



The
Bigfoot
Files

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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and incidents are either products of the author's imagination
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For my Finley

Proof



“Bean! Come see!”

Miranda had heard her mother call her like this before; she’d heard it at least a dozen times that weekend alone. But even though it was a familiar summoning, even though Miranda was concentrating on a civics essay that was due three days earlier, even though the wind blew through the yellowing trees with a certain seriousness and the congregating clouds outside of the jury-rigged awning threatened rain, she stood up. She stuffed her papers beneath a rock near the barren fire pit and ran.

But first she grabbed the camera.

There were half a dozen others with them in Big Cottonwood Canyon, some of them driving across entire

states to get here. They had all seen the same report, an obscure story written for levity, plucked from a credible news site and then trickling through their online community, their forums, their blogs: A pair of young hikers witnessed strange rustlings in the nettle. They had seen an abnormal stillness in the surrounding wildlife, as if the warblers and the foxes and the cutthroat trout were holding their breath as another beast, a king, passed through. They had noticed an unusual darkness in the evenings that concentrated around a figure—something tall, something that was neither human nor animal, but definitely something alive.

Most of all, the hikers said, they saw shadows. Shadows without moorings. Shadows in impossible shapes. Shadows that formed and disappeared in the space of a single blink.

And then the hunt began.

They all wanted to see one. They all wanted proof.

But sometimes, Miranda thought, the others seemed like they wanted the game to keep going more than they wanted to *know*. They liked the hide-and-seek of it, the gathering of intellects and theories, the division of perimeters, the smoky campfire evenings, and the fancy infrared equipment that must be unloaded and carted and mastered.

Even if a creature was bagged, tagged, and hauled around the world on exhibition, many of them would

no doubt still scour the media for reports, would still get together for the search. The search was what they lived for.

Not Miranda. She wanted proof.

She and her mother had been hunting for years. She was ready to *know*.

And the time was ripe. In the whispering petals of wildflowers, in the babbling of clear rivers, in the freeway currents across their pockmarked windshield on their drives home after fruitless trips, she could hear it sometimes: *Soon. So very soon.*

That afternoon her mother had left camp to investigate a tree-mounted motion sensor camera that had been activated, then mysteriously lost power—no doubt pushed off the branch by the wind, as often happened. But her mother was giddy at the prospect. “Or maybe—maybe, Bean—Bigfoot knocked it over when he saw the blinking light!”

“What is he, camera shy?” Miranda joked.

Those jokes were easier to make lately. They grew on Miranda’s tongue like thorns; all she had to do was spit them out.

Up past the reservoir Miranda went, a thin wind crying through the firs like a vindictive ghost. When the first of a cold rain dotted her cheek, she resisted the urge to run back under the awning with her homework. Instead she focused her mind—

What if this is it?

What if I turn this corner, around this pine, down this gulley, and I see him?

What if we found Bigfoot?

Even from behind the parched autumn grass and the quaking, coin-size leaves of white aspens, Miranda could spot her mother wearing the mad-eyed grin of a person obsessed—it beamed, it was like a new sun.

A knot in Miranda’s stomach untied itself.

It’s happening, she thought, and I’m ready.

“Where?” Miranda flew through the swishing grass and into the clearing, camera poised. “Where is he?”

“Look at it, Bean!” Her mother stepped backward, angling Miranda to see the dampening loam behind a fallen log.

Miranda’s insides tangled.

A footprint.

Only a footprint.

Smudged into the dirt, a heel and five toes, clearly human—or, at least *humanoid*, she corrected herself with some bitterness—and fading as the rain hit the ground.

A large footprint, yes. But when Miranda checked herself for veneration, for the stuff that her mother currently oozed like she was able to convert oxygen into awe . . . it wasn’t there.

There was nothing there.

Miranda waited while her mother and the others took photographs, while they found the missing motion sensor camera (which had indeed fallen from the tree and turned itself off), while they analyzed the footprint's length and width and tread, while they spoke about the find as if it was the first of its kind and not, as Miranda would have pointed out had she not been too empty to speak, the tenth footprint they'd found that year alone.

Miranda acted polite. Miranda acted smiley. Miranda acted the perfect assistant as they huddled around the footprint like it was a relic. She held jackets and helped frame their "Aha! Discovery!" pictures and nodded when they said, over and over, "Can you believe it?"

Another footprint.

She really, really could believe it.

"We're so close, Bean." Her mother put an arm around her, and a sudden, foreign instinct came over Miranda—to jerk away, to push back, to run.

When her mother was twelve weeks pregnant, she'd seen baby Miranda on an ultrasound—just a grainy white dot dancing across the screen "like a jumping bean," her mother always said, and the nickname stuck.

Miranda couldn't remember the last time her mother had used her real name. Why had that never bothered her before?

The storm finally convinced them to leave the clearing; they peeled away reluctantly one by one until it was just Miranda and her mother—and the footprint, until the mud claimed it.

“This, right here.” Her mother gestured at the ground, at the aspens, as pale as if someone had drained them, at the forest all around them. “Isn’t this amazing, Bean? We’re so close!”

Miranda couldn’t hold back. “But we’ve seen so many footprints. If he’s really out there, why haven’t we seen him yet? Why haven’t we found real proof?”

“Oh, Bean.” Her mother again wrapped herself around Miranda, constricting her. “Be patient. We don’t find Bigfoot—Bigfoot finds us.”

It was only after her mother walked ahead, the sound of her happy whistle piercing through the din of the storm, that Miranda realized what she’d said:

If.

