabbed the lapels and pulled it in tighter.

“You think like everybody else?” J-Rob asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you dress like everyone else, think like everyone else, laugh at all the same jokes?”

“No,” I said. “What’s your point?”

“My point is me and Crew is just like you. We don’t think like everyone else. The difference is they threw us in a hospital because we thought differently. You ever been to one of them... hospitals?”

I shook my head.

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“Ain’t no fun,” he said. “When you first get there you try to convince everyone you don’t belong there by converting them to your way of thinking. You know what you believe is 100% ironclad truth. But after a while, you just want to fit in, so a little at a time you pretend to come around to their way of thinking just so they’ll stop looking at you that certain way and whispering behind your back.”

“So, Uncle Crew...” I started, but J-Rob interrupted me.

“Is just trying to be like everyone else even if he has to pretend.” He started to walk away.

“Wait, don’t you want your coat?” I asked.

“Keep it,” he said. “I got another one.”

He was gone before I could insist. I thought about following him, but it was too cold. I slipped my arms through the sleeves and welcomed the warmth the coat brought, even if it stunk to high heaven. Obviously, J-Rob was not familiar with dry cleaners or laundromats. Mixed in with the cigarette and coffee smell was the faint scent of body odor. I stuck my hands in the pockets and felt something that I thought was a lighter. I pulled it out and was astounded to see a jump drive. J-Rob didn’t seem like the type who could find the power button on a computer let alone own a jump drive. A voice in my head told me the right thing to do was find him and return the drive, but a louder voice in my head was screaming at me to look at what was on the drive. The screaming voice always wins out in my mind. I pulled myself up and ran up to my room.

Grover was nowhere to be seen so I shut the door and hurriedly turned on my laptop. I stood in front of the computer trying to will it to boot up faster than normal, but instead it seemed to be taking far longer than usual. The login window appeared, and I was so nervous and excited I typed it in wrong twice. I sensed myself getting more and more frustrated so I stopped

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and collected my thoughts. Slowly and taking great care to hit the correct keys, I typed in the password and opened the Windows desktop. I stuck the jump drive into the USB port and waited for the system to recognize the new drive. Everything was taking twice as long as it usually did. As soon as the system read the drive and allowed me access to it, I opened it to discover one folder with the name “LGC Field Study.” I opened the folder and found 14 images. Before I could look at them the doorknob turned. I slammed the laptop shut, and groaned louder than I intended when Grover walked in.

“It’s my room, too, you know,” he said insulted that I took exception to his presence.

“I shouldn’t have to share a room with you. I’m in high school.”

“Writing love letters to your boyfriend?” Grover asked.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I said looking down at the laptop. That was the first time I heard myself admit that out loud. A lot had changed in a day. I went from thinking the greatest guy in school had a thing for me to thinking the greatest guy in school wasn’t that great, and may have had ulterior motives for wanting to get to know me.

“Looking at more of your pictures?” Grover asked.

The question caught me off guard. I fumbled for a reasonable answer and finally just said, “Stop asking me dumb questions.”

He looked at me mischievously. “Let me see what you’re hiding.”

“No, dip wad.” I moved the laptop behind my back.

“I’ll tell mom.”

“And I’ll tell mom you have one her magazines.”

“Go ahead,” he smiled. “I put it back.”

“So, I’ll tell her you had it. She’ll believe me.”

“And I’ll tell her you’re doing something on your computer

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you shouldn't be doing."

I grunted. "I'm not playing, Grover! This is serious stuff."

"I'm not playing either," he said. "Show me."

I balled my hands up into fists and thought about leaping out of the bed and socking him in the eye, but instead, I just cleared my throat and said, "Fine, but I swear to god, you are dead if you tell anyone."

"Cool," he said jumping on the bed.

I lifted the lid to the laptop and awoke it from its sleep. The file was still open. I clicked on the first picture and Grover said it best.

"Holy... whoa!"

We stared at the picture for a long time without saying a word after that. I was trying to process it. Uncle Crew was squatting down next to a... something huge. It was covered in hair or fur or whatever you call it... it was...

"Bigfoot!" Grover yelled.

I quickly clamped my hand over his mouth. "Shhh! It's not Bigfoot," I whispered. "It's a fake."

He looked up at me and shook his head. "No way that's a fake," he said with my hand over his mouth.

I removed my hand. "It has to be."

"Open another one," he said excitedly.

I did as requested and we both gasped. There were two apes or guys in gorilla costumes or whatever they were wearing. These two were standing next to J-Rob. I laughed nervously. They were two feet taller than him. They were really big guys in really big costumes. I could feel sweat forming on my brow. They had to be fakes. They just had to be.

"Two Bigfoots," Grover said.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said with a fake chuckle.

"Another one," he said pointing to the mouse pad. "Open

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another one.”

I huffed. I didn't want to. I didn't want to have to see more of those things. I was mad at them for looking so... real. But if I didn't click on the next picture, Grover would have had a hissy fit. I opened it. An ape with breasts squatted next to the ape laying on the ground. Uncle Crew was off to the side. The female was holding a large Tupperware container and appeared to be scooping some kind of mushy food out. She was twice as wide as Uncle Crew.

“Boobs,” Grover shouted.

“Shut up,” I growled.

“These are real,” Grover said. His teeth were almost chattering he was so excited. “Bigfoot is real.”

I didn't deny it this time. I clicked through the pictures and saw more of the same. It became clear to me that the ape laying on the ground was injured or ill, and Uncle Crew was tending to it. The other apes looked on with concern and curiosity. The faces of the creatures started to get to me the more I studied them. They were ape-like in their features, but they were human, too. The faces were leathery, and the brow ridges were prominent. But the noses were more human than I was comfortable with.

I clicked on the last picture and saw a female holding a baby. It was beyond cute, but I was still utterly disturbed by the whole thing. I tried to convince myself once again that they weren't real.

“Wait 'til I tell Tommy Dixon,” Grover said.

I jerked him up by his collar. “You can't tell anybody about this, you understand?”

He looked at me scared out of his mind. “Let go of me.”

“Promise me you won't tell a soul about this.” I could feel the veins popping out on my neck.

“Okay, okay, I promise,” he said.

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I let him go. “We don’t even know if it’s real,” I said more for myself than him.

“You’re crazy,” Grover said. “Nobody could fake that.”

“They can fake all sorts of things. Ever heard of Photoshop?”

“Of course,” Grover said. “Learned it at computer camp last summer. Never saw nothing like that, that’s for sure.”

“That doesn’t prove it’s real,” I said. I pulled the jump drive out of the USB port and held it up. “What do you want to bet that old J-Rob is pretty good when it comes to Photoshop?”

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I didn't sleep a wink after Grover and I turned the lights off and settled in for the night. My brain fought with itself all night. I went from thinking the pictures were real to knowing they had to be fake and back again over and over until all my thoughts felt like racecars speeding around in my head. It was maddening. No matter what I did, I couldn't shut it off.

I gave up trying to sleep about two in the morning. I sat up and watched Uncle Crew's FROG from my window. He didn't go out, probably because three guys had broken into his room a couple of nights before. He was waiting for them to come back. They wouldn't. Even I knew that. They hadn't found what they were looking for, and there was no reason to risk getting caught looking in the same place twice.

J-Rob stepped out on the stoop at the top of the stairs a couple of times and smoked a cigarette. I drifted back to our conversation on the porch. I played every word over along with every motion he made. He had a lot of nervous ticks. Comes with being crazy I guess, but there was one that seemed out of place. A few times he would pat the pocket of his coat, the pocket that had the jump drive in it. Then it hit me. He meant for me to find that jump drive. He wanted me to see the pictures.

The natural question followed, "Why?" I thought about putting on some shoes and running outside to ask him, but I knew he would deny it.

His face glowed orange each time he took a drag from his

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cigarette. If he saw me watching him, he never let on. I didn't know much about him, but I knew he loved my uncle like a soldier loves his commander or a boy loves a hero. If I had to guess why he gave me the jump drive, it was so I could help. He would never betray Uncle Crew by asking me outright, but if I volunteered, then he was off the hook.

I quickly ditched that idea. How could I possibly help? I was a kid, a test-taker still trying to make my way through Homer's Iliad and global history. I couldn't help myself through high school, how could I help them... with whatever it is they were doing.

I tried one more time to lay back down in bed and fall asleep, but this time all I thought about was Joyner. I hated myself for believing that he could actually be interested in me. What a jerk I was. I felt like a complete and total fool. The horror slowly engulfed me as I realized that I would have to see him at school.

I gave up trying to sleep and quietly left the room. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I just wandered through the house aimlessly until I reached the living room. I didn't turn on the lights, choosing instead to sit on the couch in the dark. The pale light of a half moon shined through the window. I sat and listened to the sounds of the early morning. The house settled, causing barely audible pops, and the wind outside whirled. It was amazing to hear nothing make so much noise. I heard a floorboard creak and almost let it pass without a thought. It suddenly dawned on me that floorboards don't creak on their own. I became stiff. Another creak. Something out of the corner of my eye moved. I turned and saw a dark figure swaying by the fireplace. I screamed. The figure jumped and sprinted past me. I screamed with more intensity as I realized that it was a real live person hiding in my grandparents' living room. The man jerked the front door open and disappeared into the darkness just as granddaddy and mom came rushing down the stairs.

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“What the hell...” granddaddy started to say, but stopped when he saw the front door wide open.

“Honey,” mom said running to my side.

I was a blubbing mess.

Granddaddy eased up to the door and peered outside. He shut it when he realized no one was there.

“What happened?” mom asked sitting next to me and allowing me to bury my face into her shoulder.

“A man,” I said as I sobbed.

“Man?” Granddaddy said. “In the house?”

I nodded pointing at the fireplace. “He was over there.”

I heard the kitchen door open. Uncle Crew and J-Rob barreled into the room.

“What’s going on?” Uncle Crew asked.

“Heard some wild screaming,” J-Rob added.

Granddaddy looked at me with more concern than I have ever seen in an adult. “Hayley said she saw a man in the house. Front door was open when I came down the stairs.”

J-Rob didn’t hesitate. He ran to the door and opened it. Growling like a wildman, he jumped out onto the front porch in an attack posture. If I hadn’t been scared to tears, I would have been laughing. He stepped back inside. “Nothing. I’d say he’s halfway to Peoria by now.”

“What did he look like?” Uncle Crew asked.

I shook my head, and attempted to say that I didn’t know, but all I could manage was a series of squeaks.

“We should call the police,” mom said stroking my hair trying to calm me down.

Granddaddy grimaced. “Police have been out here enough.”

“But a man was in your house, daddy,” mom said sternly.

“I know,” granddaddy said, “And they’ll ask questions, none of which Hayley’s going to be able to answer because she didn’t

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get a good look at him. It'll rouse the neighbors and just bring us attention I'd just as soon avoid."

"Daddy, call the police," mom demanded.

Nana Taffy came down the stairs holding Grover's hand. "What happened?" she asked.

Granddaddy rubbed his grizzled face. "A lot of excitement. No one's hurt..."

"A man broke into the house and daddy refuses to call the police," mom said.

"A man?" Nana Taffy said pulling Grover in close. "Oh my. Why would he do that?"

"Who knows? Probably a drunk got lost on his way home," granddaddy said.

"A drunk?..." You could hear the outrage in mom's voice. "It could have been a burglar or rapist or serial killer for all we know."

"Connie!" Nana Taffy shouted as she covered Grover's ears.

"It was me," Uncle Crew said.

I looked up at him astonished.

"What do you mean, it was you?" granddaddy asked. "You were in the house?"

"No," Uncle Crew said. "They're after me."

"And me," J-Rob added.

Granddaddy dropped his shoulders and shook his head. "No one's after you boys."

"No," I said. "It's true. Someone is after them."

"Enders," J-Rob said.

Granddaddy started to shuffle toward the stairs to go back to bed. "Sun will be up in a couple of hours. We should try to get some sleep before it's too late..."

"They broke into my room the other night," Uncle Crew said. He hesitated before he continued. "Hayley saw them."

All eyes turned to me. "There were three of them." I cast my

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head down feeling ashamed now for not telling them sooner.

“You saw them from your room?” mom asked.

“No,” I looked to see if Uncle Crew would step in and save me, explain what I was doing, how I was able to see the three men, but he simply nodded. “I went up to Uncle Crew’s room after he and J-Rob left the other night...”

“Why would you do that?” Granddaddy asked.

“Sh... she had her reasons,” Uncle Crew said trying to suppress a nervous facial tick. “We’ve talked about it.”

I didn’t know if he was trying to save me or keep the subject of the camera from coming up. “They broke into the FROG while I was there... I mean I wasn’t exactly in the room when they came exactly. I was hiding in the tree right outside the back window. I couldn’t see any of them.” I considered telling them about Joyner, but quickly changed my mind when J-Rob spoke again.

“Gotta be Enders,” he said.

Granddaddy turned to him and asked in a strained voice, “What’s an Ender?”

“Assassins,” J-Rob said. Uncle Crew squirmed. “Of sorts,” he continued. “They work for developers, the timber industry, oil companies, any outfit trying to get their hands on government land.”

“This isn’t the time, J-Rob,” granddaddy said.

“Tell ‘em, Crew,” J-Rob pleaded.

Uncle Crew had a look in his eyes like someone was pointing a gun at his head. “They... they clear vulnerable protected lands from endangered and at risk wildlife.”

“You mean like Bald Eagles?” mom asked.

“No,” Uncle Crew said with slightly more confidence. “Lower profile endangered species. Animals that don’t get a lot of attention except from a few animal rights groups.”

“And by vulnerable protected lands,” Nana Taffy said. “You

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mean what?”

“I mean those government-owned, protected lands they’re considering selling to pay down the federal debt. The Enders eliminate any evidence of endangered species from those areas and the developers make their case that there’s no reason to keep the land under protected status.”

“Why do you call them Enders?” Grover asked.

“Because,” J-Rob said, “they end entire species just to make a stinking dollar.”

“And this has to do with Bigfoot?” mom asked.

“No,” I said. “Owls.”

She looked at me ready to ask how I knew, but I didn’t give her a chance.

“That’s what Elizabeth Starling was doing in Little Grand Canyon. She was collecting evidence that an endangered species of owl used that area as its habitat.”

“They don’t just end animals,” J-Rob said sounding disturbed.

Mom jumped up. “Daddy did you hear that. The men who killed Elizabeth Starling were in this house. You have to call the police.”

Granddaddy considered her demand. “I’ve heard a lot of things here tonight. Not a lot of which I put much stock in.”

Nana Taffy said sternly, “Hank Stanton you pick up that phone and call the police. The neighbors be damned. I promise you that if I have to do it myself, you will not soon live it down, do you hear me?”

He grumbled and marched past everyone and headed for the kitchen to make the last phone call he ever wanted to make.

The police stayed until sun up. They tried to interview me without my mom present, but she wouldn’t go for it. She sat by

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my side while they grilled me for every little piece of information. After the first couple of questions, I seemed to irritate the cop questioning me. I got the sneaking suspicion he was trying to get me to admit I made the whole thing up. If another cop hadn't found a pair of muddy footprints by the fireplace, I'm sure he would have happily written it off as a prank or a desperate cry for attention on my part.

But then again, my story did seem to justify their suspicion of Uncle Crew's involvement in Elizabeth Starling's death. Three men broke into his room. They were looking for...

"What?" the bloated police officer with blotchy skin and thinning salt and pepper hair asked.

I didn't want to answer. Uncle Crew was being questioned on the front porch. I was sure he was telling the other officers about the camera, but what if he wasn't? If I say something, it could get him in big trouble, make him look even more guiltier than he already looked.

The cop scratched his cheek, and I could hear his fingernails scrape across the stubble of his poorly shaven face. "Miss Wilkes, what were the three men looking for in your uncle's room?"

I shrugged. "Money, maybe. I don't know."

"You said that one of the men said something about a Teddy that told them your uncle was into Bigfoot, right?"

I nodded. The next words out of my mouth should have been "Teddy is T.J. Joyner," but I said nothing instead.

"They knew something about your uncle. I'm betting they knew he didn't have money either. Make sense?" he asked smugly.

"I guess," I said. "Not really though."

"Honey," mom said.

"I'm just saying knowing one thing doesn't necessarily mean you know another thing. Make sense?" I asked returning the smugness.

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“Miss Wilkes, why were the men in your uncle’s room?” He was not amused.

“I think we just all need to calm down,” my mom said.

“You’re here out of courtesy, Mrs. Wilkes..”

“And you’re here because we called you,” my mom snapped. “My name is Ms. Wilkes not Mrs. Stop calling me that. It reminds me of my ex-husband and this night has been traumatic enough.” She cleared her throat and sat up straight in her chair. “If my daughter says she doesn’t know why the three men were in Crew’s room, she doesn’t know.”

I had never felt such gratitude for my mother’s faith in me and such guilt for her faith me.

The officer tapped his finger on the table and adjusted his posture in his chair. “I have a better question, then. What were you doing in your uncle’s room, Miss Wilkes?”

Mom sat back and waited for me to answer.

“I...,” I fidgeted. “I wanted to get a closer look at his Bigfoot stuff.”

“You have an interest in Bigfoot, do ya’, Miss Wilkes?”

“Yes,” I said.

Mom looked at me disapprovingly. I was lying and she knew it.

He pressed some more, but I always brought the conversation back to the Bigfoot thing. It was the perfect out. As far as he was concerned, I was just a silly teenager into ridiculous urban legends. That’s 99% of the kids my age. Mom was another story. She didn’t believe one word of it, but she never let on.

“One last thing,” the police officer said. “Any idea who this Teddy is that you overheard one of the men refer to?”

I bit my lip. I knew who the dirty scumbag was. But it seemed like a bad idea to tell the police so I just shook my head.

The police officer stood to leave the room, and I did the same.

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I didn't want to be left alone with mom and have to give her the real answers to questions I had just been asked. The portly cop waddled into the living room and I was right on his heels.

My heart nearly stopped when I saw a younger, slightly more fit police officer at the door holding Elizabeth Starling's camera.

"What's that?" the older officer asked.