She’d said *if*.

The word came out so naturally, as if it had been perched there on her lips for a long, long time—and her mother hadn’t even noticed.

Miranda had barely noticed.

Miranda dragged herself back through the rain to camp, where she found the notes for her civics essay, soaked and torn cleanly in half by the wind. She searched, but the missing sections were hiding somewhere in these

woods, these damn trees that refused to reveal anything that was given to them to conceal.

The next day they drove home, where they would unpack and stay only until the next bumpkin farmer announced that he saw an ape-like creature crossing the stream in his fields. Until the next shadow.

Miranda tuned out her mother's circular talking. Something new was happening within her, and she honed in on it. Where there was once wonder, there was now itching, a grain of sand in your eye.

Where there was once fireworks and golden frenzies and the sensation that she was reaching out to touch magic and magic was reaching back—there was instead this tiny, odd anger burrowing beneath her ribs.

“We're going to find one, Bean,” her mother said, again and again. “We're so close. Believe me.”

Miranda curled up on her seat, feigning sleep. With the hand farthest from her mother, she reached up and pulled out a hair. A single hair. The bite of pain chewed through the hot fog in her brain. It gave her something to hold on to.

And so she did it again.

Another hair, another bite.

Eventually her mom stopped talking and there was, at last, quiet.

Miranda pressed her ear against the cold glass of the window, straining to hear the air currents above the

rumbles and grunts of their car—but outside the window, there was nothing.

Outside the window, it was a dead zone.

Soon, soon, soon—that was what she wanted to hear. A reassurance. But the wind on the dark, rain-soaked highway, the air brushing the windshield and the metal of the car door, the sky around the bold twilight stars—all were silent.

Except this one word, echoing in her head again and again—*if, if, if*.

Miranda was good at naming shadows.

She could sense them before they incorporated into solid darkness, before they had decided on a shape—and then she could tell exactly what they belonged to.

You are only a spare desk, hulking outside the principal's office.

You are only a banner, flapping in the gale of the air-conditioning vent.

You are only a hawthorn bush, a streetlight, a bird, the clouds rolling across the moon—you are only me, my shape reflected on the ground behind me.

A peculiar skill for a twelve-year-old to take pride in—the days of checking under beds and in closets for hungry monsters were long over for most of her peers.

But there was still someone at Miranda's house who made a monster out of every unexplained silhouette or indecipherable sound.

And so she had to be vigilant.

And she had to come here, to the school, before anyone else arrived, so she could work.

A house full of monsters was not a place where she could think, no matter how much she tried to hide in the shadows.

She sat in front of the lockers, a spread of homework and books around her. It was a balancing act she attempted most mornings—trying to jostle the various assignments that were all due that day, none of which was even close to being completed.

Pockets of magic existed in the world, Miranda knew, but they came exclusively in the form of moments like these—the hours before the school opened, when the building was an empty shell and the freshly born sunrise made the harsh fluorescent lights in the hallway almost obscene in comparison. Moments when the only sound was her own wheels spinning.

These cereal hours, these foggy mornings . . . Miranda had always been busy enough to need every waking hour of her days, but lately she'd been squeezing out extra time where she could.

She had to.

She had to make sure everything was perfect. Even if

other elements of her life threatened to ruin everything.

She glanced at the clock. Quarter to seven: That gave her only fifteen minutes to devote to each assignment. And even if she did manage to get them finished, that didn't leave time for anything else—any of the other things she had to do to catch up. It wasn't enough time. It was never enough.

Panic jolted through her like cold coffee.

What if I don't get these finished?

What if I have to ask for more time?

What if they won't give me more time?

Too many things swirling, hovering—they gathered in a mist, thick as a curtain. Mind spinning like a second hand on a clock, she took out her phone and opened her to-do list.

To-do list:

Finish study guide for history

Put tutoring schedule online

She twirled her inky hair around her finger. There was something else she was missing, something that was clouding a large amount of her mental storage—

Fall Fling! How could she have forgotten? Her delinquent homework was eating every other task in her brain. The Fall Fling was next week, a dance that would raise money for new projectors in every classroom and simultaneously provide her classmates with three hours of teacher-free socialization. It was her most ambitious

project as student body president so far, and she had to get every detail just right.

Confirm student council meeting with administration

Call DJ about extension cords

Order pumpkin spice doughnuts from bakery

Her election as student body president had been a rare historical feat—only a seventh-grader, and yet they had still chosen her. A seventh-grader, to rule even the older grades.

And so the Fall Fling had to be perfect.

That word again, *perfect*.

Her favorite word.

Proofread flyers

Write script for school announcements next week

Her to-do lists never seemed to get any shorter, no matter how hard she hustled; her mind was a video game landscape, every item on her list a bad guy. You kill every one within sight, and it's quiet until you turn a corner and you're ambushed.

A dozen papers around her, two textbooks straddling a folder of exam notes, and eight tabs open on her phone—and the ticking of the clock, which was as loud as her own pulse—

Something inside her unspooled.

What if there are questions on the history test that weren't on the study guide?

What if the DJ cancels?

What if—

She inhaled, concentrating on surrendering the tension in her shoulders, loosening the imaginary cords that bound her, but they only cinched tighter.

What if the bakery loses our order?

What if no one shows up to the dance?

What if I don't get it done in time? Any of it? And then the camp, the leadership camp—

What if, what if, what if?

Alone in the hall, she reached up and yanked out a single strand of hair. A prickle, then relief.

One strand of hair, and she could think again.

Another strand, and she could breathe again.

A door opened down the hall. A shadow emerged.

The custodians, she predicted, beginning their slow tour of the school's floors with their mops.

But it was her guidance counselor, Ms. Palmer.

"Miss Miranda Cho." Ms. Palmer eyed her, jingling her keys in the door of the counseling office. "It's early, even for you."

"Just getting some extra credit work done." A baby fib. "You know how it is—if I'm not ahead, I'm behind."

And she was so far behind.

She gritted her teeth and hoped the counselor would leave her alone.

"Actually, Miranda, I'm glad to run into you." Ms. Palmer paused. "Can we talk?"

The counselor disappeared through the door without waiting for a response; Miranda gathered her things from the tiles, and as she lifted up the pages, she gathered herself, too. The counselor wouldn't interrupt the student body president unless it was important.

Like the camp?

What if Ms. Palmer has news?

She folded up her annoyance and put it into her pocket.

Inside her office, Ms. Palmer's fingers clacked on her keyboard, her computer sluggish as it woke up for the day. She'd finally organized (or had someone else organize) the mishmash of files that were, until today, threatening to overtake her desk. She'd gotten a haircut, too—though apparently a fairly cheap one, as her curls were slightly higher and tauter on the left side of her head. And there was a faint, barely there stain on her collar—coffee or black tea, splashed into the shape of a continent.

Small details. Anyone else would gloss over them, let the details remain camouflaged against the rest of the mundane.

But to Miranda, small details were dessert.

"Have you heard anything?" Ms. Palmer asked, and Miranda's heart thumped crookedly.

"Nothing yet."

Nothing in the mailbox, nothing in her e-mail—nothing at all.

“You’re a shoo-in, Miranda.” The black wave composed itself—Ms. Palmer was not the type to soothe. “Your application was perfect—you had a perfect term last spring. Perfect grades, perfect extracurriculars, and now, with you serving as student body president . . .”

Miranda hid a sigh. She could live forever in that word, *perfect*.

Three weeks ago she’d applied to a leadership camp for next summer, one of the most prestigious youth programs in the nation. Students who were selected flew to Washington, D.C., for communications workshops, service projects, White House tours, and meetings with important people. The kind of people Miranda wanted to be when she grew up.

Any day now she would find out if she got in. Any day.

“Miranda, I wanted to talk to you about your absences.”

Somehow Miranda managed to keep her smile from slipping. She even widened it, a cat’s smile.

“I’ve been reviewing your attendance record. You’ve missed ten days of school—we’re still in the first term.” Her eyes bored holes into Miranda. “You’re not skipping school, are you?”

“No,” Miranda said—but she’d hesitated. “At least, not on purpose.”

“What do you mean?”

Here we go, Miranda thought, and swallowed. “Sometimes I have to go with my mom on her work trips. But I

always bring my homework and I've never missed a deadline." She didn't mention that sometimes she had to get extensions for those deadlines.

But the counselor wasn't impressed by Miranda's semi-honest disclosure. "What does your mom do for work?" she asked, and the questions formed before Miranda could even blink:

What if she laughs?

What if she doesn't believe me?

What if I tell her and it doesn't make me feel any less alone?

"She's—" A thousand lies leaped to Miranda's aid:

She's a travel photographer.

She's a corporate lawyer with bicoastal clients.

She's an artist with a case of wanderlust that parenthood never cured.

But the truth was written somewhere in her file; Ms. Palmer would find out if she lied. And then there would be more questions.

Ms. Palmer waited. Why did guidance counselors have to look so kind, so dependable? Everything about her seemed soft to Miranda—a pillow to hug, a hammock to fall into. Someone to spill all her secrets to.

Even the secrets she kept locked away from herself.

"Do you know what cryptozoology is?"

Ms. Palmer frowned. "Like the Loch Ness Monster? Things like that?"

“Yes.” Humiliation flowed through Miranda’s body in a polluted river. “My mom does that. She looks for creatures—last week we were in Ohio.”

“What’s in Ohio?”

“The Frogman.” *Burrow into the ground*, Miranda instructed herself, *and don’t stop until you’re on the other side of the earth*. “Half man, half—”

“Frog.” Ms. Palmer laughed once, a gust of air. “That sounds like a fun job. Does she work for a zoo?”

“No,” Miranda said. That would be respectable. “She runs a blog—*The Bigfoot Files*. She charts sightings, organizes searches, that sort of thing.” She pursed her lips. Those were all the details she was willing to offer—she already wished she could erase the name of the website from this conversation. The last thing she wanted was for Ms. Palmer to look it up.

“Anyway,” Miranda concluded, “she has to travel a lot.”

“And you don’t have a sitter you can stay with? Or family?” Ms. Palmer didn’t ask about Miranda’s father. That, too, would be in her file.

No, Miranda had nothing like that. Babysitters cost money, and family, well . . . family members were supposed to be the ones who stuck around when the good times had run out and only the muck was left.

Miranda and her mother had no such people.

“Can you talk to your mom?” Ms. Palmer said. “See if she’d be willing to cut back on her travel, at least during the

school year? It's important that you're here for classes—"

"I know." Miranda hated when she snapped, when she knew she was acting like a stereotype of her age. But she hated it more when adults explained things as if they were simple, when in fact they were impossibly messy. They handed her a skein of tangled yarn, then wondered why she wasn't wearing it as a sweater.

Ms. Palmer studied her. "Are you afraid to talk to your mom?"

Miranda was so surprised by the question, she nearly laughed. "No," she said, and it was the truth. Not scared of her mother. Not at all. That was akin to being afraid of a muffin. A crayon. A toadstool.