"Camera," the younger one replied.

The older cop grumbled, "Hell-fire, Gary, I'm not stupid. I can see it's a camera. Why do you have it?"

I looked over at granddaddy and J-Rob sitting on the couch. Neither one of them looked very happy.

"The wild-eyed one gave it to me... Crew. Said he found it," the younger officer said.

"And?" The older officer asked with a growing impatience.

"He claims it belonged to that Starling woman."

The older officer paused. He seemed to be stuck in time. He turned to granddaddy and then examined J-Rob. Both of them looked away. He turned on his heels and looked at me. He twirled back around and took the camera from the young police officer. "Curious thing, that," he said. "Mr. Stanton, you got any idea how a dead woman's camera ended up on your property?"

Granddaddy leaned forward and looked at the floor. "None whatsoever."

"How about you, shaggy beard?" the officer asked J-Rob.

"Me?" J-Rob responded.

"Nah, I'm talking to the girl," the cop pointed a thumb at me.

It took a second for J-Rob to read the sarcasm in the officer's voice. "I guess it could be because me and Crew brought it here."

"How did you end up with it?"

"We found it," Uncle Crew said pushing his way past the younger officer in the doorway.

"What does this have to do with these men who broke into

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my house?” granddaddy asked.

“Sir,” the older officer said, “your son just handed over evidence in a murder investigation. How and when he came about said evidence may or may not have something to do with the breaking and entering your granddaughter alleges took place over the last couple of nights.”

“Alleges?” I snapped.

“No offense, Miss Wilkes. Alleged just means we have no evidence to support your claim. We have to consider you may have embellished the story.” The officer’s blotchy face seemed to be getting blotchier.

“Why would I be offended by that? You’re basically just calling me a liar.” If he wasn’t a cop who outweighed me by a gazillion pounds, I would have punched him.

“Nobody called you a liar,” the police officer started, but stopped when Uncle Crew interrupted him.

“Elizabeth gave me the camera,” he said.

The air was sucked out of the room. I’m not sure that he had even told granddaddy that he was working with Elizabeth Starling. The stunned silence chilled the air.

The fat officer shifted his weight from one leg to the other. The leather on his gun belt crackled. “Son,” he coughed nervously. “Did you just say Mrs. Starling gave you this camera?”

“Yes,” Uncle Crew said.

“How is that finding it, exactly?”

“It’s not... exactly.”

“You said before that you found it. Now you’re saying that the Starling woman gave it to you.” The fat officer’s tone was growing more and more impatient. “Which is it?”

“Elizabeth gave it to us when we found her. She wanted me to get it to the proper authorities.”

The cop shifted again. The leather crackled again. “Hold up.

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Are you saying..” He hesitated. My guess was he was trying to answer the question himself before he asked it. “Are you saying you found Elizabeth Starling in Little Grand Canyon?”

“Yes.”

“Injured?”

“Yes.”

“And was that also you on the 911 call?”

“Yes.”

The cops murmured as if they were in a movie theater and they just figured out who the killer was.

“Son,” the fat cop said. “Is there something you’d like to... confess to?”

Uncle Crew shook his head. “I didn’t kill her. Neither did J-Rob.”

“Thanks,” J-Rob said sincerely.

The officer held up the camera. “Son, who in tarnation is more proper than the police department when it comes to the authorities?”

Uncle Crew looked down and kicked the wood floor of the foyer. “The EPA.”

The fat cop let the words hang in the air as he tried to figure out what the EPA was. It hit him. “The Environmental Protection Agency? Did I miss something? They investigate murders now.”

“No,” Uncle Crew said. “They protect owls.”

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The cops had no choice but to haul Uncle Crew and J-Rob to the police station for further questioning. Granddaddy and Nana Taffy followed shortly after them. They debated whether or not they should call a lawyer. Granddaddy didn't think it was necessary. He knew his boy. He was innocent. Nana Taffy reminded him that his innocent boy hadn't exactly been forthcoming to this point. Granddaddy reluctantly agreed. They decided on a nephew of someone they went to church with. They had no idea if he was any good, but they were counting on getting the "God connection" discount.

Mom gave Grover and me the option of staying home from school. It was tempting, but I had already missed one day. I wasn't going to miss another. Especially when this was the day I was going to let Teddy Joyner have it with both barrels. The grilling by the cops and seeing my family put through the wringer because of that idiot and his goons pushed me over the edge. I couldn't wait to see him.

Grover was happy to stay home. He'd missed most of the action during the night, but that didn't matter to mom. She still thought he was sufficiently traumatized to warrant a day off from school. Plus, I was pretty sure she couldn't face a full day of work. Staying home with Grover was the perfect excuse for her to drop out for the day.

She didn't forget my interrogation by the fat cop. She stood in my bedroom doorway while I got dressed. "So, you're into Bigfoot?"

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I shrugged. "I guess."

"What were you really doing in Crew's room, honey?"

"I already said."

"Say it again. Humor me."

I was careful not to look her in the eyes. "I wanted to see his Bigfoot stuff."

"Ah-huh, and what is it exactly that you wanted to see?"

"You know, the Bigfoot... things. Footprints and junk."

She stood in the door frame without saying anything. She watched me as I nervously searched the room for my shoes. "Honey... and I mean this with all the love in my heart, but you're feeding me a load of crap."

"I'm not," I insisted unconvincingly.

"Two seconds," She said holding up two fingers.

"What does that mean?"

"That means you have two seconds to tell me the truth."

"Alright," I sighed. "There's a toolbox in the garage that is full of newspaper clippings from when Uncle Crew went missing. I was in Uncle Crew's room looking for more... I don't know... more information, I guess. I just wanted to know what happened to him."

"Hayley!" she said sounding completely disgusted with me. "That is none of your business. You shouldn't be snooping around the garage or Crew's room for that matter." She placed her hands on her hips. "What did you find out?"

I looked at her and laughed.

She bit her lip to hold back her own laughter, but it didn't take. She guffawed. "Well, I've always been curious, and Crew hasn't exactly been a Chatty Kathy about it."

"Not much," I said. "He wasn't raised by Bigfoot... in case you wanted to know."

"I didn't, but good to know."

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“Claims he was found by people in the woods.”

“People in the woods?”

“Off the grid types, you know,” I said feeling cool for just using the phrase.

“I see.” She got a faraway look in her eyes. “What must go on in that head of his? The accident. His mother dying. Being lost. Just all awful stuff. I can’t imagine.”

“Don’t forget what granddaddy did to him,” I said.

She furrowed her brow not knowing what I meant at first, and then her face relaxed as she realized what I was saying. He’d abandoned his son. Uncle Crew felt completely alone all those years he was growing up.

“Why do you think he did it?” I asked.

“Your granddaddy?” She considered my question. “I can think of a couple of reasons. Not excuses, mind you. There is no excuse for what daddy did, but still, that doesn’t mean I don’t completely understand what he did. There are just times when you want to check out, sweetie. Life just has a way of pounding the crap out of you. Misfortune follows misfortune follows misfortune until you just don’t want to take any more... shit.”

“Mom?” I said giggling. She rarely used bad language. I had overheard her a few times, but never in my life had she ever used a swear word while speaking directly to me.

“I’m sorry, honey. There’s just no other way to say it.”

“So it’s possible to get to a point where you can’t take any more... misfortune.” I thought about using her four letter word, but chickened out.

“I didn’t use the word ‘can’t.’ I said your granddaddy didn’t want to. He could have. Most of us can. But sometimes you get to a point where you just don’t want to. Granddaddy reached that point after the accident. Mom doesn’t think it was so much the accident that did him in. It was finding Crew that did it.”

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“Finding?” I asked. “You mean searching for Uncle Crew did him in.”

“No,” she said. “In a weird way, searching for your uncle helped your granddaddy not focus on the accident. The second he found Crew and knew he was safe he had to face the fact that the woman he loved was dead. He’d never admit it, but I think sending your uncle away was an attempt to forget about the accident. He replaced the grief of losing his wife with the guilt of abandoning his son.” She smiled. “Listen to me. I sound like Dr. Phil. Lord help me.”

She started to leave, but I ran to her and wrapped my arms around her before she could. “Thanks for not abandoning Grover and me, mom.”

She patted my arm. “I guess you can thank your granddaddy for that.”

“How so?”

“I grew up with the man. I saw what it did to him. By the time I was old enough to go to school, I was surprised to find out that the other kids didn’t see their fathers cry every night. It tore him up.” She gently pried herself loose from my embrace and headed for the door. “Offer still stands. You can stay out of school if you want.”

I smiled. “I wouldn’t miss today for anything.”

Owen was waiting for me on the sidewalk in front of school. “My cousin told me what happened.”

“He wasn’t there,” I said.

“Third shift cop told him about it this morning. Did he do it?”

“Did who do what?”

“Your uncle... did he kill Mrs. Starling?” His voice carried across

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the front parking lot. A few heads turned our way.

“Keep your voice down,” I growled as I grabbed him by his arm and pulled him closer. “Of course he didn’t. He was working with her on a project.”

Owen scratched his head. “You know it looks pretty bad for him, right?”

“I know.”

“Cops think he did it. No question about it.”

“They’re wrong,” I said.

“You’ve flipped back and forth on it yourself.”

“Well...” I started the sentence before I knew what I was going to say. I didn’t know how to finish it so I completely changed the subject. “You seen Denise?”

“About 10 minutes ago. She’s inside looking for Danny Perry.”

I gritted my teeth. “Idiot. I can’t believe she’s still going to go out with him.”

“Yeah, well Joyner still thinks you’re going out with him. Saw him first thing, and he was asking where you were. Why didn’t you call him?”

“Because I want to do this in person,” I said. “Can’t wait to see his face when I tell him...”

“Tell him what?” The voice came from behind me. I turned to see Joyner smiling at me. Denise and Danny were linked in an awkward shoulder to shoulder embrace. Danny’s arm gripped Denise’s shoulder tightly, and she leaned against him, throwing all her weight into him. They looked like they were about to engage in a wrestling match instead of two star struck lovers hanging all over each other.

I quickly erased the shocked look from my face and replaced it with my best stone-faced expression. “You... about tonight...” I was sounding much more nervous than I intended. The plan was to be tough and heartless and just let it rip, but looking at his

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face... his gorgeous face, I couldn't find the cold heart I needed.
"I can't go."

Denise scowled at me.

"What? No way," Joyner said sounding surprisingly hurt.
"Why?"

"Because," I said. "I know about... you know."

He raised an eyebrow. "What do you know?"

"Your name is Teddy," I said as if that explained everything.

"You're calling off our date because my name is Teddy." A confused smile spread across his face.

"No. I'm calling off our date because you had three guys break into my uncle's room." I said it fast before I could chicken out.

"What?" He was incredulous.

"Don't deny it." The accusation out in the open, I felt a wave of defiance come over me. I felt violated and cheated and just plain icky. I wanted answers from him. "Tell me why."

"Look," he said after a deep sigh. "I don't know what you're talking about. This is crazy."

"Three guys broke into my uncle's room the other night. One of them said something about Teddy telling them Uncle Crew was really into Bigfoot. Teddy! That's you. You were the only one I had told that to at the time."

His face turned beet red. "I didn't say anything to anybody about that. I swear!"

"Liar," I screamed. "It had to be you."

"Hayley," he said sounding more confused than I could ever imagine he could be. He was Mr. Cool. Nothing flustered him. "You have to believe me. I didn't say anything, and I didn't have three guys break into your uncle's place. Why would I do something like that?"

"Because," I said stepping toward him. I wanted him to back

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down or flinch, show some weakness in some way. “You knew my uncle was working with Elizabeth Starling. You knew about the owls. You knew about the camera.”

He furrowed his brow. “I knew about what? None of this is making sense.” He turned to Denise. “Do you understand any of this?”

Denise cleared her throat and smiled smugly. “You never know with Hayley. She’s got a wild imagination.”

If her betrayal hadn’t stung so badly, I would have smacked her.

Owen laughed.

“Something funny?” Danny Perry barked.

“Far from it,” Owen said. “Sucks when your best friend stabs you in the back.” He made sure to look Denise directly in the eyes when he said it.

Denise stared at her feet.

“You insulting the lady?” Danny asked with a glare.

“No,” Owen smiled. “I definitely did not insult a lady.”

Danny was too stupid to realize that Owen had just insulted Denise again. I was too hurt to giggle. Owen was right. It does suck when your best friend stabs you in the back.

Joyner reached out to touch me but I withdrew. “C’mon, Hayley. It’s me.”

“I think that’s the problem,” Owen said.

Joyner gave him a death stare. “Don’t push your luck.”

For reasons that still escape me, Owen stood up to Joyner. “Or what? What are you going to do?”

I was terrified for Owen so I grabbed his arm and tried to pull him away. “Let’s go,” I said. “We don’t need this.”

“He didn’t answer your question,” Owen said staring down Joyner. “Answer her question!”

“Why you coming at me like that?” Joyner asked. “You got a

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thing for her?”

“Shut up,” I yelled. Back to Owen, “Let’s go now!”

Half the school had surrounded us by now. Joyner had an audience. He couldn’t let Owen’s defiance stand. “You want me to answer her question, loser. Beat it out of me.”

“Back off,” I said, more pleading than demanding. I didn’t want to see Owen get hurt because of me.

“No, I’ll go,” Owen said. “I don’t care.”

“No you won’t,” I said. I was getting more and more irritated with his idiotic show of bravery.

“Son, you don’t want to go with me,” Joyner laughed.

“Son?” Owen laughed. “What are you, my grandmother?”

Joyner bolted forward. I pushed Owen back and turned to meet Joyner head on. “Leave him alone,” I said, this time demanding.

Joyner turned from enraged to sympathetic in a flash. He looked sheepishly at the crowd that had gathered. “Alright... okay... this is getting way out of hand. I’m reasonable. All I want is for you to at least reconsider about tonight. I promise you... whatever you think I’m involved in, I’m not. I swear.”

“Don’t believe him,” Owen said.

I shushed him fiercely. He was being a pigheaded jerk. If reconsidering going out with Joyner would get him out of this, I was willing to do it. “Alright, I’ll reconsider. I’ll let you know by the end of the day.”

That was it. The situation was diffused. Joyner, Danny, Denise, and everyone else dispersed. I breathed a sigh of relief. Owen was still livid, maybe even more so.

“No way,” he said. “Not a chance. You’re not going out with him.”

I felt like slugging him. I’d just saved him from a major beating, but he was too stubborn to see it. “Owen, I don’t know why you

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think you have to get involved in my business, but I can take care of myself.”

He looked as if I had actually slugged him. “Involved in your business? I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“Well don’t, okay? I’m a big girl.”

“Excuse me for liking you.” He cut the last word short as if he had said something he wasn’t supposed to. I was starting to wonder if Joyner was right. Maybe he did have a thing for me.

Owen must have sensed my suspicion in the uncomfortable silence. He took the opportunity to clarify what he meant. “I like you as a friend. You know. That’s all I meant. We’ve known each other since we were four. Kind of my job to look out for you.”

I smiled. “Not if looking out for me means the beating of your life.”

“Are you kidding me?” Owen said. “I could’ve taken him easy.”

I rolled my eyes. “When did you get all macho on me?”

“I’ve always been macho,” he laughed. “I just keep it hidden until I need it. This is the first time I’ve ever needed it. How’d I do?”

I shook my head and put my arm around his shoulder. “Too well. Promise me to keep it hidden for the rest of our lives.”

He thought about it. “Can’t put the macho back in the bottle.”

We headed for the school. “Well, just tone it down a notch or two,” I said. I couldn’t let him know it, but as scared as I was for him, I appreciated what he tried to do for me. It was a side of Owen I had never seen before. It was nice to know he had my back.

Of course, Joyner was waiting for me outside my last class. I had determined before I sat down in my first period class that I

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had no intention of going out on the date with him. There was just no way. He was a creep's creep, and I didn't want anything to do with him. I had to admit though that he was pretty convincing when he denied having anything to do with the three guys who'd broken into my uncle's room. If I hadn't already made up my mind that it was him, then I probably could have been swayed.

I stepped out into the hallway and saw his face through the crowd of approaching students. My heart started to beat fast. I tried to tell myself it was because I was nervous about officially breaking off our date, but the closer he got, the more I started to think that I still liked him. How could that be? He was basically a thug, a criminal who sent bigger thugs to break into Uncle Crew's room. There was no way I should have even the tiniest bit of romantic interest in him, but there it was. My heart was fluttering. He was beautiful. Everything about him was perfect. I guess it just made sense that I would feel a little something for him.

No, I told myself. This is insane, he is a jerk. Kick him to the curb and get home as fast as you can.

He approached, and I opened my mouth to speak, but stopped when I saw that he was holding out a single red rose. I blushed. I couldn't see myself, but I could feel all the blood rushing to my cheeks.

"I know," he said. "It's super corny, but I figured I didn't have anything to lose."

I didn't know what to do. I saw my hand reach out and take it from him, and I hated my hand for it. Nobody gave it the authority to take the rose.

"So," he said closing his eyes. "Let me have it."

"I'll go," I said, immediately covering my mouth afterwards. That wasn't what I had planned to say.

"Sweet," he sighed.

"This doesn't mean I don't have questions," I said.

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“Ask me what you want. I got nothing to hide.”

“Tonight,” I said. “And promise me you’ll leave Owen alone.”

He shrugged. “To be honest with you, I kind of like the guy. I know he’s got a problem with me, but I’m cool with that. We both like the same girl.”

I thought about what he said. “Who?”

He laughed. “You, who else?”

I snickered. “Owen and I are just friends.”

“You may think that,” Joyner said. “But Owen’s got other plans.” I saw him looking past me. I turned to see Owen across the hall. He gave me a disgusted look and walked away. I considered going after him, but I was already confused by my relationship with Joyner. I didn’t need to dive deeper into my relationship with Owen. Owen was my friend. I saw him that way, and he saw me that way. It wasn’t necessary to examine his feelings for me any further. Joyner was wrong.

I turned back to him. “Consider me a hostile date. I’m going, but I’m not exactly happy about it.”

He nodded. “I’ll take what I can get.”