Ms. Palmer leaned back in her chair. Miranda made herself small as a beetle as the counselor studied her—hands folded calmly in her lap, lungs bringing in air and returning it with a steady rhythm. No detail at all that would give her away. Nothing that would let Ms. Palmer know how much Miranda wanted to reach for a hair.

"You only have two absences left before you face losing credit for this term," Ms. Palmer said, and Miranda's heart crash-landed in her stomach. No credit meant her grades would be suspended. Liquefied. Her end-of-term report card would bear those two dreaded letters—NC—instead of those bright, clean As sweeping down the margin, unbroken, like a mountain chain.

“And you know what that would mean: even if you did get into the camp”—*if*, Ms. Palmer said *if*—“you’d have to turn it down to make up your absences at summer school.”

When Miranda was dismissed, she stood on gelatin legs and muttered something resembling a good-bye. She headed back into the still-empty hallway, closing the counselor’s door behind her.

If. She’d said if.

The hours before school started had always felt like Miranda’s secret. A magic time.

Now the building seemed eerie without the kids talking, running, pulsing through like blood cells. The halls were just empty veins, and they felt thinner now, too. Less room to breathe. Miranda’s thoughts rattled around in her brain, echoing, colliding into each other, entire universes.

A shoo-in for the leadership camp, Ms. Palmer called her—and the counselor was not generous with compliments.

But she had also said *if*.

There could be no *if*. Miranda had to go to that camp. She had to.

In the meantime, she sank back down among familiar shadows—the shadow of a tower of assignments whose height was incompatible with the amount of time she had left to finish them. The shadow of the teachers with

whom she would have to bargain, *again*, for extensions. The shadow of her cringing and squirming and loathing herself for needing the extra days.

Looming over them all was the biggest shadow, the one she could never outrun, the one with a mouth and a spine and a thrumming heartbeat—the shadow of the knowledge that she would never get it all done, she would never get caught up. No matter how fast she worked, no matter how hard she hustled—next week would be Alkali Lake. The week after that—Hope, Idaho. The absences, piling up like beach trash.

Until something changed, every day would be a hustle.

Miranda pulled out hair after hair while she raced through her homework, and on every strand she made a furious promise: No more missed classes. No more extensions. No more meetings with Ms. Palmer where the counselor cross-examined her about her life and about her mother, getting dangerously close to the truth.

Between yanks and sentence diagrams, her mind galloped over happy terrain: daydreams of the leadership camp. Two months of catered meals and clean, matching bedsheets. Two months of grown-ups acting like grown-ups. Two months with two thousand miles and at least that many imaginary creatures between her and her mother.

Perfect, Ms. Palmer had said. And Miranda would be.

School always ended too quickly.

The hours flapped past like hurried birds in a cold sky. All too soon, Miranda sat outside, beneath the old bur oak tree, her backpack full enough with books and papers and expectations that it could sink her to the bottom of a river. She should have unzipped it at once and finished her vocabulary sheets, but instead she leaned her head against the trunk, the scars of previous generations' initials carved into its bark, and allowed herself the briefest, smallest moment to simply breathe.

Breathe and watch the tree.

Boughs, blackened green against the blue of sky. Leaf after leaf, layer after layer, until the canopy was thick enough to bury the clouds.

Anything could be hiding behind these leaves.

She stiffened. That wasn't one of her own thoughts, born of her own mind. That thought belonged to someone else.

Even something as simple as the leaves of a tree had been ruined for her.

She looked around—at real life unfolding before her. At the last of the buses driving away. At the faculty parking lot slowly emptying, teachers and staff going home to cook dinner, to tend to household chores, to zone out in front of the television until bedtime—things normal people did. Stray boys used the near-empty parking lot to cruise on longboards, despite the signs posted everywhere forbidding it.

Miranda squinted—she'd known all of these boys once, back when they were all little and their families had rotated carpools to get them to kindergarten. Back when Miranda's mother worked a nine-to-five, and different moms would sometimes watch her after school for an hour or two.

Back before everyone in her mother's life dropped them like old sandwiches.

Now the boys stretched tall and lurpy, like their bones had grown faster than their skin. She had grown, too, she knew, but somehow when she was around these boys, she felt like she hadn't changed at all. Like she was still

freckled and pigtailed, still three feet tall, still starry-eyed. Still telling her outlandish stories—and still believing every word.

She hadn't been that girl in a long time.

One of them saw her and, after a moment, waved. A dash of his hand; he could have been swatting away a bug.

Miranda pretended not to see.

To-do list, Miranda typed on her phone.

Proofread flyer for Science Club sign-ups

Finish bibliography for English

After a moment, she added:

Talk to Mom

It was late summer—or early fall, depending on which side you were rooting for. Pockets of color were visible on the mountains, brushstrokes of faintest yellow and ochre and pink among the dark conifers. Chilly evenings stung when the sun went down, but a faux-July still made for sweltering days.

A small season of its own, this season of change, of transition. Miranda always felt a burst of momentum at this time of year, a gentle push from the gods of new school terms and sharpened pencils and fresh starts.

Not even the click and shift of September could make Miranda excited for this last item on her to-do list. She wasn't *afraid* to talk to her mom. But that didn't mean she

wanted to. Indeed, she would rather—well, that was a list that could have gone on for miles, the number of things she'd rather do than talk to her mom.

The oak leaves turned over, a soft breeze finding them above Miranda's head. And beside her, something rustled the well-manicured hedges trimmed along the junior high building. Her pulse spiked and her breathing slowed, her back straightening against the trunk. All involuntary reactions, her body triggered by the sound of twigs snapping and the smell of fresh air.

It's nothing, she told herself. A squirrel or a bird.

Her mind knew there was no such thing as monsters, but her body was slower to convince. When a pigeon hopped out between the bushes, she still exhaled harder than was necessary.

It was always nothing.

A trio of girls came out of the science room, one of them carrying a mushy, post-eruption papier-mâché volcano. Two of them were the Martinez twins, Alex and Carmen.

The other girl was Emma.

Miranda had a brief window in which to dodge them—to run back into the school, to hide in the baseball dugout, to climb up into the tree and make a nest, where she would live forever—but her dignity made her hesitate, and then it was too late.

“Hi!” Carmen called.

I didn't hear her, Miranda told herself. I'm busy, I'm writing in my student planner, I'm working . . .

And then she heard it:

“Hey, Miranda.”

Emma.

She could never forget the timbre of Emma's voice—rippling soft in the air, pretty as birdsong. Even after a whole summer without hearing it, Miranda knew it like she knew her own heartbeat.

The girls walked toward the oak, and Miranda's chances of avoiding them evaporated.

What if Emma told them what happened?

What if she's coming over to confront me about it?

What if they laugh at me?

She put on her official student body president face: engaged mouth, listening eyes. “Oh, hi!”

“Are you waiting for your mom?” Was that a barb in Emma's words?

Miranda skimmed her fingers along the straps of her backpack, letting them dance into the ends of her hair. “No, I was about to start walking.” *Their rides will be here any minute, she reasoned, and then I'll be free of them.*

Free of conversation. Free of questions.

Free of trying to fill the space between Emma and herself with anything but this discomfort, gathering like dust.

Her vocabulary sheet waited, unfinished in her

backpack. Was there a word for this? A word for people who used to be friends, and then stopped?

“You’re walking? All the way home?” Emma lived near Miranda, on the opposite side of town—in fact Miranda could still see Emma’s bedroom window from her own bedroom window.

Sometimes, when she couldn’t sleep, Miranda would push aside her curtains and wait until Emma’s window went dark and her night-light snapped on—the rose-shaped one Emma kept by her bed, the one that made her whole room glow pink as sunset, each plastic petal the intense shade of the floribunda buds in Emma’s front yard. Then Miranda would snap off her own light and fall horizontal onto her covers and close her eyes.

Somehow, on difficult nights, it was easier to find sleep if she pretended both of them were looking for it at the same time.

Miranda pushed the subject elsewhere. “Was this your project?”

Emma surveyed her volcano with a wrinkled brow. “Yep. All those hours painting these dumb little palm trees by hand, and Howard only gave me a B.”

“Everyone knows Howard is a beast,” Alex said. “She never gives As. I made a lightbulb potato and she still docked me points for skipping a step in the scientific method.”

“Which step?” Miranda asked.

“Hypothesis,” she said. “Our brother did the same experiment when he was in her class, so it wouldn’t be fair to guess what would happen, right? I already knew.”

The girls laughed. Miranda laughed. Emma glanced at her, happy blue eyes lit up like a carnival sky.

Those eyes.

You can do this, Miranda told herself. She didn’t know why Emma was speaking to her now, after all these months, why Emma was so smiley, so warm.

Don’t mess this up. Don’t do or say anything weird. Nothing like what Mom would say.

“What did you get?” Emma nudged Miranda and sent her heart into a tap dance.

“Um, a ninety-nine.”

“Wow,” the twins chorused.

A ninety-nine, she wanted to repeat. *As in missing one point*. Not a solid one hundred, Miranda’s favorite number, the double zeroes like fat balloons full of air, the roundest, most perfect number in the grading system.

“What was your project?” Alex asked.

Miranda studied the way the blades of grass bent beneath Alex’s sandal, the spiky shadows it made on the sidewalk. “Oh. Um, I tracked the spread of an invasive species of borer beetles through a neighborhood’s trees.”

The twins’ jaws dropped. “No wonder!” Carmen said.

“Miranda’s brilliant,” Emma said.

Miranda glowed with the memory of what it was like

to hear someone say these things in this possessive way. To feel proud of your best friend's accomplishments, responsible for her triumphs, to be equal partners in every high and low of her life, like you have a growth. Like you have a *twin*.

"So you're like a real scientist," Carmen said. "Are you going to invent something?"

"Build a robot?" Alex said. "Discover a new dinosaur?"

"Maybe someday." There was no limit for a girl who cared so much about her ranking in the district-wide science fair that she charted the reproductive habits and egg sac locations of the beetles for six months. Yes, she started plotting her project last spring, while still in sixth grade. A preemptive strike for her application to the leadership camp, and, for anyone who happened to be looking, a chance to do the scientific method right. To show that she could do science the right way.

If you were going for perfect, you couldn't afford any practice shots. Perfect didn't believe in them.

Carmen said, "You should come over! We're making cookies."

"We live three blocks from here," Alex said. "Emma's coming, too."

Emma shifted the volcano in her arms and gave Miranda a ghost of a smile—but her eyes, Miranda noticed, were watching, hyperaware. Waiting.

Remembering.

“I can’t.” Sweat condensed in Miranda’s armpits.
“My—my mom’s coming—”

“You said you were walking,” Emma said gently, and
Miranda’s insides flailed.

For a politician, she sure was terrible at lying.

Carmen linked her arm through Miranda’s. “Just call
your mom when you get to our house.”