I waited at the front door for Joyner’s truck to pull up in front of the house. I was hoping to sneak away before anyone else knew he was here. I dreaded the meet and greet portion of the date. I tried to talk mom out of making it a requirement, but she insisted. I had never been on a date before, and mom wanted to see who she was entrusting her daughter to for the evening. I didn’t get into the complications that surrounded the date. It would have freaked her out beyond belief.

Every set of headlights that passed by made my heart jump up in my throat. I was more nervous than I think I’ve ever been. I think I would even have preferred being questioned by the fat

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cop again over waiting for a date that I wasn't even sure I wanted to go on.

Mom stuck her head out of the kitchen at one point and summoned me back. I clenched my fists and walked like I was stepping on eggshells. I hoped this wasn't the... talk, the one where she explains how idiotic teenage boys and girls can end up with a baby if they are out of their ever-lovin' minds and go places they have no business exploring. I had heard it before, and I was mortified by it. I stepped in the kitchen, and mom pointed to the back door. Owen was pacing back and forth on the back deck. I looked at mom.

"He won't come in," she said.

I shook my head and went outside and was struck by an immediate chill. He was wearing a t-shirt, ragged jeans, and a floppy pair of sneakers. "What are you doing out here? Come inside."

"Why are you doing it, Hayley?" He asked without looking at me.

I searched for an answer he would be satisfied with, but realized he wouldn't be satisfied with any answer. "I need to know for sure."

"You already know," he said. "Teddy – remember?"

I nodded. "There are lots of Teddys."

"But only one that is as good looking as Joyner, right?"

"That's not it at all." It was partially it, but Owen didn't need to hear that.

"I don't want you to do this."

"Owen..."

"Please, Hayley."

"I can take care of myself. Stop treating me like a poor, helpless girl who needs a guy to look out for her."

"That's not it," he said.

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“Then what is it?”

“Hayley,” mom shouted. “He’s here.”

“In a minute,” I shouted back. I looked at Owen. “Well?”

“Just don’t go,” he said.

I shook my head. “Go home, Owen.”

I turned and went back in the house feeling Owen staring at me all the way.

Mom, Nana Taffy, and granddaddy where all huddled around Joyner at the front door. The sight of it made me sick to my stomach. I could only imagine what kind of embarrassing things they were saying.

I heard granddaddy say, “Joyner? That the Marsh-Joyner Timber people?”

“Yes, sir,” Joyner said. “The Joyner part anyway.”

“Where you fit in?” granddaddy asked.

“My dad’s the CEO,” Joyner said looking relieved to see me.

“You’re a sophomore?” mom asked.

“Junior,” he answered.

Nana Taffy grunted in disapproval. “Hayley’s just a freshman, you know?”

“Yes, ma’am, but she’s very mature,” Joyner said. He looked at me pleadingly.

“Mature? High praise coming from a Junior in high school,” granddaddy said sarcastically.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s enough. You ready, Joyner?”

He nodded. “It was nice meeting all of you,” he said as I grabbed his arm and pulled him out the door.

I quickly shut the door and to my horror heard granddaddy say, “Kid’s too damn polite.” And mom said, “Cute, though.” My cheeks flushed red, I ushered Joyner to his truck.

On the way there, Joyner said, “I guess I can wait to see those owls.”

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“Owls” I asked.

“Your uncle’s pictures,” he answered.

I had completely forgotten. I nodded and walked faster.

Climbing into the front seat, I was disappointed, but not surprised to see Denise and Danny in the backseat of the king cab.

“Hello,” Denise said with a snarky tone.

“Hey,” I said frowning that she was practically sitting on his lap. She was an idiot and, until yesterday, my best friend. Part of me wanted to take her and shake some sense into her like my mom always threatened to do to me when I was acting like a brat. Danny didn’t care a thing for her. He was just hoping Denise was desperate enough to let him go a little further than most of the girls at the school were willing to let him go. He was a creep in the first degree. Anyone with any sense kept their distance from him.

Joyner climbed behind the wheel. I looked back at Denise and Danny and then back at him. Granddaddy said you can always judge a man by the company he keeps. It didn’t look too good for Joyner. Maybe Owen was right. I shouldn’t have agreed to the date.

As we pulled away, I saw a cop car coming down the street with Uncle Crew in the back seat. His head followed Joyner’s truck as we passed. I caught a glimpse of his eyes. He was not happy to see the truck.

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“You’re not eating,” Joyner said.

I smiled and took a bite of pizza out of obligation. I wasn’t hungry, and I wasn’t interested in eating, but for some strange reason, I didn’t want to be rude. To say I was uncomfortable would be the understatement of the century. I’ve felt more at ease sitting in a dentist chair waiting to have a cavity filled.

Pete’s Pizza Garage was far from a classy joint. It was an old auto repair shop that had been converted into a pizza place. Mufflers, rims, fenders, bumpers, anything car related hung on the walls. The wait staff dressed in mechanic uniforms and had rags hanging from their belts. Their shirts were decorated in flare galore. It was a sickening display of redneck kitsch.

Denise giggled as I took a small bite out of my slice. “Hayley is being so dainty. She usually eats like a pig.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” I said abruptly.

“O-M-G, chill,” she said smugly.

“Stop talking in letters. You’re not sending me a text message.” She exhausted me. The longer I sat with her in Pete’s watching her feed pizza to Danny and giggle at his stupid little jokes, the harder it was for me to remember why I was ever friends with her.

Joyner gently placed his hand on my forearm. “Let’s find another table.”

I nodded, grabbed my soda, avoided eye contact with Denise, and scooted out of the booth. Joyner followed carrying his own drink and a plateful of pizza. We found a booth at the other end

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of the restaurant and sat down.

“I shouldn’t have brought them along,” he said.

“I shouldn’t have come.”

“Still don’t trust me?”

I sipped on my soda. “I hate to admit it, but I want to trust you.”

“Why is that so bad?” he laughed.

“Those three men, they said ‘Teddy.’” I paused waiting for him to offer some sort of plausible explanation, but he didn’t so I continued. “It had to be you.”

“Because my name is Teddy?”

“Because your name is ‘Teddy, and you were the only one I told about my uncle’s... hobby.”

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s say it was me. Why would I send three men to break in to your uncle’s room, to steal Bigfoot stuff?”

I studied his face to see if he could possibly be acting. If he was, he was one of the best actors I’ve ever seen. “They were looking for a camera.”

“Camera?” He sounded insulted. “I can afford my own camera. Why would I hire three guys to steal your uncle’s camera?”

I didn’t how much I should tell him so I tried to change the subject. “Marsh-Joyner Lumber,” I said.

“Timber,” he corrected. “Marsh-Joyner Timber. Lumber deals in wood. Timber deals in trees.”

“Right,” I said. I thought about J-Rob’s Enders. Joyner’s family was in the timber business. It was one more piece of the puzzle that fit. I was sure now that I was sitting in a booth with the guy who’d sent three men to break into Uncle Crew’s room.

He picked up a piece of pizza and smelled it. He was about to take a bite, but stopped. “I have a confession,” he said.

My ears perked up. “I’m listening.”

“I did tell someone about your uncle’s interest in Bigfoot,” he

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said.

“What? Why didn’t you say something before?”

“I betrayed your confidence. That’s not something a boyfriend does.”

The word ‘boyfriend’ made my ears ring.

He must have noticed my shocked expression. “I know I’m not your boyfriend, but I was kind of hoping... you know, that things would move in that direction.”

“Who did you tell?” I said avoiding the awkward relationship question.

“My old man,” he said. “He and I don’t get along that well. We don’t connect on much. I’m not real proud of the family business. He resents me for it, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, we had this moment the other night where we actually seemed to be getting along. I was just looking for stuff to talk to him about, and before I knew it, I blurted out your uncle’s business.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What’s your father’s name?”

“T.J.,” he said. “Like me. I’m...” His face turned white. “I’m a junior.” He sat back in the booth. “No way.”

“Your dad sent Enders into Uncle Crew’s room to find Elizabeth Starling’s camera.”

“Not a chance... What’s an Ender?”

I gave him the definition and he shook his head. “It makes sense,” I said.

“My dad’s a lot of things,” he said nervously pushing the plate of pizza forward. “But he is not a crime boss. He runs a timber company. Before that, his dad ran it and his dad’s dad, and so on. You’re talking about... murder,” he whispered.

“Does anyone call him Teddy?” I asked.

He looked away.

“Joyner, does anyone call your father ‘Teddy.’”

“Yes,” he snapped. “My uncle.”

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“The one who robbed a convenience store?”

“Convenience store?” He looked at me as if I was crazy, and then his expression quickly softened. “Oh, that uncle, no. It’s a different one.” He shifted in his seat and moved in closer. “Does your uncle still have the camera?”

“No, he gave it to the police,” I said.

“The police?” he shouted. The other restaurant patrons looked at us. He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “Why would he give it to the police?”

“Because it’s evidence in a murder investigation,” I said sounding disgusted that he even had to ask.

“Right,” he said. “Of course.” He sipped his drink and stared at the plate of pizza.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“Huh,” he said coming out of his trance. “No, nothing, I’m just wondering what was on that camera.”

“Pictures,” I said.

“Duh,” he said almost with a smile.

“No, I didn’t mean that,” I said. “I meant I saw the pictures.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“What were they?”

I hesitated.

“C’mon,” he said leaning in. “You just told me my dad might have something to do with Elizabeth Starling’s murder. You can at least tell me what’s on the camera.”

I took a deep breath. This was wrong, but still, I felt sorry for him. I ignored a lot of red flags. Did he really expect me to believe he’d just remembered his father’s name was Teddy? Was I supposed to ignore the fact that he’s the benefactor of an industry that employs Enders? I couldn’t let myself forget that he’d betrayed my confidence. Still, he did have those blue eyes. Against my

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better judgment I said, “They’re just pictures of Little Grand Canyon and some other parts of the Shawnee National Forest. I downloaded them to my laptop.” As soon as I’d said the last part I regretted it. He didn’t need to know that.

“You did?” he asked excitedly.

“Ummm, yeah, but there’s really not much to see.”

He shrugged. “I heard a rumor that she took a picture of her killer.”

“Rumor?” I smiled. “No, but that would be convenient. There were just pictures of trees, and rocks, and owls.”

“Owls?”

“Yeah, that’s what she was looking for. They’re endangered. She was trying to protect their habitat from...”

“People like my dad,” he said.

“Basically.”

He rubbed his temple. “It doesn’t look too good for my old man.”

I considered for a moment telling him about the other pictures, the ones on J-Rob’s jump drive, but I decided against it. I was still having a hard time accepting that they could be real. “I’m sorry,” I said out of a sense of decorum. It sounded ridiculous coming out of my mouth. What a meager thing to offer, my apologies.

“Don’t be. It fits, like you said.” He dropped a fist to the table, and the silverware rattled. “Man, I knew he was a skunk, but a murderer... I just never would have thought he could do something like that.”

I found the acceptance of his father’s involvement as disturbing as his denial. I hated my dad, but I don’t think I could ever accept the fact that he took another human being’s life for something as insignificant as money.

As if he were reading my mind, Joyner said, “It’s not just about the money. I mean that’s not the only reason I could see

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him doing something like this. It's about the business. It's been in the family for 200 years. That's why we don't get along. I don't want to have anything to do with it, and he wants to prep me to take it over. He'd do just about anything..." He laughed. It was a cold desperate laugh. "Scratch that. He'll do anything to keep it at the top of the timber industry charts."

I reached out and placed my hand on his. "What are you going to do?"

He thought about the question. "Get you out of this."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he's sent thugs to your house already to look for that camera. He's not going to stop until he finds it."

"The police have it," I said.

He waved me off. "Dad's tight with the sheriff. He got him elected three times in a row. Believe me, that camera is going to disappear. You have to give me the pictures."

I was stunned by the request. "What?"

"I should be the one to bring him down," he said.

"But it's your dad," I said not knowing if I could do the same to my own jerk for a father. "I... I... I..." I was stammering because I didn't know what to do.

"Look, here's how I see it playing out. They took your uncle in for questioning, right?"

"Right," I said trying to remember if I had divulged that piece of information to him before.

"I'll bet you large pizzas for life that my good old dad is going to try and pin this whole thing on your crazy Uncle Crew."

I felt the goose bumps rise on my arms. "What do we do?"

"You do nothing. It has to come from me. You have to trust me on this one."

I nodded. I had no other choice. "Tomorrow. I'll meet you at the library. I'll bring you a jump drive with the pictures."

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“Two things,” he said taking my hand. “Tell no one.”

“Of course,” I said.

“And delete those pictures from your hard drive.”

I went cold. “Why?”

“For your own safety. I don’t want this connected to you at all. If anything were to happen to you...” he stopped and cleared his throat. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was holding back tears. But guys like Joyner don’t cry. Not over someone like me anyway. “Just promise me,” he said.

I nodded.

He smiled. “Looks like the family business ends with my dad.” He leaned back and stared off into space. My heart hurt for him. What a terrible thing it must be to know what a monster your father is. I vowed to myself never to complain just because mine never called. It seems things really could be worse.

Little did I know that they were about to.

The date, or whatever it was, was over Joyner drove me home and walked me to the front door. We attempted some awkward small talk until we ran out of even insignificant things to say. I don’t know what a boy looks like right before he kisses you. I’ve seen movies, and read books, but I still didn’t feel like I knew how things worked. I had no clue if the look in a boy’s eyes right before he kisses you was any different. Mostly I sensed that Joyner was calculating at what speed and velocity he should subtly move his head in close enough for me to be sucked into his the gravitational pull of his lips. That way, he couldn’t be blamed for making the first move. It was the forces of nature. His head crept closer and closer to mine. I think I heard him grunt when I leaned my head away.

He stood up straight and wiped his lips with his hand. “Let’s

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not,” he said.

“Let’s not what?” I said innocently.

He rolled his eyes because he knew that I knew exactly what he was talking about. “Kiss.”

“Oh,” I said, “I wasn’t aware I had asked you for a kiss.”

He smiled and placed his hand over his heart as if I had wounded him. “This was a weird night. I don’t want the first time we kiss to be associated with... you know.”

I nodded. I did know. He didn’t want our first kiss to be on the same day he found out his father had someone killed.

He walked down the porch steps and then spun around. “We will though. We have to. I’m going to be useless until we do.”

“Going to be useless?” I said kiddingly.

He laughed. “I’m glad we met, Hayley Wilkes.”

I blushed. He was a beautiful boy if ever there was one.

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I didn't delete the images from my computer. I thought about it. I even placed them in the desktop trashcan, but when the pop up window appeared asking me if I was sure I wanted to permanently delete the files, I clicked "No."

I placed them in a password protected folder and named the folder "quilting notes." I don't quilt. Have no interest in it, but I was hoping that most people going through my computer looking for pictures of endangered owls wouldn't think of looking in a folder about quilting.

I did put them on a flash drive for Joyner. I probably shouldn't have, but I did trust him... kind of. He seemed genuinely distraught to learn that it was probably his father who killed Elizabeth Starling, or had her killed. Still, there was a little gnawing in the back of my brain that screamed, "Trust no one." Maybe I watched too much TV and read too many books, but something told me that that the only person who really could protect me was me. My mom would be proud. That whole female empowerment thing she always went on about was sinking in, but this wasn't about being strong. It was about being unsure of who to trust, and what the right thing to do was.

I broke out my mom's seldom used Schwinn. She'd bought it right after the divorce was finalized. It was the first of many exercise initiatives that lost steam in a matter of weeks. She didn't need them anyway. The stress of being a single mom had kicked in, and the pounds just started to fall off.

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I left without telling anyone where I was going. There would be questions. Why on earth would I be going to the library of my own free will on a Saturday? I love the library, but it's not exactly where the cool kids hang out on the weekends.

I practiced lying to Joyner as I peddled clumsily (I didn't ride a bike that often) across town. He was going to ask me if I deleted the pictures from my computer, and it was important that I be convincing. He had to believe me beyond the shadow of a doubt. I should have felt bad for lying to him, but instead I felt justified. My computer, my life, I could do whatever I wanted. And if I was brave, I would just tell Joyner exactly that. But I wasn't, so I wouldn't.

I pulled up in front of the historic library and squeezed the handbrakes until the tires slid on the sidewalk. The bike came to jolting stop.

Joyner was sitting on the tailgate of his truck. He wore orange tinted sunglasses that made him look like a rock star. I almost lost my resolve when I saw him. I had this weird inclination to confess all my sins. I didn't delete the images. I'm such a bad person. I swear I didn't mean to lie to you.

He hopped off the tailgate and approached me. "Got 'em?"

I reached in my pocket and handed him the jump drive.

"You deleted them from your laptop?"

"Yep," I said. I decided yep sounded happy enough to be true and short enough for me not to mess up. It was quick, and I could make it sound convincing.

He nodded. "Good. Good." He breathed in deeply. "I can't believe this, you know? I had some time to think it over last night. This is a big pile of festering crap my dad has gotten us into." He clinched his fist. "Damn! He's a real bastard." He huffed. "I've got to see it."

I furrowed my brow. "See what?"

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“Where she died... where my father had her killed.”

I stood with my mouth agape.

“I know,” he said. “It doesn’t make any sense. I just feel like... it will help put things in perspective.”

“I don’t think you should.”

“Oh, yeah, I know. I definitely shouldn’t do it, but I am.” He rubbed his hands together and smiled. “Want to go with me?”

My left eyebrow went up. Not because he asked me to go with him, but because I did want to go. I didn’t say a word. I rode my bike to his truck and lifted my mom’s Schwinn into the bed. I looked back at him still standing in front of the library. “Let’s go,” I shouted.

His iPod was mounted to the dashboard of the truck and feeding into his truck’s sound system. *Meet the Creeper* by Rob Zombie was blaring through the eight speakers hidden throughout the truck’s cab. It was a hard driving beat that unsettled me. Zombie probably would have been proud of himself for giving me the willies. It wasn’t just the song. It was listening to the song while riding in a truck headed for the scene of a murder and, I have to admit, being in a truck with a murderer’s son. How far does the acorn fall from the tree and all that. You can’t help but think about that kind of stuff.