The elbow crooked in hers made Miranda reel. Had it
been this easy before, to make a friend?

“What do you say, Prez?” Emma was looking at her,
right at her. Hope scratched against her rib cage.

It had been easy to lose a friend, too. Her brain regur-
gitated the image at her like a sip of foul vinegar:

Emma’s face, the last time Miranda talked to her.

Emma’s cheeks, bright as fire when she made her
escape from Miranda’s house.

Emma’s steps down the porch reverberating in
Miranda’s ears long after Emma was gone.

Reality struck Miranda like a meteorite:

*What are you doing? You can’t go to their house. You
can’t go to anyone’s house.*

And no one can come to yours.

She made a big show of slapping her forehead. “I left
something in my locker!”

“What?” Emma asked.

Miranda thought quickly. Lying to grown-ups was easy. They were so eager for you to say what they wanted to hear, they'd rearrange your words themselves if they had to.

But kids saw through you. The three pairs of eyes on Miranda made her feel as sheer as the wind.

"Student council stuff," she blurted. There. Nice and ambiguous. And true, if they wanted proof. "You—you guys go on ahead." Why were the words so hard to say? Why did they come with an aching in her throat, an unfairness in her chest? She wished, desperately, that she could be one of them. A normal girl, giggling with friends, gobbling up chocolate chip cookies, inviting people over on a whim. She wished she could be the kind of girl who says yes, who could go enjoy the normal bustle of someone else's house.

But she would never be such a girl.

"Should we wait for you?" Alex said.

Emma was silent, but the expression on her face—the one that said *this is sad, but not surprising*—said everything for her.

"Uh, actually," Miranda said, "I might have a family thing."

And before the girls could spot the punctures in her lies—the way she wrenched her hands, like she was trying to remove them from her wrists—she turned and practically ran back into the school, where she hid in the foyer

and watched through the tinted windows as the girls walked away without looking back.

What if that was my chance?

What if she had been reaching out? Testing things?

Opening a door?

What if there was a way—?

But Miranda was an expert at knowing when things were impossible.

A door had been shut—Miranda was the one who had shut it, and it would stay closed.

The secretary came through the foyer. “Miranda,” she said, surprised. “Don’t you have a ride?”

“My mom’s on her way,” Miranda said. To support her claim, she let the secretary walk her out of the school, back into the golden afternoon light; they paused together where the curb dropped off into the road.

The secretary shifted her purse against her body. “I can’t leave until all you students are home.”

Guilt crept into Miranda’s bones. Her mother didn’t actually know school ended at two forty-five. Her mother thought school ended at three thirty.

She thought it, because that’s what time Miranda told her school ended.

That way the school was always empty when Miranda was picked up.

“She’s running pretty late, isn’t she?” The secretary stared out at the street, the sun’s rays making ripples of

the black asphalt, and Miranda fiddled with the edge of her shirt to keep her hands from migrating to her hair to yank out her guilt.

“Wait, what is that?” The secretary blocked the bright rays with a flat hand. “Is that . . . a dog?”

A vehicle cruised into the pickup lane—a huge, tan vehicle, a cross between a van and an RV. Cartoonish eyeballs circled the headlights; plastic antlers branched out from a dented roof rack. A pink tongue unfurled from the front bumper and dingy brown fringe dangled from the doors.

This was why she couldn’t go with Emma.

This, and a million reasons just as hairy and embarrassing.

Miranda screwed her mouth into a tight little pucker, putting away her smile for the day. “That’s my mom.”

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The Critter Mobile was missing one of its hubcaps. It still wore the crusty mud of last month's trip through Jackson Hole—hot on the trail of the borophagus, a hyena-dog hybrid rumored to prowl the shores of Wyoming's lakes. All they'd found was beached carp and trash.

A collection of bumper stickers coated the cargo carrier on the Critter Mobile's roof, overlapping one another in a veritable map of the vehicle's travels: YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK. ARCHES—BEEN THERE, DONE THAT. EVERGLADES—LIVE FOR THE ADVENTURE!

Front and center, above the license plate, was the white I BELIEVE sticker, like an emblem.

“Where were you?” Miranda asked through the open window.

Her mother held up her brick of a cell phone. “I’m sorry, Bean, I lost track of time. Phone died.”

“Then charge it.” Miranda glanced back at the school. The secretary still stood there, squinting at the van—*What are you waiting for?* she thought. *Go home.*

“I can’t find my charger.”

Miranda deposited her backpack on the bench behind her, then pointed at the sign of a left-facing arrow with a red slash through it. ONE WAY. DROP-OFF OR PICKUP ONLY. “You’re not supposed to drive this way.”

“We’re fine,” her mother said. “That’s just a formality.”

“It’s really not.” Miranda’s quiet reply was lost in the noises of the Critter Mobile: the fart sound of the captain’s seat as she sat down, the screech of the door slamming shut, the sinister whistling in the undercarriage as her mother pulled away from the curb.

Miranda bent way over, out of sight, pretending to fix her sandal; the Critter Mobile always took a few minutes to accelerate, which meant they slunk past the busy soccer fields with the pace and energy of a parade float, scraggly brown fringe blowing in their exhaust.

Kat, Miranda’s mother, tossed a handful of spicy Funyuns into her mouth with one hand and operated the long, sticky gear shift with the other. “How was school, Bean?”

“Good.”

“Any big tests coming up?”

Miranda waited until they passed the edge of the school's grassy acreage before she answered. "We just had midterms."

"How'd you do?" Kat asked.

"Fine."

The Critter Mobile's driver-side mirror had suffered a fatal injury in the Ozarks last summer, so Kat had to stretch tall and arch around her headrest to see behind her when changing lanes. She did so now, and Miranda watched her, holding her breath. They were technically the same size, but Miranda always thought of her mother as shorter, smaller. Kat added bulk to her frame with sheer, floral-printed flowing robes—capes, Miranda called them, and Kat would argue, "Capes don't have sleeves, Bean. These are capelettes." As if Miranda should not only understand the various kingdoms and phyla of cryptids and monsters, but also demonstrate a working knowledge of the classification of capes, capelettes, robes, dusters, sweaters, and such.

With Kat twisted so, Miranda took in the full effect of her mother's hairstyle. Kat's long black hair was braided two ways: a huge fat braid down one side of her head, and six little snaky braids on the other side, sparkly lavender ribbons woven through the strands.

Miranda worked with other students' mothers all the time. They came to PTA meetings, they volunteered for assemblies, they chaperoned dances—

To-do list, she quickly typed while the thought was as fresh in her mind as wet ink:

Confirm that Hannah's mother ordered the linens for the Fall Fling refreshment tables

She loved how those moms dressed—casually in comfortable jeans and T-shirts, or in suburban-mom cardigan sets, or in tailored pants and blazers if they came straight from work. Their purses were subtle, their shoes practical, their haircuts symmetrical. Miranda always wanted to stare, wanted to drink in every detail.

Between Kat's flowery capes, her wild accessories (today's earrings were glittering white unicorns with jeweled lilac stars for eyes), and the giant silver-rimmed glasses that magnified her eyes to gargantuan proportions, Miranda often felt she was being raised by a wispy, human-size butterfly.

"Guess who I talked to today?" Kat said.

Miranda replied on autopilot, "Who?"

"Uncle Bob."

Uncle Bob was not Miranda's uncle.

Kat started calling him that years ago, but he wasn't related to any of the Chos. Bob was one of her mother's colleagues—or the closest thing Kat had to colleagues. He was a pale, perspiring, balding, middle-aged man who kept a portable metal detector on his belt and was a close talker. When Miranda thought of their meetings with him over the years, the memories came along with the

scents of the things he'd eaten most recently—microwave taquitos, cheesesteak, onion rings.

“There was a Bigfoot sighting in Washington today,” Kat went on. “In Olympic National Park. At the falls in Fable Forest, early this morning. A couple of honeymooners spotted him across the reservoir—full corporeal sighting. Red eyes and everything! He lumbered back into the rain forest before they could get their cameras.”

Energy leached from Miranda's body as her mother spoke. Another week, another Bigfoot sighting—and, Miranda thought with new alarm, another trip. Another absence.

She could not miss any more school. She couldn't.

No matter what a pair of bored backpackers thought they had seen.

“Oh, don't worry, Bean,” Kat soothed her daughter, misinterpreting her frown. “No photo means it'll stay hush-hush for now—the last thing we want is for *Bigfoot Bozos* to catch wind.” She put on a war face. “Someone's going to get him on film one of these days, and it's not going to be them.”

Bigfoot Bozos was a reality show in the style of nature documentaries, filming Bigfoot researchers out in the wild. They flew around the country and captured it all: Bigfoot hunters sniffing the dirt for traces of the beast's alleged sulfuric body odor. Bigfoot hunters sitting in lawn chairs for hours at a time with binoculars glued to their

eyes, eating cold beans from a can while waiting for the Squatch himself to prance through camp. Editors compiled the footage and added music and sound effects, making the cryptozoologists look maximally ridiculous.

To Kat, the show made a mockery of everything she stood for.

To Miranda, the show was the punchline to the joke she was living.

Kat moved on from the alleged Fable Forest sighting to the latest conference presentations on Bigfoot's post-summer migration patterns to Uncle Bob's theory about Bigfoot's electrosensory abilities—"Just like sharks!"—and she didn't stop talking.

She was still talking when the Critter Mobile lurched into the driveway of their humble single-story house. Miranda got out of the car and shut the door, and still her mother talked, hands waving so energetically she honked the horn by accident.

Miranda followed the sidewalk down to the mailbox, all the while keeping an eye on Emma's house across the street. Emma's garage was open, the curtains drawn—if Miranda didn't know for certain that Emma was currently with the twins, she wouldn't have risked walking outside at all.

What if they decided to come to Emma's house instead?

But she had to check the mail.

It could be today.

She prepared herself and opened the mailbox.

Nothing. So not today.

No mail yesterday, either. Or the day before.

Miranda kept her face steady in case—just in case—someone could see her. In case Emma had already made it home and was watching from her bedroom window.

Inside, though, Miranda roiled.

No news about her leadership camp, positive or negative.

She wanted to know.

A quartet of terra-cotta lawn gnomes stood on their porch—much beloved by Kat, much endured by Miranda.

She kind of hated those gnomes.

It was unsettling, how easy it was to hate things lately. How she'd become quick to the drawing of scorn, swift to be stirred up over things which, not so long ago, had delighted her.

“Hello, Clarence,” Kat said, shaking the hand of the bespectacled gnome with the daisies in his beard. “Fine afternoon.”

Miranda went inside before Kat started responding for the inanimate lawn ornaments; she couldn't stand the sound of her mother doing a wizened old gnome voice.

A habitat provides clues to the creatures it contains; it cites what foods sustain them, how they spend the darkest, starriest hours, what they do to bathe and wash and keep their skin or hair or scales or fur neat. Careful observation

of such a habitat—a collecting of details—could tell you so much about the animals who called it home.