We pulled into the gravel top parking lot in an area called the “Illinois State Little Grand Canyon Picnic Grounds.” Sycamore trees lined the small circular area. The truck came to a crunching stop on the loose rocks. I got out and stood by the door, keeping it open. I knew when I closed it I would be at the point of no return. I could crawl back into the cab and tell Joyner to go on without me. He wouldn’t blame me. And I wanted to do just that, but without thinking, I reached out and pushed the door

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shut. When I heard the sound of the perfectly fitted door click into place, I knew not going was no longer an option. I stepped to the front of the truck and scanned the woods.

“This is the place?”

He nodded. “I heard this is where they found the body anyway. It was moved here. They found her over there on that picnic table,” he said pointing to a table to the left, surrounded by three crisscrossing trees.

“The body was moved,” I said.

“Yep, they’re pretty sure.”

“Why?”

“They don’t know for sure,” he said, “but I’ve got a pretty good idea... that is if my dad really is responsible.”

“What?” I asked trying to sound sensitive more than anxious, but I’m not sure I pulled it off.

“That picnic table, this parking area, they’re on state land.”

“So?”

“So, someone’s murdered on federal land, federal agencies get involved. Someone’s murdered on state land, state and local authorities get involved. Told you, my dad pretty much owns the cops, state troopers, too. Don’t know for sure, but I’m fairly sure he has a lot less influence over the FBI.”

I felt a knot in my stomach, and I swallowed the lump building in my throat. “Your dad sounds like a great guy,” I said with disdain. “So, if not here, where was she killed?”

He pointed to the well-worn mouth of a trail at the center of the gravel parking cul-de-sac. “Federal land. If I’m right, I mean.” He walked to the back of his truck, opened a large cooler and pulled out a backpack. “Hike? Got a first aid kit, flashlights, water, and trail mix for two, and...” He reached in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “I got a cool GPS program on my cell phone.”

I looked at him like he had three heads. “Why did you pack

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for two?”

He shrugged. “I had a hunch.”

“Uh-huh,” I smiled. I was wearing a thin t-shirt with a heavy sweatshirt. It was enough for now, but I was pretty sure that if the temperature dropped just a few degrees, it would be too cold for me. I didn’t want to be stuck in the woods freezing my butt off. “No coat,” I said folding my arms over my chest emphasizing the nip in the air.

He grinned, opened the toolbox affixed to the front of the truck bed and pulled out two camouflage jackets. “I literally got you covered.” He tossed me one of the coats. I clumsily caught it and stared at it. “It’s clean,” he said.

I shoved my arms through the sleeves and pulled the coat over my shoulders. I inadvertently caught a whiff of something. It was Joyner’s scent. I held the lapel to my nose and breathed deeply.

“Smell?” he asked.

Embarrassed, I said, “No... not at all.” I clapped my hands. “What’s the plan?”

He tied his coat around his waist and put the backpack on. “We look for high places. According to the paper she was beaten up pretty badly. I say we look for a cliff that isn’t straight down. The way I figure it, she must have bounced and flopped down a good ways before landing.”

I closed my eyes and shut my mind off to the thought of Elizabeth Starling plunging to her death down a jagged rock face. I cleared my throat.

“Sorry, that wasn’t very sensitive.”

I opened my eyes. “That’s fine. Let’s do this.” I walked to the head of the path. I turned to see Joyner still standing by his truck. “What are you doing?”

“I’m allowed to have second thoughts, aren’t I?” he asked

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tapping his foot anxiously.

“Girl,” I said with a playful tone.

He gripped the shoulder straps of the backpack and jogged after me. We entered the woods together, neither one of us prepared for what we were about to find.

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My dad gave me one useful thing before leaving our family. He gave me a keen awareness of that “hinky” feeling. As a lawyer, he’d honed his ability to sense when things weren’t quite right. As he would put it, “Something fowl was afoot.” (Did I mention he’s a huge dufus?) He called it that hinky feeling. And as useless as he was as a father, it was probably the most useful skill he could have taught me. It’s always good for a girl to know when a crap storm is about to hit.

I started getting that hinky feeling about a half mile into our hike into the Little Grand Canyon area. Something was not right. I couldn’t tell you what that something was, but there was a gnawing in my gut that told me something foul was afoot. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and there were a few instances where I felt like somebody was watching me. Joyner was in front of me so it couldn’t have been him.

Now, I was on a trek to find where a woman was murdered recently, so it is possible my mind was playing tricks on me, but my dad insisted that the hinky feeling never lies to you. He called it our survival sense. When we were cavemen dodging leopards in the jungle, those of us who listened to our hinky feeling stayed off the dinner menu.

My hinky-ness wasn’t entirely based on blind instinct. There are unidentified noises in the woods that come at you from virtually every direction. The dry bedding of the forest crackles and crunches when creatures big and small scattered upon hearing our

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heavy footfalls on the path. Thin branches all around us whipped and fluttered in the brisk breeze. And the towering trees swayed, throwing shadows from side to side. At times it even seemed as though the forest was alive.

Joyner must have sensed the same thing because a few times he stopped and silently held out his hand signaling me to stop and be quiet. His head snapped from left to right as he scanned the woods for signs of... something.

We stopped at a bend in the path near a huge boulder, taking a seat and breaking out the water. He was the first to mention the uneasy feeling.

“Something’s not right.”

I gulped from my water bottle and nodded. “I know.”

“I get the feeling we’re being watched.”

I looked through the low hanging branches of smaller trees directly in front of us. “I hear ya. I’ve had the feeling for about a quarter mile now.”

“Probably deer or something.”

“Stalking us?” I smirked.

“Stalking is a strong word.”

“Okay, following us,” I replied.

“Squirrel then,” he said.

“Squirrels never made me feel this way,” I avoided eye contact with him. I felt humiliated for feeling like a scared little girl.

“What way?”

I shrugged. “Anxious.”

He nodded. “Me, too.” He smiled and started laughing.

“What?”

“Maybe it’s Bigfoot...”

Just as the words left his mouth a howling cry echoed through the trees. My heart beat so hard and fast that it nearly cracked my sternum.

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Joyner stood and took on an attack posture, his hands were gnarled and ready to form fists, and his knees were bent. He did a 360 degree turn. “What the hell was that?”

I wasn’t aware of it until I looked down that I had placed my hand over my chest. I’m not sure if I was even breathing. I gasped. “We should go back.”

He forced himself to look more relaxed. “No... We’re just overreacting. It’s the wind or something”

“I really think we should go,” I said.

“No,” he insisted. “We’re here. Let’s just keep going.”

“We don’t even know what we’re looking for..”

“Shut up!” he barked. “We’re not going back!”

I looked at him hurt and alarmed. I stood in a huff and started my way back up the trail.

“I’m sorry,” he said coming up behind me. “I didn’t mean it. I... It’s just that this is important to me.”

I tried to keep going, but he grabbed my arm roughly and turned me around. “Let go!”

“No,” he said. “Please. I have to do this, and I need you with me.”

I slowly relaxed under his tight grip. I’m not a fan of anyone telling me to shut up, but this couldn’t be easy for him. I felt somewhat responsible for making him see the truth, that his father was more than a corrupt corporate executive. He was a monster. I flared my nostrils and blew out all my frustration and anger. I eased myself from his grip. “Okay.”

He smiled uncomfortably and invited me to walk in front of him. His demeanor was different. He wasn’t the cool, laidback Joyner who had entered the woods with me. He was spooked.

I apprehensively led the way. The feeling of being watched didn’t go away, and now I was also feeling troubled by my choice of company. I looked over my shoulder on more than one occasion,

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and noticed him looking at his watch. It may have been my imagination, but it almost seemed like he was late for something.

“So,” he said after about a mile of saying nothing, “did you really delete those pictures from your computer?”

“I said I did, didn’t I?” I was irritated by the question. Frankly, I didn’t see how it was any of his business.

“Good,” he said. “That helps a lot.”

I stopped and turned to him. “Helps?”

“Yeah, helps ease my mind... about your safety.”

“You’re acting strange,” I said.

“Me?” His upper lip twitched. “No, I’m not. What are you talking about?”

I was about to explain what I meant when I noticed a thick tangle of branches move in the woods just over his left shoulder.

He heard it and spun around on his heels. “Wha...!” he wheezed.

A series of loud noises followed, like somebody was crashing through the woods at a very fast pace.

“Somebody’s jerking us around,” he said.

A guttural hoot responded to the sound of his voice.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“C’mon, has to be,” he insisted.

There was another series of thwacks and crunches from the other side of the trail.

“We should really go back,” I pleaded.

He looked as if he was just about to agree when his cell phone rang. We both almost jumped out of our skin at the incredibly intrusive sound of it. He quickly reached in his pocket and pulled out the phone. He looked at the LCD readout, grimaced and then answered the phone. “Yeah... just about... I know... No... I’ve got it... No...”

A dull thudding sound came from the trail in front of us.

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“Joyner...” I said with a shiver running down my spine. One look at him and I could see he was just as terrified as me.

“Where are you?” he asked the person on the phone. “Do you hear that?”

I looked at him confused. Why would the person on the phone be hearing what we’re hearing?

“Let’s just do this now,” he said. “I don’t care what my dad said!” he growled.

I backed away. “What about your dad?”

“Okay... okay... five minutes.” He looked at me with a restless expression. “She deleted them.” He hung up the phone.

“Who was that?” I said still backing away.

“You probably shouldn’t ask so many questions,” he said putting the phone back in his pocket.

“Why?”

He gritted his teeth. “Because it’s really starting to annoy the piss out of me.”

I felt the blood drain from my face, and my knees started to shake. His tone was creepy, and his eyes cold. “What?”

“There you go again,” he said rushing me and clamping both his hands around my upper arms. He shook me. “More questions!” Spittle flew from his mouth as he spoke. “You couldn’t really believe that I was into you, could you?”

“I don’t understand,” I said fighting the urge to break down and cry my eyes out.

“This last week has been torture. I’m T.J. friggin Joyner. I shouldn’t be wasting my time with someone like you.” He released me and backed away wiping the saliva from the corner of his mouth. “But you had to have a freaky-ass uncle who decided to play around with his little Bigfoot games in our woods. And then there was that woman... these are our woods!” He shouted smacking his chest with the palm of his hand.

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“You were just using me to find out about my uncle,” I said. It wasn’t a question. It was a statement that I had to hear myself say to believe it. The popular boy didn’t like me. How could he?

“My old man said I had to do it for the family business. Trust me, I tried like hell to get out of it. He didn’t know what your uncle was up to. What he had to do with that old Starling hag. All he knew was that he had her camera. I was supposed to work my way into your good graces and get the camera before he turned it over to the authorities, but I just couldn’t take it.”

“You did send those men to my uncle’s.”

“When your dad has more money than God you can afford some muscle to break a few laws for you,” he said.

I forced a laugh. “Well, you’re out of luck because Uncle Crew already turned the camera over to the authorities.”

He laughed back. “How many times do I have to tell you that my old man owns the cops? As long as good old Uncle Crew didn’t get it to the feds then we’re golden.”

I shook my head. “You’re so stupid. It was a digital camera genius. Uncle Crew’s probably got copies all over the place.”

He sneered. “Darlin’, your uncle is about to do some very bad things. When we get through with him, a picture of a couple of stupid owls won’t mean a thing.” The grin vanished and he slapped me so hard I felt my jaw pop. The metallic taste of blood quickly filled my mouth.

A fierce high-pitched wail came from very close by. It sent violent vibrations on the wind that rattled my bones. This time I saw the blood drain from Joyner’s face. He felt it, too.

He shoved me. “Move!”

I stumbled forward. In addition to the feeling of being followed, I felt deceived. I was so mad at myself I started grinding my teeth. I could practically feel the enamel being filed away. What was I thinking?

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We reached a steep incline in the path and I struggled to scramble up, stepping on exposed tree roots and rocks along the way. Joyner wasn't patient with me at all. He blew his top and slammed me to the ground at one point. When I reached the top of the climb, I turned and saw Joyner having the same difficulty I did. I laughed, and then stopped abruptly. I spotted a flat rock on the ground about the size of the palm of my hand. I quickly picked it up and cupped it in my hand.

Breathing heavily, Joyner reached the top of the incline and smiled. "I can't believe you're so stupid. You had the perfect opportunity to run. Why didn't you?"

I shrugged. "Because then I wouldn't get a chance to do this," I said raising my hand and smashing the rock into his temple. He tumbled backwards down the small hill. I stood with my mouth wide open, surprised at my accuracy and power. I wanted to jump up and down and scream in celebration, but time was of the essence. I turned up the path and ran as fast as my legs would go.

The world around me disappeared. I was focused on getting away. The feeling of being watched was gone. The cold air didn't chill me as it had before. The sounds of the woods gave way to the sound of my own labored breathing as I glided across the rugged path. I ran until I felt as if my lungs would burst. I stopped, bent over, and placed my hands on my knees. I attempted to collect enough energy to run even farther. I had no idea how far I had gotten away from Joyner. Maybe he wasn't conscious. Maybe... maybe I killed him. I imagined I had even heard a crack when the rock met his skull. Just as I was trying to decide if it was a bad thing if I killed Joyner, I heard him call out.

"Bitch!"

Judging by the short echo that followed, I guessed I had put a good distance between us, but not enough. I turned to put more between us, but my legs wobbled. I was spent.

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“I’m coming!”

I panicked. I had the distinct feeling that if he caught me he was going to return the beat down I just gave him. I staggered off the path and made my way through the thick underbrush. It was slower going, but I had lost my speed anyway. Cover was my only chance.

I headed up the steep incline pulling myself along using the trunks of the trees. My legs had no strength, but I forced myself to keep going.

“Hayley!” Joyner called. He was farther away.

I stopped and crouched down, hid myself behind one of the bulkier tree trunks. The path was 150 feet away, but I had a good view. I scanned the skinny dirt vein, and gasped when I saw Joyner walking with a noticeable sway. His hand covered his bruised temple. I reveled in his pain. He stopped at one point, and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He pushed a single button and seconds later I thought I heard an annoying little cell phone tone ringing further up the hill behind me. I turned, but given the faintness of the tone, I knew it was a considerable distance away.

“Dude,” Joyner said. I had to lean in and control my breathing to hear his end of the conversation. Luckily, I had pissed him off enough that he was yelling. I may have even damaged his hearing with the rock. I imagine he was experiencing an annoying ringing in at least one ear. “She bolted... I know... yes... stop yelling at me! She bashed me with a rock and split... nearly cracked my skull open... she’s headed your way. I’ll keep driving her your way... call me when you have her. Don’t do anything to her until I get there. Bitch is going to pay for what she did to me.” He put the phone in his pocket and continued down the path.

He reached the area where I had entered the woods and was about to pass unnoticed when a baseball-sized rock landed just a few feet in front of him. He jumped and then bent down and

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examined the rock. He roared with laughter.

“That was a weak-ass throw, Hayley,” he screamed in the direction the rock had come from. “You gotta do better than that.”

A smaller rock popped out of the forest and smashed into his shoulder. He grabbed the spot and wheeled to his left.

“Hey!”

I looked past him and tried to see who was throwing the rocks, but the best I could do was make out some movement that could have been a stiff wind.

“Come out, Hayley!”

A group of small trees in the distance shook.

“If I have to come in there...” He stopped suddenly and placed his arm over his face. “Oh, damn! What is that smell?” He stepped back.

A whistle came out of the woods.

He flinched at the sound, and then rose up on his toes, slowly extending his neck. “What...” He huffed, and then without another word bolted up the trail.

Something crashed through the woods after him. I caught a faint whiff of the odor he must have smelled. It was putrid. Sweat and crap and mildew all rolled into one. Only slightly less offensive than a skunk.

I stood, brushing off the debris of the forest floor from my pants. I worked my way down the hill, watching for Joyner to return at any moment. I stopped several times to monitor the sounds of the forest. Each step I took felt like something was matching me step for step, but when I stopped and let things settle, there was nothing but dead silence. The smell lingered a bit, and that didn’t help my nerves.

Just before stepping onto the path, I waited for several minutes, listening for the sound of Joyner’s footsteps.

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I took a deep breath and stepped on the flat surface of the path, immediately spotting one of the rocks that had been thrown at Joyner. I reached down and picked it up. It was heavy. I can't believe he thought I had thrown it. I looked in the direction the rocks had been thrown. Visibility was at least 20 feet in. Whoever threw it had an arm like Mark Buehrle (my granddaddy's favorite pitcher in the major leagues).

I was wiping my hands together to get rid of the grit and grime from the rock when I heard a bloodcurdling scream. This was different than the other noises that were coming from the forest. I knew who was screaming this time. It was Joyner. My first instinct was to laugh because Mr. Cool was screeching like a little girl, but it occurred to me shortly thereafter that Mr. Cool was screeching like a little girl because he was afraid for his life.

The sound of footsteps that I had expected earlier finally came. Joyner appeared over a small ridge, and was tearing toward me like a madman. He was running so fast I gave up any thoughts of trying to get away. He would catch me with no problem. I tripped over a root as I looked for a place to stand. I don't know what I was even looking for, maybe for a soft place to fall when he clobbered me like I had clobbered him. I could hear the sound of his erratic breathing as he approached. He was whimpering while we was running, maybe even muttering, I could swear I even heard him say "help me," over and over again.

He got to me and kept going. I'm not even sure he saw me even though I was in plain view, just inches away from him. I could have stuck my foot out and tripped him. He zoomed past me, and a different odor assaulted me. A brown spot on the back of his pants quickly solved the mystery of this new foul stench.

I turned back to look at who... or what was chasing him and saw just the glimpse of a shadow over the ridge as it broke through the forest border and cracked, and snapped the foliage. It

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disappeared into the gloom of the dense woods. The sound of thunderous footsteps running through the thick collection of trees, shrubs, and ferns echoed around me.

I was too confused by the events to be scared. I even smiled at one point. I tried to wrap my mind around the events of the last 30 minutes, but I couldn't quite come to terms with any of it. Joyner's behavior, the noises, the smell, it was all so unexpected and foreign that I didn't want to believe it. I whispered a single word, and headed up the trail, away from Joyner and his stalker. That word was, "Bigfoot."

I spotted Joyner's backpack at a small set of stone steps that led up to a short winding path adjacent to the main path. I sat down on one of the stones and hurriedly unzipped the pack. The water bottle touched my lips before it even registered in my clouded mind that I had pulled it out.

It could not have been Bigfoot. Bigfoot is not real. That was ridiculous. Even Uncle Crew said it wasn't real.

"What was it then?" I asked myself.

Bear, I thought. Are there bears around here? I had never heard of any. Deer. I laughed and silently berated myself. It was chasing him, you idiot. Deer don't chase people. It had to be somebody who followed us here. Had to be. There was no other answer. Who?

I took another swig of water and went stiff when I heard voices. Water dripped down my chin as I pulled the bottle away from mouth. Men. Headed toward me. I scooped up the backpack and ran for cover in the woods. I slipped and staggered up the hill and collapsed to the ground behind a large beech tree. My breathing was shallow. My heart was beating in my throat. I fought to stay quiet. Their voices grew louder.

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“... should have never gotten him involved,” I heard one of them say. A sandy blond head of hair was barely visible through the tangle of branches that helped hide me from view. “He’s not up to it. He’s just a kid, for Christ sake.”

“Not up to us,” another one said. This one wore a ratty Cubs baseball cap. “Boss man says bring him in, we bring him in. He’s got a thing about teaching the kid how the business really works.”

“Where is he?” the third and last one said. I got a glimpse of chubby rosy red cheeks.

Sandy blond said, “No telling and I guarantee we’re going to catch hell because the little prince screwed the pooch on this one.”

“Teddy’s cool,” the Cubs fan said. “He’ll come through for us.”

Chubby cheeks chuckled. “You’re dreaming. This whole thing is stupid. We should have just torched the Bigfoot guy’s place when we had a chance.”

“Boss man wanted to know what he was up to,” Cubs fan replied. “If he’s a fed, we’re in for a world of hurt.”

“He ain’t a fed,” sandy laughed. “Guys off his friggin rocker.”

I held my breath as they passed. I was a good fifteen feet off the trail, and I was pretty sure they couldn’t see me without really looking, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

“Bringing the girl out here was stupid,” Chubby cheeks said.

“Part of the setup” the Cubs fan said. “A lot of caves out here to hide a body...”

That was the last thing I heard them say. I forgot to breathe after they were long gone. When I exhaled, a rush of hot air released from my mouth in one long puff. I started to see white spots and my head began to spin. I feared I was passing out. I shook my head and righted myself. Passing out was not an option, not with three guys in the woods looking to hide a body in a cave, and certainly not with some... thing lurking in the woods, stalking

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humans.

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It was night before I knew it. I decided to stay off the trail and move in the opposite direction of all the other people and things that were heading for the parking area. Which meant I was hopelessly lost, and traveling on foot in the dark in an area that was known for its sheer cliffs and sudden drop offs... not smart.

I found a downed tree, sat down, and allowed myself to really cry for the first time since this whole thing had started. I wasn't sure what I had done to deserve all this, but it wasn't fair. I minded my own business... most of the time. I was nice to people... most of the time, and I wasn't an annoying snot-nosed brat... most of the time. Yet, here I was in the middle of some freaky karma crap fest.

And I wasn't just worried about me. My whole family was probably in danger. They had no idea. This thought made me angry, and I immediately stopped crying. If Joyner and his goons did anything to my family, I would make them pay.

I yawned, and it surprised me. How could I be tired? Men were looking for me, bad men. I was pretty sure they wanted to kill me and hide my body in a cave. Being sleepy didn't seem like an appropriate response. I stretched out on the tree and laid flat. I stared up through the tree tops and watched the powdery gray clouds zoom across the darkening sky. A few dim stars sparkled and flickered. My eyelids grew heavy and within a matter of minutes I drifted off into a surprisingly deep and relaxing sleep.

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I felt something. Not physically. I was aware of something as I started to wake. I was awake before my eyes opened. I kept them closed trying to assess if I had dreamt everything. I wasn't in the woods. Joyner wasn't a bad guy. He was cool and totally madly in love with me.

I opened one eye and in my unfocused state I thought I saw the figure of a man standing over me. I jerked and screamed, falling to the ground. I heard a commotion, or thought I did. It could have been me hitting the ground with a thud. Blinking and rubbing my eyes, I looked for the man, but he wasn't there.

It was darker. There was no moon and a thick cloud cover had settled in over the area. The temperature felt like it had dropped 20 degrees. If I could've seen past my face, I bet I would have seen my breath. I dug through the backpack and found a flashlight. I turned it on and immediately clicked it off. It was impossibly bright. If someone was traipsing through the woods looking for me, the flashlight was a dead give away to my position. I might as well just jump up and down and scream, "I'm over here!"

Caves. Sandy haired guy had said something about caves. Anything was better than sitting out in the open freezing. A cave had to be warmer. At the very least it would protect me from the chilly wind.

I stepped carefully through the woods hanging on to trees each step of the way. The ground could disappear at any moment. I had no idea where I was. For all I knew, I was near one of Little Grand Canyon's cliffs. I didn't want to plummet to my death trying to avoid being killed by Joyner and his three thugs.

The night brought more than dipping temperatures. It brought a deep, deep sense of creepiness. I'd never felt smaller in my entire life, while at the same time I barely had room to walk through

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the thick underbrush, and I felt like the forest was vast and never-ending. I would never find my way out.

Not to mention that the feeling of being watched was back. This time it felt like a thousand eyes were on me. I was an alien in the woods. I didn't belong, and because of that I brought on a great deal of curiosity from every creature big and small. The small I didn't mind. It was the big things I just as soon do without.

I found a rock face. I reached out and touched it gingerly at first, and then patted it excitedly. I was closer to a cave. I walked my hands down the cold, pitted surface, using it as a guide in the darkness. It felt like a small thing, but I couldn't have asked for a better stroke of luck. I was basically roaming blind through the woods. Finding this rock face gave me some hope that I would make it until morning.

The rock was covered in a thick slimy moss that alarmed me. It almost felt like a furry animal in spots. The last thing I needed was to reach out and grab something that had the potential of grabbing me back.

The rock face ended. I stepped away from it and extended my arms out, hoping that there was just a gap in the cliff. If there was, then that gap could have been a cave. I reached and slid my feet forward and reached, and slid forward some more. Nothing. Exasperated, I pulled the flashlight from the backpack. Closing my eyes, I prayed that turning it on wouldn't attract the wrong kind of attention. Eyes open, I engaged the switch. The beam stretched across a small clearing and bounced off a thicket of trees. A pair of green eyes turned and disappeared just as the light hit them. I gasped loudly and stood stiff as a statue.

I felt a tiny jolt beneath my feet and heard a pop. I started to sink. Looking down, I could see the earth slowly rise above my feet. It took a second or two to determine what was happening. "Sink hole," I whispered. As soon as I said the words, the slow

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steady sinking turned into a sudden drop. The ground beneath me was gone. I fell and violently crashed onto a much harder surface about twelve feet below. The wind vacated my lungs, and I involuntary tried to suck it back in, making a pained groaning sound. I couldn't breathe. Terror engulfed me as I could not foresee ever being able to breathe again. I slapped the ground, and tugged on my collar. Slowly the tightness in my chest relaxed, and the oxygen I so longed for crept back into my lungs. My groaning gave way to a raspy pant, and then a series of hearty puffs.

As I breathed out deeply, the warm air smacked me in the face. That didn't seem right. How could I breathe on my own face? The cave was pitch black. The gaping hole over my head leaked no light. There was none to be leaked. Another hot blast of air hit me in the face. I probed the ground looking for the flashlight, I was holding when I fell. Where was it? I quickly moved my hands across the muddy cave floor. Another dose of hot air hit me. I had been so consumed with trying to breathe, that I didn't notice the stench in the cave. The hot air blasts reeked even more. Crap, moldy dirt and dead rodent danced on the waves of the lethal fumes. I wanted to puke my guts up.

My hand struck something metal, tube shaped. The flashlight, still on, but buried in dirt. With a shaky hand, I grabbed it and hoisted the beam of light in the direction of the explosions of hot air.

A face grimaced in the bright light just inches from my own face. The skin was dark grayish, leathery. The eyes, big brown orbs hidden under a thick brow ridge. The nose was more nostrils than anything else, but there was a tiny bulb of leathery flesh that protruded at the end of the bridge. The mouth was cast down in a large frown. Wiry hair outlined the grotesque face.

I screamed as if I were trying to break my vocal chords, and

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the... creature, monster, ape... Bigfoot matched the pitch of my scream and bolted to the left, disappearing in an instant.

I was too scared to move even my head. I stared straight ahead, not wanting to see that face again, and certainly not wanting to see the rest of the thing that was attached to that face. Eventually, I managed to shift my eyes to the left. If I happened to hear a noise, I would shift them back to a dead ahead position.

And it did make noises. At first, it broke out into a frantic whimpering. As unbelievable as it sounds, it was as terrified by me as I was of it. As time passed, it calmed and let out a subdued hoot. I muffled a scream by biting down on my lower lip. Soon after that, I could hear it walking, and thankfully, it seemed to be moving away from me.

I pushed myself up against the cave wall, wincing in pain as I did. The fall had jolted my lower back. I felt like I had been hit with a sledge hammer. Fully upright, I turned the flashlight to the left, the... thing was nowhere in sight. I whispered "Thank God," and turned the flashlight to the right. The cave continued past the end of the beam of light. Given that a monster didn't head that way, I determined that was the direction for me. I scanned the ground for the backpack, located it, strapped it on, and then hobbled through the cave.

A little voice in my head said, "You just saw Bigfoot."

I snickered like that was a ridiculous notion.

"What was it then?"

I shook my head because I didn't want to think about it. If enough time passed, I might even be able to convince myself that it was nothing. It was an illusion. Shadows bounced off the cave walls when I turned the flashlight on. My eyes were adjusting, that was it. Plus, I'm out in the friggin woods by myself in the middle of the night. There are killers chasing me. How could I not imagine horrible monsters lurking in the darkness?

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“This was right in front of your face, idiot?”

“Shut up!” I yelled. The sound of it echoed through the cave. I clamped my hand over my mouth. I was going crazy. I was talking to myself. More than that, I was yelling at myself. I managed to giggle at that. Only I would be unsupportive and critical of myself at a moment like this.

The cave was huge. It twisted and turned and dipped for what seemed like miles, but it only seemed like that because I wanted to find a way out in the worst way. It was warmer than being out in the elements underneath the bitterly cold sky, but I wasn't wild about the creatures that possibly lived in the cave. Beyond the thing I may or may have not seen earlier, caves were full of spiders, bats, and virtually every other creepy crawly that ever crept and crawled. I'd much prefer to freeze than run into anything else that considered this cave its home.

I squeezed through a short narrow pathway and stood in a vast cathedral section of the cave, it must have been 20 feet in diameter, and the top of it was too high to measure. At the opposite end of the large cavern, I could see an opening. It was smallish, maybe half my height. But what it lacked in height, it made up for in width. It must have been 10 or 12 feet wide. It looked like a mouth.

I scurried across the large exposed area and headed for the opening. When I reached it, I breathed a sigh of relief and stooped to exit, but stopped suddenly when I heard a noise. It was unidentifiable at first, and I couldn't tell if it was coming from inside or outside the cave. I knelt down and shined the flashlight through the opening. I heard the noise again. It was a sniffle, like someone had a cold or... was crying.

“Hayley?” a voice echoed.

I snapped my head around and saw a figure sitting on the cave floor.

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“Is that you?”

I shined the flashlight in that direction and was relieved and angered to see Joyner. It was good to see another human being even if it was a human being I detested. It didn't escape me that I wouldn't be in this situation if it weren't for him.

He squinted against the light. “Tell me it's you?” he cried like a baby.

“It's me,” I said. “Thought you left.”

“I ran into the woods to get away from that... thing. I got lost.” He wiped the snot running from his nose on his sleeve. “They're Bigfoot things, aren't they?”

“They?”

“I've seen two of them at least,” he said.

I pulled some water out of the backpack and drank.

“Give me some,” he said.

I hesitated.

“C'mon, I'm thirsty.”

I tossed him the bottle. “Crying will do that to you.”

He drank without bothering to respond to my insult.

“See ya',” I said turning toward the opening.

“Wait,” he said swallowing with some difficulty. He had a brief coughing fit. “Where are you going?”

“As far away from you as possible,” I said.

“Don't be like that...” He reached out to touch me.

“You touch me and so help me God I'll scream my head off.”

He smirked. “Who's going to hear you?”

“Those things out there.”

His smirk melted away. He held up his hand like he was surrendering. “Okay, okay. Just thought we could pool our resources.”

“You tried to kill me!” I shouted

“Wha... no, no, no... it was my dad. Look, I didn't want to do

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this, but he said I had to do it for the family. He said it's just the way business works. I wasn't going to hurt you. I swear."

"You hit me."

"I know, and I feel really bad about that. It's just that I'm really confused. He's my dad, you know? I'm not thinking straight. But I swear I was doing it for show more than anything. I had to convince Jackie and the other guys that I was going to go through with it."

"Your friends weren't anywhere around when you hit me."

He looked for an answer. "Look, I'm sorry. Please don't leave me." I saw the water bottle trembling in his hand. I couldn't for the life of me remember why he was so cool and sought after.

"You're unbelievable."

He looked away in shame.

I put my hands on my hips and dropped my chin to my chest. Shaking my head, I looked up and said, "You get within five feet of me and I'll kick you in the nuts so hard you'll pray that those things find you and put you out of your misery. Understand me?"

He nodded and smiled appreciatively.

I stooped down and prepared to exit the cave.

"Wait! What are you doing?" he asked.

I grunted. "Leaving, Einstein. What's it look like I'm doing?"

"But you can't go out there. Those things are out there."

I laughed. "I got news for you. They're in here, too."

"What?"

"Saw one back there..."

He was out of the cave before I finished my sentence. I calmly crawled out and stood at the mouth of the cave. It took me a few seconds to find him standing behind a fat tree. He held onto it like he was a toddler clinging to his mother's legs. He was practically hyperventilating.

"You have to get a hold of yourself," I said. "You can't be so

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skittish.”

“I’m scared,” he said hugging the tree tighter.

“Really?” I said sarcastically. “Because you’re acting like a regular tough guy G.I. Joe.”

“I am?”

“No, you idiot. You’re the biggest Nancy I’ve ever seen. I thought you were some big jock, some ladies man, Mr. Suave, Mr. Cool.”

“What makes you so tough?” he asked with just a hint of resentment.

I thought about the question and then answered, “My mother.” I turned off the flashlight, and Joyner actually screamed.

“What are you doing?”

“Your friends still out here?”

“Turn on the flashlight,” he begged.

“Answer me.”

“What?”

“Are you friends still out here?”

“I don’t know... I guess... probably. They wouldn’t go back without me. My old man would kill them.”

“The light stays off.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because your friends will see it and, while being lost in the woods with a jerk like you is not high on my list of fun things to do, running into your friends would be even worse.”

“We need the light,” he insisted.

“Yep, we do,” I said walking into the tree line.

“I swear I’ll protect you if Jackie and the others find us.”

I stopped and stared at him through the darkness. “Don’t jerk me around, Joyner. The only reason you’re being so agreeable and nice is because you’re afraid to be alone in the woods with those things running around. As soon as we meet up with Jackie

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and the boys, I'm as dead as you had planned to make me a few hours ago."

"That's not true..."

"Shut up!" I screamed. My voice bounced around the woods and nearby canyon. "So help me... I'm going to get us back to your truck and you're going to drive me home."

"What then?" he asked.

I grimaced in frustration. "I haven't thought that far ahead."

As he was about to say something, a long dejected groan drifted out of the cave opening. My stomach tied in knots. "Move," I said although it was unnecessary because Joyner was already moving so fast he was practically out of sight.

"Not so fast," I cautioned. "You could come up on a drop off before you know it."

He stopped and turned. "This is stupid. Turn on the light."

"No," I answered.

He stepped clumsily through the darkness toward me. "Give it to me."

"Stay back."

"Hayley, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to get out of here in one piece." He ripped the flashlight from my hand and turned it on. Looking over my shoulder, his eyes became big as saucers. I turned and felt my whole body shake when I saw the creatures standing at the mouth of the cave.

Six of them... Bigfeet. There was no denying it. That's what they were. They were enormous. They dwarfed any professional basketball player I've ever seen. They stood like humans, but that was the only similarity we shared. Their arms dangled to the bottom of their thighs. Their pointed heads slumped forward making it appear as if they had no neck. Their shoulders looked five to six feet wide. Their feet were not big at all. They were in perfect proportion to the rest of their bodies. They didn't frown

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like the one in the cave. These six monsters flashed menacing grins that revealed short fangs.

A whoosh came from behind me. I turned to see the beam of the flashlight bouncing through the forest. Joyner was running like an Olympic hurdler over downed trees. It shouldn't have surprised me that he was running like a coward, leaving me to fend for myself, but for some reason it did. Hearing those towering monsters huffing and grunting, I wished he would come back, that somewhere deep inside of him, the Joyner I thought he was this morning would suddenly appear and be a noble, heroic human being. But when the beam of the flashlight finally disappeared, I realized that it was a foolish wish.

I turned to give the Bigfeet one last look before I too took off, but they were gone. The vegetation all around me rustled and shook and crackled. I gasped and dashed blindly ahead.

I felt myself stop sharply at the same time I heard a heavy whack. I wobbled on my skinny legs and the world began to spin. Just before I lost consciousness I became acutely aware of a searing, throbbing pain in my head.

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When I came to, I was laying next to the tree that had knocked me unconscious. The sun was beating down on me through the forest canopy, and the temperature had risen a good ten degrees. I tried sitting up, but the woods immediately began to spin. I groaned. My stomach churned, and I vomited. The pain was massively annoying and debilitating. I lay back down and sucked in as much fresh air as I could.

I heard a crunch and a snap. I was in too much agony to react with much more than an irritated moan. Frankly, I just didn't care. Whether it was Joyner, his goons or the Bigfeet, I was at the point where I was hoping they'd put me out of my misery.

"Over here!" I heard someone shout. It sounded like... Owen.

I lifted my head and squinted against the punishing light. My line of sight was limited. I stretched and craned my neck trying to see if it really was him. A willowy figure stepped out from behind a tree and approached.

"Hayley!"

I didn't answer. I lifted my hand and shielded my eyes from the sun.

"Hayley." Whoever it was knelt down beside me. "She's over here!" he yelled.

I blinked and for the first time saw his concerned face. It was Owen. "I'm thirsty," is all I could think to say. I should have been ecstatic to see him, but I was still dazed and confused.

"Good night, Irene," I heard another voice say. A bigger

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figure knelt down next to Owen.

“J-Rob?” I asked.

“Like A-Rod,” he said.

I saw him hand something to Owen, which Owen in turn held out to me.

“She ain’t got strength to drink it herself,” J-Rob said. “Give her an assist.”

Owen’s hand cradled the back of my head, gently lifting it until my mouth met the canteen of water. I drank and then coughed and spit.

“Careful now,” J-Rob said. “She took a wallop to the noggin. Things ain’t firin’ on all cylinders in that pretty little head of hers. Looks like she’s forgot how to swallow. Don’t move her too much.”

“I can’t believe we found you,” Owen said. “Oh my God, we found her.” He chuckled. “We found her.”

“What...” I started to ask something but forgot the question. I started to cry. I was in such a fog.

“Take it easy,” J-Rob said. “We’re here. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“We’ve got to move her,” Owen said.

“It ain’t safe,” J-Rob replied.

“They’re coming,” Owen said.

I felt myself slipping back into unconsciousness. I tried to fight it.

“Don’t you worry about them,” J-Rob said. “Crew will have them chasing their own tails.”

I struggled to speak. I wanted to know who was coming. I fought to open my mouth but the effort exhausted me. I felt myself sinking into blackness.

“Holy crap,” Owen said excitedly. “We found her. We actually found her...”

Just before I lost consciousness, I heard Owen tell J-Rob,

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“Looks like somebody laid this stuff on top of her to keep her warm.”

When I came to, I heard the steady pitter-patter of rain. I opened my eyes and was surprised that it was dark again. I blinked. Maybe I was losing my vision. I held my eyes open wide. I wasn't in the woods. I was back in the cave. I slowly pushed myself up. The dizziness was gone, but the pain was still there. “Owen?” I called out in a feeble voice.

I heard something skidding across the cave floor. “Hayley,” Owen said crawling toward me.

“Where are we?”

He reached out and gently put his arm around me. “Little Grand Canyon. You shouldn't be sitting up.”

I tried to process what he was saying. “Joyner... where is he? He brought me out here yesterday.”

“Yesterday? You've been missing for three days.”

“What?” I strained to bring him into focus. “No. We came out here yesterday... Saturday.”

“It's Tuesday,” Owen answered.

“That's impossible. We were hiking..” I stopped and looked at him apologetically. “You were right about Joyner. He's...”

“An ass,” Owen said. “I know. Listen, some stuff has happened that you should know about.” He hesitated.

“What is it?”

“Joyner is still missing. And his old man isn't too happy about it. He's got your uncle combing these woods looking for him... and...”

“What's going on, Owen?”

“He kind-a sort-a threatened your family.”

A throbbing pain rushed through my brain. I rubbed my

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temples. “Threatened them how?”

“If your uncle doesn’t bring back Joyner alive, he says he’s going to torch your grandfather’s house... with everyone it.”

I gritted my teeth to try and clamp down on the pain. My eyes were burning with tears. I could feel my blood pumping through my veins. I attempted to stand, and Owen tried to hold me down.

“You need to stay down...”

I tried to shrug him off, but I was too weak. “I have to get back.”

“No,” Owen said. “You need to let Crew and J-Rob take care of it.”

“You don’t understand. Joyner... his father, they killed Elizabeth Starling. For sure. No question about it, and Joyner brought me out here to kill me because... I don’t know why exactly...”

“Because you’re a loose end,” I heard a voice say. I jerked my head around in the direction it was coming from and immediately regretted it. My world started to spin again. I sat back and attempted to stabilize myself.

Uncle Crew stood at the entrance of the cave. “They don’t know what you know, but when a billion dollar project is at stake, they’re not willing to take any chances.”

“You lied to me,” I said with a half smile.

“How’s that?” he asked approaching.

“Bigfoot. It’s real.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You saw them?”

“Yes, and I’d just as soon never see them again.” I leaned against the cave wall and sniffed the damp air. “They’re foul...” It suddenly occurred to me where we were. “This is their cave.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Owen said. “Bigfoot? Seriously?” He smiled. “Here?”

“That’s not a good thing,” I said trying to stand again, but

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without success. “They don’t seem all that friendly.”

“They’re not,” Uncle Crew said. “Wild animals don’t know from friendly.”

“Do they know from douche bags, because they were being total douches,” I said.

Uncle Crew shook his head. “There are extenuating circumstances. They aren’t exhibiting their normal elusive behavior. They usually do everything to stay out of our way, but a member or their group is hurt and can’t move. They’re waiting until he gets better or..”

Dies. He didn’t have to say it.

J-Rob entered the cave. “Mr. Joyner’s men are set up in a tent down by the Muddy River.”

“What about the rain?” Uncle Crew asked him.

“It’s steady but light. We’re okay for now. Gets any heavier we’ll see some flooding.”

“They ask about me?”

“Only every other second. Mr. Joyner’s got them on a short leash.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Told them you were headed further into the canyon.” J-Rob scratched his scraggly beard. “They’re stinkin’ Enders, and they ain’t got the bones for a little rain. They’re huddled up like scared little kittens in their tent.”

“What’s an Ender?” Owen asked.

“Bad guys,” I said. I felt my stomach rumble. I realized if I really had been out here as long as Owen said I was, I hadn’t had anything substantial to eat since a slice of pizza on Friday night.

“Hungry?” Owen asked.

I nodded.

He walked to the opposite corner of the cave, picked up his backpack and brought it back over to where I was sitting. He

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reached in and pulled out a bag of trail mix.

I snatched it from his hand and shoveled some into my mouth. I mumbled “Thank you,” with a mouth full of nuts and dried fruit.

“Careful, now,” J-Rob said. “You’ll choke and start coughing. Won’t do your head no good, believe you me.”

I swallowed and said, “Is no one concerned that we’re sharing the cave with a bunch of disgusting gigantic apes?”

“It’s a big cave,” Uncle Crew said. “They’ll keep to their end. We’re safe here.” He sat down next to me. “Do you have any idea where this Joyner kid is?”

I thought back and then shook my head. “He ran like a rat when your friends showed up.”

“Well that’s never a good idea,” J-Rob said. “Everyone knows you don’t run from something that can outrun ya’.”

“Guess he didn’t get the memo,” I said.

“Which direction?” Uncle Crew asked.

I pointed out the mouth of the cave. “That way, but that was...” I counted the days on my fingers. “Two days ago.”

“It’s a place to start,” Uncle Crew said. He walked to the backpacks and dug through the contents. He pulled out an industrial-sized flashlight, a rain slicker, and a handgun.

“Where did you get that?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” He responded.

I shook my head. “What are you going to do?”

“Find your friend.”

“He’s not my friend.”

Owen fought a smile.

“I’m coming with you, boss?” J-Rob asked.

“No,” Uncle Crew answered. “You stay and keep an eye on these two. Joyner’s men get close, you move farther back in the cave. I don’t want them to know we found Hayley.”

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“Will do.” J-Rob slapped Uncle Crew on the back. “Keep your powder dry. Take to the high ground if the rain picks up. This area floods like a son-of-a-bitch.”

Uncle Crew looked at me. “I promised your mother I’d find you and bring you home alive. Don’t do anything to screw that up for me.”

“I’ll stay alive if you will,” I said attempting a smile. The muscles in my jaw seemed to squeeze my temples, causing a sharp pain.

Uncle Crew ducked and exited the cave.

J-Rob clapped his big hands together. “Got some MREs... Meals Ready to Eat... case you didn’t know. Beef stew, lasagna, chili... don’t recommend the chili in an enclosed area like this. Gives you the farts like you wouldn’t believe.”

Owen laughed, and I wanted to but suppressed the urge because laughing would have made it feel like my head had exploded.

“Beef stew,” I said.

“Lasagna for me,” Owen said.

J-Rob retrieved the MREs and handed them to us. “They’re double packed. Break the seal on the outside pack and that activates the heating element. Give it about 10 minutes and then open the inside packing. Voila, you got a hot meal.”

“Cool,” Owen said.

“So,” I said, “you and Uncle Crew aren’t so crazy.”

J-Rob shrugged. “I wouldn’t go that far. I’m batty as they come, but Crew... no, he’s the most normal guy I know. He’s a got few quirks here and there, but everybody does.”

“You mean like the swim fin thing in the backyard?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Now that is for purely investigative purposes.”

“Investigative?” Owen asked.

“You can hoax just about everything when it comes to Bigfoot sightings; blurry photos, shaky video, footprints, scat... a creative

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person can't make any sighting look believable. But there is one thing no one can fake."

Owen and I waited for him to continue, but he drifted off, forgetting that he was even in the middle of a conversation. "What?" I finally asked.

He snapped back. "Huh? Oh... stride, more specifically, length of stride. In a report, that's the first thing a good Bigfoot investigator looks at. Walking in big feet, whether they're wood or rubber or plastic, is pert near impossible at normal stride let alone long unnatural strides. Crew always tried to duplicate every stride in every report we got."

Owen nodded as if it made perfect sense.

I finally broke the seal on the outside packing of the MRE and set it down on the ground. As I waited, I felt a heaviness in my lower abdomen. I did some figuring in my head. If it was Tuesday, and I had been unconscious since Sunday, that meant I hadn't gone to the bathroom in a very long time. My kidneys were telling me that I needed to make up for lost time. I held my hand out to Owen. "Help me up."

"You shouldn't stand..." he started to say, but I cut him off.

"I have to pee. Unless you want me to do it right here, you better help me up."

He looked at me horrified. "Too much information."

"Pee right there," J-Rob said. "Don't none of us care, and won't none of us say nothing."

"Are you kidding me?" Owen snickered. "I do care, and I will have to tell everybody." He reached out and grabbed me by the back of my elbow with one hand and by my wrist with the other. He leaned back on his heels and tugged. I rose up from the ground and stood on very wobbly legs. I shook loose from Owen's grip.

"I'll go the rest of the way on my own," I said.

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He shrugged and let me stagger to the other end of the large cavern. I measured every step carefully. I felt like one more blow to my head and it would crack like an egg. Finding a spot hidden behind an outcropping of rock, I struggled to unbutton my pants. My hands seemed to have a mind of their own. After several seconds, I gave up and just wiggled my pants off my hips without unbuttoning them. It seems I had lost some weight by being unconscious for two days. I squatted and held myself up by holding on to the cave wall. I breathed deeply, and felt the pressure on my lower abdomen melt away.

I was about to let myself totally relax when I heard a noise. It almost sounded like a cat purring. Tiny excited grunts followed. The Bigfeet were nearby. I hurriedly stood and pulled my pants up. A shadow zipped to the left. I cursed under my breath, closed my eyes and counted to three. “Go away,” I whispered. Opening my eyes, I moved around the outcropping of rock and with less care than before, moved toward Owen and J-Rob.

A small rock hit me on the butt. “Hey,” I said twirling around. I huffed when I saw what had thrown the rock. It was a miniature Bigfoot. It couldn’t have been more than three feet tall. He (and his penis was a dead giveaway that he was indeed a he) grinned playfully at me. He was just a baby. I knelt down and picked up the rock he had tossed at me and gently tossed it back to him. His grin grew wider. He twirled around and clapped, hooting wildly.

I felt myself giggle. I placed my hand on my chest, surprised by my involuntary expression of joy. I bent down and quietly said, “Hey there, little guy.”

He puffed out his cheeks and let out a single hoot.

He was much cuter than the ones I had seen earlier. I did not get that menacing feeling they had given me. It helped that I towered above him instead of the other way around, but there

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was something altogether innocent about him.

“Holy...” I heard Owen say as he approached. The sound of his voice startled me and the young Bigfoot. “Is that one of them? I thought they would be bigger.”

“They are bigger,” I said. “This is just a baby.”

Owen carefully stepped forward and knelt down beside me. “Incredible.”

The little Bigfoot eased forward, grinning, baring unimposing teeth.

“Can I touch it?” Owen asked, his hand already reaching out.

“I don’t think...” I started, but the sound of J-Rob’s booming voice cut me off mid sentence.

“Stop,” he said with a forced calm that was unsettling. “Don’t make any sudden movements. Back away slow. I mean slow as turtles in molasses.”

I turned to him. His knees were bent and his feet were shoulder width apart. His arms were spread open parallel to the ground. His gaze was locked on something above and in front of us. I followed his line of sight and saw what had him so spooked. A large female Bigfoot was partially hidden in the shadows. Like the little one, her teeth were bared. But she was not grinning. A chill ran down my spine. I grabbed Owen’s arm and started to scoot back. The female stepped forward and opened her mouth wide, releasing a soul-shuddering hiss.

“Wha...fobble...” Owen muttered sounding as if he swallowed his tongue. His hand was shaking.

“Easy,” J-Rob said. “Nice and easy.”

The female roared at the sound of his voice. Owen screamed. I would have, too, but I was too scared to make a sound. The Bigfoot followed with a high-pitched screech of her own. She reached out and placed the back of her hand on Owen’s chest. With what was probably just a flick of her wrist, she shoved Owen

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back, sending him crashing into me.

J-Rob let out a hoot punctuated with a guttural warble. The female responded with a curious head tilt and repeated the sounds J-Rob had used.

Owen scrambled to get his footing and then reached for me. The Bigfoot grabbed his arm and twisted him around. I cringed as I heard a bone snap. Owen let out a stifled groan.

“Hey now, Miss Grouch, let him go,” J-Rob said slowly stepping forward.

The female grinned and picked Owen up by his arm and let him hang helplessly while he screamed in agony.

“Down, Miss Grouch. Down!” Owen demanded. He went through a series of grunts and verbal scats that made him sound like a drunk jazz singer.

The female bellowed so loudly I thought it might cause a cave in. The little Bigfoot jumped and slapped Owen’s dangling feet. The little guy was giggling madly.

“Miss Grouch!” J-Rob yelled.

The female pulled Owen in closer, until his face was just inches from hers.

“Don’t eat me,” Owen pleaded hysterically.

I stepped forward. “Put him down, now!”

“No, Hayley,” J-Rob said. “They don’t take too kindly to that tone.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I’ve had enough. Put down my friend now!”

The female’s brow furrowed, and she snarled.

“She feels threatened,” J-Rob said. “That’s all. We got to show her we ain’t a threat.”

Owen squealed, “How... how could I possibly be a threat?”

I took another step. “Listen to me you big dumb ape, put Owen down.” I gave an exaggerated gesture for down.

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The little one started to howl and screech.

“Down,” I said repeating the gesture. “The Bigfoot looked at me quizzically. She snorted. “Down.” She looked down at the cave floor. “That’s right. You understand me, don’t you? Down.”

She snorted again and dropped Owen. I slowly moved to his side. The female stood quietly with the same quizzical look on her face. It was as if she was confused that she understood me. She scooped up the young Bigfoot and melted back into the darkness.

“Holy mud on a flap,” J-Rob said excitedly. “I ain’t never seen Miss Grouch take orders from anybody before.”

“Why do you call her Miss Grouch?” I asked helping Owen to his feet.

“Cause she’s mean as a snake. Always in a god awful mood.”

“Maybe because you named her Miss Grouch,” I said examining Owen’s wrist.

“I think it’s broken,” Owen winced.

I nodded. “I think you’re right.”

“Let me see,” J-Rob said. He stuck his chin out and peered down over his nose at Owen’s swollen wrist. “Yep, broke all to hell, looks like. You got off easy. Seen Miss Grouch take down a full grown male sasquatch before. Nearly broke his neck. You don’t mess with her young ‘uns.”

Owen and I leaned on each other as we walked back to the mouth of the cave. “Is that what you call them, sasquatch?”

“Yeah,” J-Rob said. “Bigfoot sounds kind of backwoods and ignorant. Besides their feet ain’t big at all. They’re perfect sized for them things. Your uncle calls them North American Gigantos.” He gently took Owen’s arm.

“Gigantopithecus blacki,” Owen said grimacing. “I read about them.”

“Right,” J-Rob said. “Giant apes that they say lived only in Asia and died out about 300,000 years ago.”

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“They say?” I said.

“Well,” J-Rob smiled. “We ain’t in Asia and those things ain’t dead. So I’d say they missed the boat on a couple of points.” He looked at Owen. “This is going to hurt a bit.”

Owen sucked in and nodded.

J-Rob started feeling around Owen’s wrist with his thumb, pressing down fairly hard. Owen bit his lip to hold back a scream.

J-Rob finished his exam. “Ain’t as bad as I thought. Single break. Slightly out of line.”

Owen was sweating. “What does that mean?”

“Means I gotta set it, and you ain’t gonna to like it.” He looked at me. “Run and get me the first aid kit and the hunting knife out of the red pack.”

I did as asked. Worry and adrenaline had suppressed the pain in my head. Too much was going on for me to concentrate on my throbbing temples. I returned with the items J-Rob had requested.

He took the knife, still in its protective sheath, and held it up. “This here’s a Bowie knife. One the finest instruments ever devised by man.”

Owen swallowed nervously. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I ain’t going to do nothing with it. You’re going to bite down on it while I set your wrist.” He held it out horizontally in front of Owen’s mouth.

Owen looked at me. I sensed he wanted me to talk J-Rob out of playing doctor, but instead I nodded and said, “Do it.”

Owen leaned forward and bit down on the sheath-covered blade. J-Rob opened the first aid kit and pulled out some wire mesh. “Wire splint. This stuffs great.” He handed it to me. Back to Owen, he said, “On the count of three I’m going to give your wrist a quick jerk. It’s going to hurt like nobody’s business. You

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ready for this?”

Owen shook his head.

“Quicker we get it done the better,” J-Rob said.

Owen closed his eyes and nodded.

“One,” J-Rob said. He yanked Owen’s wrist to the left, and I heard a loud popping noise that made me sick. Owen’s face turned snow white as he bit down on the knife.

“What happened to counting to three?” I asked.

J-Rob took the wire mesh from me and started wrapping it around Owen’s wrist. “Hell, that’s just something you say. I ain’t never made it to three yet.”

“You set a lot of broken bones?” I asked.

“I seen my share,” he said with a smile.

“You can stop biting on my good knife now, son. The tough part’s over.”

Owen opened his mouth and let it drop to floor. “Damn... shit... holy... that hurt like hell!”

“Told you,” J-Rob said.

“I hate to interrupt the fun,” I said. “But we’ve still got a couple of cavemates to deal with.”

J-Rob got some medical tape out of the first aid kit. “They’ll keep to themselves.”

“How can you be sure?” I asked.

“Because me and Crew have been studying those things for 20 plus years. I know them better than I know my own mother.”

Owen shook his head. “I can’t believe it. They’re real! Bigfoot is real!”

J-Rob chuckled. “This always happens. Takes a few minutes for it to set in. You’ll try to convince yourself there is some other explanation later on. Your mind will start fightin’ you.”

“No way,” Owen said.

“You say that,” J-Rob said. “But in a week, maybe two, you’ll

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start to wonder if you saw what you thought you saw. You'll tell yourself that a sasquatch didn't have you hanging four feet off the ground. It was a man in a monkey suit or something. I've seen it happen before. Hell, even I find myself trying to explain it away sometimes. I mean they're walking on two legs just like us. That's not supposed to happen."

"That thing broke my wrist," Owen said. "I don't think I'll try to tell myself it doesn't exist in a week."

"We'll see," J-Rob said as he finished taping Owen's wrist. "We'll see."

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At day break, the rain was still falling and J-Rob was getting increasingly nervous. We could hear the run-off growing louder and louder as the hours passed. J-Rob reassured us over and over again that if anyone could navigate the canyon under flood conditions, Uncle Crew could. After the third time he told us, I realized he wasn't trying to reassure us, he was trying to reassure himself.

There were no more visits from the other occupants of the cave, but we could hear the faint chattering of their voices as they grunted in their primitive language, and it was very clearly a language. Certain sounds garnered certain responses. They were talking, a fact that made me more uneasy than their massive size and aggressive behavior. The one thing I had going for me as a human was to outthink most wild animals in life-and-death situations. Here was an animal that apparently could do some pretty good thinking of its own.

As late morning approached, we heard voices from outside the cave. J-Rob crawled out of the cave entrance for a few moments and then crawled back in.

"Joyner's men," he said. He hurried to his backpack and slipped it over his shoulder. "I've got to lead them away from here." He examined Owen's wrist. "It set pretty good. How's it feel?"

"Like someone shoved a steel spike through my wrist," Owen said. He was covered with sweat and very lethargic.

"There's aspirin in the first aid kit," J-Rob said.

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“Aspirin,” Own laughed. “That doesn’t even work on headaches.”

“Yeah? How’s moaning and complaining work on the pain?” J-Rob asked as he moved toward the entrance of the cave.

“I’ll take care of him,” I said. “Do what you have to do, and come back as soon as you can.”

He smiled and nodded. In the blink of an eye, he was out of the cave and scrambling toward the goons.

Owen held up his arm. “I’ve never broken anything before,” he said proudly.

“Hard to break anything playing Wii and Playstation 24 hours a day.”

“I’m a cyber athlete,” he said chuckling before breaking out into a death cough.

I opened the first aid kit and hurriedly retrieved the aspirin bottle. I frantically opened it, and poured two pills onto the palm of my hand.

“You’re moving pretty fast there, Hayley. A guy might think you’re nervous about something.”

I gave him a smug smile. “Just tired of hearing you complain. Take these and shut up.” He took the aspirin from me, and I was frightened by the cold clammy feel of his hand. I was nervous. He didn’t look good. I didn’t know much about broken bones, but I did know that the possibility of infection was a very real danger in a setting like this.

“When we get back,” he said after swallowing the aspirin, “and I get a cast, you get to sign it first.”

“Wow,” I said with mock excitement. “Dreams really do come true.” I felt his forehead with the back of my hand, something I had seen my mom do a thousand times with Grover and me. “You’re hot.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” he grinned.

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“I’m not kidding, you’ve got a fever.”

He shrugged. “It’ll pass.” He stumbled to a nearby sleeping bag and laid down. “Some pair, huh? You with your head and me with my wrist.” He closed his eyes.

“Not to mention we’re the only two teenagers in America without a cell phone.”

He was too tired to respond. He smiled and drifted off to sleep. His breathing was labored and shallow. I moved closer to him and watched over him like a nervous mother.

I jerked awake still sitting next to Owen. The act of snapping my head up caused a sharp pain, but it subsided quickly. I massaged my neck and looked down at Owen. He was a shade whiter than he was before I had nodded off. I placed my hand on his cheek. He didn’t seem to be as hot as he was before. I crawled to the nearest backpack and dug through it until I found a t-shirt. At the mouth of the cave I stuck the shirt out in the rain and let it soak up some water. Crawling back to Owen, I heard a man’s voice coming from outside, followed by another and then another. I quickly folded the wet shirt and placed it on Owen’s forehead.

Back at the cave entrance, I laid flat on the ground and surveyed the immediate area outside. In the distance I could see a ratty Cubs hat. Joyner’s goons were deep in conversation. I could make out looks of concern, but I couldn’t hear a word they were saying. I held my breath to eliminate the noise it was causing, but it didn’t help. I couldn’t stand not knowing what they were saying so I crawled out of the cave and pulled myself on my belly to the edge of the woods. Finding cover behind a tree, I stood and quietly dashed from bush to tree to bush until I was in listening distance of the three goons.

“... drenched to the bone. This is crazy,” the sandy blond one

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said.

“I get the distinct feeling that Andre the giant is jerking our chain,” Cubs fan said. “We’ve been walking in circles for an hour. And where’s our resident Bigfoot hunter? I haven’t seen him since yesterday.”

“The big one said he was headed toward the LaRue Swamps. Good hike from here, but he caught on to some trail,” chubby cheeks said. “One of us should have stayed with him.”

“He ain’t going nowhere,” sandy blond said. “He knows what will happen to his family.”

I lost my balance leaning past the cover of the tree to hear more of the conversation. My foot crashed through a small bed of twigs that snapped underneath my weight. I was paralyzed with fear. I didn’t even dare look up to see if my clumsy footing had brought attention to myself. I controlled my breathing and locked my eyes on the trunk of the tree. The chatter between the three men stopped. I wasn’t at all thrilled by that. I slowly looked up. They were gone. My heart stopped. I backed away carefully and then turned and ran back to the cave. I dove to the ground and rolled through the entrance.

Owen was still asleep. I quickly crawled to him and shook him by the shoulders. “Wake up, Owen.”

He stirred. “What?”

“We have to go,” I said.

“Give me a few minutes.”

“No! Now!”

I ran to the backpacks, grabbed the first one I came to, and I started rifling through it until I found a flashlight.

“Where we going?” Owen asked struggling to get to his feet.

“Deeper into the cave.”

He stopped and processed the information. “Deeper? Wait... what?”

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“Joyner’s men are outside.”

He stepped back from the opening. “Ok, but big scary Bigfooty things are the way you want to go.”

“Yeah, but they don’t have guns, and I kind of get the idea they don’t want anything to do with us. They’ll do everything they can to stay out of our way.”

He held up his broken wrist. “Gee, I kind of beg to differ, Hayley. Arm go breaky, remember?”

I looked at him frustrated. “This isn’t the time to nitpick...”

“Cave!” I heard the voice of sandy blond yell from outside the cave.

I grabbed Owen by the shoulder and guided him to the back of the large cavern. He fought me at first but then slowly gave in. With the flashlight on, we broke out into a slow trot. Within seconds, we entered a small corridor and made our way deeper into the cave.

They didn’t follow at first. Owen and I maneuvered through the narrow passage of the cave with our ears focused behind us listening for Joyner’s men, and our eyes focused on the beam of the flashlight. We were waiting with nervous anticipation for the appearance of a Bigfoot. Adrenaline was pumping through my veins. I took no notice of the constant pain that was thumping in my temples.

Unfortunately, Owen was unable to forget about his pain. He yelped on several occasions as he lost his footing and attempted to catch himself with the hand of his injured arm. The cave floor was wet and slippery from the steady barrage of rain. How the water was getting in was a mystery until we reached the sinkhole I’d fallen through earlier. Water cascaded down like a waterfall.

“Whoa,” Owen said. “That can’t be good.”

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I shined the light in the direction we had come. Joyner's goons were nowhere to be seen. "We should keep going."

"How far? What happens if we get lost?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, but right now that sounds better than getting caught by the three little pigs."

He reluctantly agreed. Shoulders slumped, he stepped toward an area of the passage that would allow him to squeeze behind the cascading waterfall. He slipped on the wet ground and again caught himself against the stone wall with his injured hand. He groaned and winced. Bending over and massaging his injured wrist, he caught a glimpse of something through the sheet of water pouring through the hole.

"What's that?" he asked.

I gazed through the hypnotic pulse of water and saw what he was referring to. It was on the cave floor. I knelt down and moved in closer. It shifted and a gulp of air got stuck in my throat. A set of large, black leathery fingers reached through the gushing wall of water low to the ground.

"Oh man," Owen whispered.

The hand cupped and captured some water. The action was repeated. I pressed my back against the wall and slowly slid to an area that kept me hidden, but allowed me to see past the falling water.

Sprawled out on its stomach, a Bigfoot with salt and pepper hair feebly reached forward and collected water to drink with its gnarled hands. It was old and clearly injured. It looked up at me, but gave no indication that it was frightened or angered by my presence. It continued to capture water in its hands and drink. I felt an unexpected feeling of pity. These... things, they were so human....

I turned to tell Owen that there was no need to panic, and was alarmed to see sandy blond standing behind him, arm draped

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over Owen's chest, and a gun pointed at his head.

"Where's Teddy?" sandy blond demanded.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

I heard the gun cock. "Where's Teddy?"

My heart pounded so loudly I felt as though the sound of it was drowning out the sound of the water falling through the sinkhole. "I swear I don't know."

"Count of three," sandy blond said through gritted teeth. "I'll ask one more time. Where's Teddy? You don't give me the answer I want, nerd boy gets a nine mil slug planted in his brain."

"I told you I don't know!" I screamed.

Owen was trembling. He looked at me pleadingly. I didn't know what to do.

"One."

"Stop," I begged.

"Tell me where Teddy is."

Ratty Cubs hat stuck his head up over a small pile of rocks. "Whoa... what is that?" he said.

"Shut up," sandy blond barked.

"Seriously," ratty Cubs hat said pointing toward the hand sticking through the waterfall.

Sandy blond followed his finger. "What the..." He shoved Owen forward with the gun planted firmly behind his ear. "Come get the girl," sandy blond ordered ratty Cubs hat. To me, "Move."

I slid against the cave wall doing everything I could not to touch sandy blond. I'm not sure why really. It was almost like I felt like I would catch some fatal disease if I touched him. Ratty Cubs hat grabbed my upper arm and yanked me away from the cascading water. With Owen in front of him, sandy blond took the spot where I had previously stood. "Holy..." was all he said.

"What is it?" Ratty Cubs hat asked.

Sandy blond turned toward us. His face was ashen. "I don't

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know.”

Ratty Cubs hat snickered. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“It’s...” sandy blond considered his words carefully. “It’s a thing, ape or... person.”

“Let me see,” Ratty Cubs hat said as he tossed me aside so hard I fell to the ground. He squeezed past sandy blond and Owen. His face was hidden from me once he got into position to view the fallen Bigfoot, but his inability or unwillingness to move for so long told me he was staring in disbelief at the poor creature.

“That can’t be what it looks like, can it?” he asked.

Sandy blond didn’t answer.

Ratty Cubs hat knelt down and examined the Bigfoot more closely. “What do we do?”

“Nothing’s changed. We find Teddy like boss man wants.”

“Yeah, but he’s going to want to know about this,” Ratty Cubs hat insisted. “If a good for nothing owl can shut down boss man’s plans, the feds will have a field day with this thing.”

Without warning, sandy blond pointed his gun at the aging, injured Bigfoot and pulled the trigger. The reverberation from the blast stung my ear drums. Ratty Cubs hat fell to the ground, while Owen squeezed his eyes shut and turned away.

Ratty Cubs hat stood rubbing his ears. “What the hell, man?” he screeched.

“Boss man doesn’t have to worry anymore. We’ll find Teddy, and then take care of all the loose ends. Carry this thing out of here in pieces if we have to.”

Owen looked at me. It was dark, but I could see that he was crying. I stood in a huff. “What did you do?”

“Nothing personal, sweetie. Just business,” sandy blond said turning to ratty Cubs hat. “Get the girl and let’s head back the

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way we came.”

Ratty Cubs hat looked down at the dead creature. “I can’t believe it’s actually real...” he said just before he let out a startled yelp and disappeared behind the wall of water.

“What... Jackie?” sandy blond said meekly

A roar bellowed from the darkness beyond the waterfall. Ratty Cubs hat screamed. Another roar and scream followed.

“Jackie!” sandy blond yelled. He held the gun up. “What’s going on?”

“We should go,” I said. “Now!”

Sandy blond turned the gun on me. “What happened to Jackie?”

“I’m not sure,” I said raising my hands above my head. “But I’m guessing you didn’t win any friends by killing...” I pointed to the wall of water.

“There’re more of them?” sandy blond asked, his voice trembling.

“And they’re pissed,” Owen said.

We heard one last scream coming from the depths of the darkness followed by gurgling and a wet crunching noise.

Sandy blond grabbed Owen forcefully and pushed him away from the waterfall. He was clearly panicked. He took several minutes to assess the situation and decide what to do. He mumbled to himself, and spoke gibberish, starting sentences and stopping and then starting a different thought before giving up. He shouted a string of profanities before he directed me to stand behind him. “I want one of you in front of me and one of you in back.” He shoved the barrel of the gun against Owen’s temple. “You think of doing anything funny, girl, boyfriend’s brains go bye-bye.”

We moved quickly along the slippery path. Sandy blond shouted at Owen to move faster. Owen tried to comply, but would invariably slip and groan in pain as he banged his sore wrist.

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Something was following us. I smelled it first and then heard the pounding of its heavy footsteps. He was angry... wait, that's not the word for it. He was inconsolable. He let out an occasional whimper and mournful howl. Sandy blond had killed a member of his family. He had nothing but vengeance on his mind, or their minds, I should say. It was obvious that there were at least three of them following us. They grunted in very distinctive and deliberate patterns. They were talking, and it wasn't a happy go-lucky conversation. My guess is they were figuring out how to make us suffer as much as they possibly could before they killed us.

We stopped suddenly.

"Keep going," sandy blond barked at Owen.

"That's not a good idea," Owen replied.

"Kid, don't make me shoot you..."

"There's one in front of us," Owen shouted.

There was a brief moment of terror-filled silence.

Sandy blond broke the silence with a panicked snuffle and snort. "That's not possible. They're behind us. Don't say they're in front of us because they're not!"

"Dude," Owen said. "Saying they're not in front of us doesn't change the fact that they are in front of us. They are in front of us!"

"How do you know?" sandy blond asked in a high-pitched squeal.

"I saw a pair of big eyes. Green glowing eyes."

The sound of stone knocking against stone came from in front of us.

"And then there's that," Owen said, his voice breathy and strained.

I felt a wisp of air on my neck and screamed.

"What? What? What?" sandy blond shouted and jerked

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around.

“Something touched my neck,” I said.

“No it didn’t,” sandy blond said. “You’re imagining things.”

A grunt came from behind me. “I’m not imagining that.”

“What do we do?” sandy blond asked, his voice quivering as if he were crying.

“We find another way out,” I said. I turned the flashlight on the cave wall immediately to our right. It was sloped and seemed to lead to a platform that hopefully led to another series of corridors. The problem was that the slope was steep, and I wasn’t sure we could make it to the top, especially Owen with his broken wrist.

Sandy blond didn’t wait to discuss it. He scrambled to the sloping wall, shoved the gun down the back of his pants and started to climb. I shined the flashlight on Owen’s face. He shielded his eyes with his good hand, and simply smiled. I returned the hollow gesture and approached the wall.

Sandy blond was having difficulty. He slipped on more than one occasion, even doing a face plant which caused a whole new string of profanities. I took my first tentative step and found a surprisingly steady foothold. I took a second step and wasn’t so lucky. I crashed to the ground, scraping my shins as I fell. Owen rushed to my side, but I waved him off. “Worry about yourself.” He shrugged and used his good hand to pull himself up the slope. I was impressed at his success. He wasn’t having nearly as much difficulty as sandy blond and me. In fact, he passed sandy blond at the three quarter mark. I could almost hear him snicker as he looked over at the thug.

He reached the top of the platform when I was half way up the slope. “Not so bad,” he said. He was breathing heavily. He placed his hand on his forehead. “Kind of dizzy though.” He swayed.

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I looked up and shined the flashlight in his direction. His face was pale. He had pushed through the exhaustion of being sick and was now paying for it. “Sit down, Owen,” I said.

“Huh?” he said blinking against the light.

“Sit down before you fall,” I demanded.

He shook his head and huffed. With much less skill than he had exhibited climbing the wall, he knelt down. Then he shifted his legs carefully until he was sitting on the platform. “Boy... not feeling so good...” he inhaled. “Whew, stinks like crazy up here.”

I stopped. “Stinks?”

“Like someone took a dump on a pile of garbage,” he said.

Sandy blond neared the top. “Shoo, you ain’t kiddin’, nerd boy.”

“Get down,” I said letting myself slide down the wall. I kept the light pointed at the top of the platform.

“What? Are you crazy?” Owen asked. “I almost puked crawling up here.”

“Get down!” I yelled.

“What’s wrong, princess...” sandy blond started to ask, but stopped when an enormous Bigfoot stepped into the light. He whirled around and tumbled down the sloped surface.

The creature groaned. A string of thick slobber hung from its clinched teeth. His eyes were wide and mad. I have never seen such hate in my life. Owen turned and screamed. Back to me he said, “Hayley, what do I do?” The ape bent down and sniffed Owen.

“Don’t move,” I said landing with a soft thud on the cave floor. Sandy blond was writhing in pain next to me.

The ape reached out and grabbed Owen’s broken wrist, and he cried out in horrible pain. The animal grumbled its disapproval and sniffed the mesh splint.

“Hold on, Owen,” I started climbing the wall again. I looked

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away for just a second, but that's all it took. The ape roared and Owen let out a grunt-huff. I scrambled to shine the flashlight back on the platform. No sign of Owen. I gasped, and then scrambled up the rock.

I reached the platform and pulled myself up, expending my last bit of energy. Puffing and sucking in air, I looked down at the cave floor below. Sandy blond was getting his feet, one hand placed on his sore back.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Yeah, well they're down there, too."

He gave me an evil look and pulled the gun out of his pants. "I'll make it out of here. You can count on that."

"I doubt it," I said forcing myself to stand. "But if you do, tell my uncle what happened. He'll know what to do."

He scoffed. "Sorry, sweetie, you're on your own."

A roar echoed through the cave. It was hard to tell where it came from, but the best guess was that it came from behind sandy blond. He gave me a quick smirk and then headed back toward the mouth of the cave. Not long after he disappeared into the darkness of the cave, I heard the thud, thud, thud of footsteps coming down the path. I turned off the flashlight and stepped back from the edge of the platform. I could hear the creature approach. It stopped just below me, sniffing the air. I saw its green glowing eyes flash up toward me. It unleashed a blood curdling roar and then continued on after sandy blond. I hadn't breathed during the entire encounter. I let out a long extended breath and fought to calm myself. Clicking the flashlight on, I turned and stepped off the platform onto a flat log spanning a seven foot wide drop off.

On the other side of the expanse, I shined the light on the ground. It was solid, but as big as those apes were, I was hoping some kind of print was left behind. Bingo. The top layer of dirt

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showed huge footprints. I followed the prints.

In the distance I heard what I assumed was sandy blond's gun going off. I was so startled that I dropped the flashlight. It bounced and tumbled and clicked off. I groaned and finally understood how someone could literally want to kick themselves. I lurched forward, bending deep at the waist trying to find the flashlight in the darkness. I saw something through the darkness and got on my hands and knees and slowly crawled toward it. Carefully patting the ground, I touched the object I had seen. It didn't feel like a flashlight. It was soft. I grabbed it and lifted it closer to my face. It was a ratty Cubs hat with clumps of hair trapped in the band, and it was wet. I pulled my damp fingers away from the hat and brought them within inches of my eyes. They were tinted red. I quickly dropped the hat and wiped the blood on my pants.

Just as I had decided to move on without the flashlight, my foot kicked a small object. Fearing I may find another bloody item of clothing or worse, I almost let it go, but I decided to suck it up and bend down. I said a silent thank you as I felt the familiar cylinder shape of the flashlight. I clicked the light on and ventured forth. Not long after, I wished I hadn't.

The first body part I saw was a thumb. I almost missed it. It was sitting on a bed of rocks and blended in well. I would have passed right on by if the thumbnail hadn't shimmered in the flashlight beam. I wheezed and placed my hand over my mouth. I wanted so badly to turn and head back the way I had come. These creatures weren't animals, they were monsters. But I couldn't. They had Owen. There was a possibility that it was his thumb lying on top of the bed of rocks, but I convinced myself that it belonged to ratty Cubs hat. I trudged on.

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I rounded a corner and heard the rushing sound of water. A fast moving creek divided the cave floor in front of me. Gigantic footprints crisscrossed the muddy wet banks of the creek. I counted at least three distinctly different tracks. One set clearly belonged to the small ape we had seen earlier, but the other two were much larger. One set looked to be twice the size of any of Uncle Crew's casts.

I also saw a pair of legs sticking out from another bend in the passageway. I quickened my step and approached them. I recognized Owen's shoes and sloshed through the creek as fast as I could to get to him. A terrible thought occurred to me as I scrambled to get to him. There was a real possibility that the legs would not be attached to a body.

Thankfully, it wasn't the case. Owen stuck his head up as I reached the bend.

"I am so done with hiking," he said as I knelt down beside him. "Never again."

"You're alive," I said almost in tears. "You're alive." I repeated and hugged him.

We embraced for a brief moment until he moaned, "Watch the wrist."

I released him. "Sorry," I said standing and brushing the mud from my knee. "We really need to get out of here."

I heard a chatter and a hoot coming from very close by. Several other vocalizations followed from virtually every corner of the cave, yet none of the creatures could be seen. It was as if they were invisible.

"I hate it when they do that," I said.

"Ten to one says their talking about us," Owen responded.

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"Not sure. Saw at least three. But I think there's more. One of them..." he considered his words carefully. "One of them was

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eating... It looked like... some kind of meat.”

I immediately thought back to the severed thumb and the bloody Cubs hat. I shook my head. It couldn't be. Then I reminded myself that they were wild animals, enormous wild animals. I helped Owen to his feet. “There's got to be another way out of here.” I looked up and down three passageways that branched off from the path we were on. The creek rushed down from the middle one. I didn't know much about nature and survival, but I guessed the water came from outside. If it could get into the cave, maybe we could get out. “C'mon.” I grabbed Owen and guided him toward the corridor where the creek flowed.

“You know that if they don't want us to leave they aren't going to let us,” Owen said.

“We'll see,” I said.

My hand shook uncontrollably as I panned the flashlight from right to left, looking for signs of the creatures. They were staying hidden. I don't know how. The space was extremely limited yet they managed to stay out of sight. They were near. The smell was a good indication of that fact, but they did not want to be seen. I was baffled at how something that large could hide in an area so small.

We reached the opening to the creek passageway. It was the smallest of the three passageways. We had barely enough room to walk without touching our shoulders together.

“Small,” Owen said.

“Good,” I answered. “Means those things can't follow us.”

“But what if it's a dead end? We'd be trapped like rats.”

“We're already trapped like rats,” I said. “What difference does it make?”

“Good point,” Owen said.

I headed in first, but Owen stopped me.

“Kind of feel like I should go first,” he said.

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“Why?”

“We don’t know what’s down there, and... it’s just a guy thing. I should go first.”

I shook my head. “You’ve got to be kidding me?”

“Just let me go,” he said.

I stepped back and motioned for him to go ahead. When he passed me I rolled my eyes. “Guy thing,” I snorted.

As narrow as the opening of the passage was, it got even narrower a few feet in.

“Have to go sideways,” Owen said. He turned to me. “Still want to go...” His eyes widened.

I didn’t like that look. It usually meant something was behind me. I froze.

Owen started to squeeze through the passage. “Hurry,” he said panicked.

I closed my eyes and turned sideways, forcing myself not to look at the entrance of the pathway. I couldn’t help but see movement out of the corner of my eye. I pressed against Owen. He was breathing so hard it sounded as if he were hyperventilating.

“It’s tight,” he grouched. “I think I see an opening, but I don’t know if I can get through.”

I heard a grumbling coming from the opening of the corridor. A blast of warm, stinky breath hit my neck and chilled me. I pushed Owen. “Do what you have to do to squeeze through,” I said.

“I’m trying,” he said in a pained tone. “Almost...” He disappeared. A second passed and I heard him grunting. “I made it!”

I wedged myself into the narrow pathway, and began pushing my way through. Something grabbed my hair and pulled. I screamed.

“C’mon,” Owen insisted.

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“Something’s got me,” I cried.

Owen shined his light through the pathway above my head. A Bigfoot with blood caked on its mouth hissed. He was tugging on my hair. He was too large to fit through the opening.

“Oh man,” Owen said. “Get away from her.” He darted the beam of light across the creature’s face. “Let her go!”

The animal howled and tugged harder. I lost the momentum carrying me forward and jerked back toward the opening of the passageway. Owen’s injured arm shot through the narrow section, and he grabbed hold of my shirt, crying out in terrible pain.

“No!” He barked. “Let her go!”

It was no use. The ape succeeded in pulling me loose from Owen’s grip and tossed me to the ground where I landed in the rushing creek. He stood over me, arms spread, with bent knees, and bellowed a frightening cry. He stepped forward and gnashed his giant teeth.

I closed my eyes tightly, pushed myself against the charging water of the creek, and tried to prepare myself to be eaten alive.

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As the large ape bore down on me, I heard a hum-hoot come from behind me. A howl and chatter followed. The ape looked curiously in the direction of the sounds. I tilted my head back and peered in the same direction. I was surprised to see the beam of a flashlight stretching over me. The silhouette of a man was clearly visible.

The man hooted, chattered, and groan-cried, and the Bigfoot did the same in return. They were having a conversation. The ape looked down at me at one point and snapped its jaws. His eyes narrowed as he raised a fist high in the air and brought it down, smashing it into the ground next to my head. He gave one last hoot and stepped away. By the time I sat up, he had vanished.

“Hayley,” the man said anxiously.

“Uncle Crew?”

He helped me to my feet. “We need to go,” he said.

Owen squeezed out of the narrow passageway and fell to the ground in front of us. “Hayley, I’m here.” He stood, covered in sludge and grime.

“What were you doing in there?” Uncle Crew asked bewildered.

“Trying to find a way out.”

“It’s over there,” Uncle Crew said pointing to the passageway to our left.

A series of howls echoed through the cave.

“Our last warning,” Uncle Crew said. “Move!”

We did as instructed. And with me leading the way this time,

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we made our way through the short corridor and emerged from the cave. The rain fell in torrents. J-Rob met us as we entered the tree line.

“This place is flooding like a mother,” he said. “We’ve got to double time it to higher ground. This whole valley is going to be under water soon.”

“Lead the way,” Uncle Crew yelled through the pounding rain.

We followed J-Rob through a winding, overgrown path that slowly ascended the canyon. The rain had turned the topsoil into a slippery slush that made it impossible to move at a fast pace. We each managed to lose our footing and end up face down in the mud at one point or another.

A popping sound stopped us in our tracks half way up the slope. None of us was sure what it was or if we had really even heard anything. Another pop sounded. J-Rob spun around holding his shoulder. Blood flowed through his fingers.

“Gun!” I yelled. I don’t know why. It didn’t sound like any of the gunshots I had heard on TV or in movies or even the gunshot I had heard in the cave, but instinct just told me that was exactly what we were dealing with.

Sandy blond stepped onto the path pointing his gun at us. He was covered in mud and what looked like blood. His eyes were like saucers. He looked as though he’d just escaped from an insane asylum.

“What are those things?” He screamed.

Uncle Crew said, “This isn’t the time. We have to get out of here.” In total contrast to the crazed gunman, Uncle Crew was as cool as a cucumber.

“No!” sandy blond barked. “Those things... They killed Bobby. Tore him apart. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“They had to,” Uncle Crew answered. Wrong thing to say, I thought.

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I heard another pop. Smoke was coming out of the gun. I turned expecting to see Uncle Crew laying on the ground with blood spurting from his body, but he stood there calmly holding his hands in the air. Whether sandy blond missed on purpose or not, I don't know.

"This whole area is going to get washed away and us with it if we don't get out of here," Uncle Crew said.

"I don't care!" The mad man shouted. "They smashed his skull against a rock, and ripped his arm out of its socket..." Sandy blond screamed. The madness in his eyes was terrifying. "What are those things?"

"You killed one of them," I shouted. I don't know what possessed me, but it came out of my mouth without warning.

Uncle Crew stepped toward the gunman. "Is that true?"

Sandy blond didn't answer.

"It's true," I said.

"So what?" sandy blond bellowed.

Uncle Crew shook his head. "They didn't kill your friend. You did. They were just protecting their family. The second you killed one of theirs you became a hostile. They're just trying to survive. That's their only objective. You threaten that objective, they'll eliminate you... and your kind."

I turned to Uncle Crew. "Which is us. We're his kind, right?"

Owen threw up his hands. "Nice going, you goon. You pissed them off."

"It was just lying there... It was only a dumb animal. How was I supposed to know?" He lowered the gun.

J-Rob noticed and sprung into action. Ignoring his bleeding shoulder, he wheeled around, yanked the gun from sandy blond, and sent his enormous fist into the thug's nose. Sandy blond crumbled like a house of cards. He was out like a light.

"Oops," J-Rob said. "Didn't mean to knock him out."

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“Doesn’t matter,” Uncle Crew said pushing past us.

“Who’s going to carry him?” J-Rob asked.

“No one,” Uncle Crew said.

“We can’t leave him here,” J-Rob said.

“We can and we will,” Uncle Crew said.

“But...” J-Rob started.

“Not up for discussion.” Uncle Crew took the gun from J-Rob.

“It don’t feel right.”

“Feels right to me...” Uncle Crew stopped. His eyes locked onto something down the hill. We all turned to see what had caught his attention. It was the largest ape yet. It had to be 12 feet tall. Its hair was black and gray. It made no attempt to hide from us. It just stood there.

Uncle Crew moved back down the hill. He stopped and grabbed sandy blond by his leg and started dragging him down the hill. “Stay here,” was all he said to us. Sandy blond mumbled as he came to. He babbled incoherently at first, and then let out a scream when Uncle Crew reached the giant ape. Uncle Crew and the ape exchanged clicks, grunts, and hoots. The ape shook its massive head and grimaced. Uncle Crew let sandy blond’s leg drop. He turned and headed back toward us. Sandy blond crawled back up the hill. The ape bent down, swooped up sandy blond with very little effort and draped the man over its shoulders. It looked like it was carrying a toddler.

Uncle Crew ordered us to go as he walked by. Owen and J-Rob did as asked. I couldn’t move. Sandy blond was getting what he deserved, but I couldn’t help feeling it was too cruel a fate for even him. The ape furrowed his bony brow and motioned for me to leave with a nod of its head. I reluctantly did as requested.

R.W. Ridley

Back at the parking area, there were two trucks, J-Rob's old beat-up truck, and Joyner's luxury truck. I had completely forgotten about Joyner. I was about to ask Uncle Crew if he had found him when I saw a figure huddled in the passenger seat of Joyner's truck. I approached cautiously and felt both relieved and angry to see Joyner wrapped in a blanket, very much alive.

"I found him early this morning," Uncle Crew said.

I examined him through the rain streaked windows. He was shaking like a leaf. "Is he hurt?"

"Hope so," Owen said coming up behind me.

"A little dehydrated and a lot freaked out," Uncle Crew said.

I turned to Uncle Crew. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Take him home to his father."

I set my jaw and crossed my arms in front of my chest. "We can't just take him home. He may have something to do with Elizabeth Starling's murder... and he tried to kill me."

Owen looked on with unbridled anger.

Uncle Crew looked genuinely surprised to hear that last part. He shook his head. "He didn't kill Elizabeth." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the path leading back into the woods. "Those three Enders did. They won't be a problem any more. As for what he did to you, I can drag him out of the truck and let you beat the hell out of him. That's all I can offer you. I can pretty much guarantee he won't fight back. In fact, I can pretty much guarantee that boy won't ever have fight back in him again. Look in the ignition."

I leaned my head forward and saw the keys in the ignition.

"Nothing has stopped him from leaving, yet he hasn't moved an inch from where I put him hours ago. He's seen things that his mind can't wrap around, not to mention running for his life and nearly starving to death."

"Can I hit him?" Owen asked.

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Uncle Crew motioned to J-Rob to get Owen in his truck. The gentle giant placed his arm around Owen's shoulder. "C'mon, tough guy. I need to rewrap that wrist." They walked away.

"But what about Joyner's father," I said after they were gone. "He's the one really responsible for all this."

Uncle Crew nodded. "You got me there." He scratched his unshaven face. "Men like his father can buy his way out of trouble like this. I've seen it dozens of times. We run to the police, they'll have to bring in the feds to investigate. The feds will blanket this area with men. Can't have that. Not until the group leaves."

"You don't want to do what's right because of...those things?"

"Protecting the gigantos is doing what's right," he said. "The day they're discovered is the day they'll start dying out."

A horrible thought hit me. Joyner had said Elizabeth Starling's body had been moved to the keep the Feds from getting involved. "When did you get Elizabeth's camera?"

He looked at me surprised. "Does it matter?"

"It does," I said.

"You sure you want to know?"

"I'm sure."

"I pried it from her cold dead fingers," he said waiting for me to respond with disgust.

Instead I responded in anger. "You moved her body."

"I did," he said unapologetically. "Elizabeth would have expected me to. She was a good lady. She and I were fighting the same fight just for different animals. Thanks to her pictures, the owls will protect this area and the entire Shawnee National forest from Joyner and his company. Thanks to her, not only will feds not be snooping around here, they'll keep everyone else from snooping around here."

"But she has a daughter," I said feeling the tears well up in my eyes. "She deserves to know what really happened to her mother."

R.W. Ridley

Uncle Crew cocked his head to the right and looked at me sympathetically. “She deserves to know her mother made a difference. Knowing the truth of how she died won’t bring her any peace.”

The tears started to stream. “It doesn’t feel right.”

He stepped up and put his arm around me, a gesture that both shocked and comforted me. “Right doesn’t always feel right.”

I laughed. “You suck at trying to make people feel better.”

He smiled. “It’s not my strong suit.” He opened the door to Joyner’s truck, and invited me to climb in. “Let’s go home.”

I slid across the seat, staying as far away from Joyner as I could and settled back as Uncle Crew turned the key and started the engine. I glimpsed out the windshield and noticed a massive figure standing at the edge of the woods. It was the female from the cave. The young giganto clung to her thigh. It grinned and jumped up and down like any rambunctious toddler would.

Suddenly, it started to feel like we were doing the right thing.

The End

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