So then this was the Cho household:

Every wall but one was covered over in photos, in maps, in artifacts from their travels. Every spare surface displayed something that had been clawed from the earth or hewn from its slumber in a bog or cut from a tree. A wiry white hair in a glass case (its owner, Kat insisted, a snow Yeti). A yellow femur hanging above a photograph of the Chos in Florida (the bone belonging, Kat would have explained to queriers, to a skunk ape). A segment of petrified tentacle (“a giant freshwater octopus fossil!” Kat called it; “a common prehistoric squid,” Miranda argued) on the coffee table beside a stack of obscure wildlife magazines.

Centered on the mantel was a hulking footprint—plaster and rock and embedded twigs. An impression of the first print Kat had ever found. Other mothers kept photos of their children above the fireplace.

One wall of the living room was covered in rainbow splatters of oil paint. On a random, wine-soaked Friday, Kat had forgone ordering dinner and instead started this mural, but abandoned it by midnight, before it could ever become anything other than paint slop. It was still there, a rough, thick layer of abstract clouds and nonsense shapes.

“That part kind of looks like a tail,” Kat would sometimes say. “Maybe it wants to be a lizard.” As if globs of oil had ambitions.

Miranda knew it would never be anything but a mess.

Another of her mother's projects that would never be completed.

Kat set her keys on the counter and turned to her daughter. "I'm going to update my blog. Do you want to—?"

"I have homework." Miranda said. "Can I use the laptop first?" She was already down the hall, closing her bedroom door when she heard her mother say, "Okay, Bean."

The habitat that was Miranda's bedroom was one of bare white walls, well-dusted crown moldings, and plain blue curtains left to hang beside their window. No posters, no photos, no trinkets. Furniture was utilitarian. The desk was aseptic, a lone history book open.

An environment clean of distractions—but even so, its inhabitant was distracted.

If she tilted her head, Miranda could see the hydrangeas in Emma's front yard, the corner of Emma's roof, the checkerboard lines in Emma's freshly mowed yard. All of them familiar details, recalled in blank moments as Miranda walked to school on dark mornings, between sentences on English essays, before she fell asleep.

Details of a former life.

Miranda could have picked this apart all evening. She wrestled with the idea of calling her, leaving her a message, retracting her earlier excuses, inviting her over. Letting her see Miranda like this.

In her habitat, exposed.

Letting Emma see Kat again. Introducing the two properly, crossing her fingers that it wasn't too much—that Emma would see the footprint above the fireplace, and the assortment of antlers in the garden window, and the speckled eggs in the freezer, and decide to stay.

But Miranda drew her curtains and unzipped her backpack.

She opened the laptop. As its screen warmed and brightened, she checked the number of homework assignments she needed to complete (four) and rechecked the due dates for all of them (tomorrow).

Four assignments. Then she could do it.

She cracked open her notebook and, making sure the volume on the laptop was low, started an episode of *Bigfoot Bozos*.

Kat could never know, but Miranda binge-watched the show. She'd seen every episode.

"My pa saw a squatch when he was my age," a man with a neckbeard was saying, "and his pa saw one, too." He sniffed. "Guess I was just born to believe."

A shaky camera panned an ambiguous forest, then the lime green flash of night-vision goggles, and the logo sprawled across the screen, the *B* in *Bigfoot* shaped like a footprint.

And then the man launched into his list of evidence, all of it limp, and Miranda's laugh was freeing. These same things had been uttered here, under this very roof,

multiple times, and they sounded as porous and outlandish from the neckbearded believer as they did coming from the woman in the “I Kissed the Jersey Devil (and I Liked It)” shirt in the kitchen.

This was why she watched it. For catharsis. The show was the closest thing she had to a confidant.

“Everyone keeps telling me I’m wasting my time out here,” the man said, “but I know he’s out there.”

“How?” the interviewer prompted. “How do you know?”

The man shrugged. “I always trust my gut. And my gut believes.”

Miranda looked up from her notebook and studied the screen, the swift cutaway to a snarl of overgrown branches and thickets of green and moss and leaves. For a moment it focused on a particular mass, a clump of something in the corner of the trees.

Miranda hit pause.

She stared.

A shadow.

She played it again, and the camera whipped past the shadow to the man. His sweaty-lipped, “Over there! I saw it near them bushes!” had Miranda snorting, rolling her eyes, and scanning her history study guide for the best possible entry point.

You need something, Bean?”

Miranda hovered in the kitchen. Her hands wanted very much to pull out a hair—just one, to settle her dancing nerves. She’d worked for nearly three hours, finishing her assignments and whittling the day’s to-do list down to this one last item:

Talk to Mom

She searched for the right words; they flitted away like shy moths in the dark.

Kat was sorting artifacts—when she had too many of one kind of object to store in their house, she sold them on her blog. She finished wrapping the dried scales of a North Atlantic furred trout skin in tissue paper and looked at her daughter.

Miranda cleared her throat. “I was thinking—” The doorbell rang, and her heart kicked against her chest as if it had grown feet.

What if it’s Emma?

What if she’s ready to be friends again?

What if she’s ready to forget what happened?

But Kat came into the kitchen with a long white package.

“It’s here!” Out of a snowstorm of packing peanuts Kat lifted something that could only be described as a Contraption. “Do you know what this is?”

Of course I don’t, Miranda answered wearily in her mind, *but I’ll bet you’re going to tell me.*

“This is a scanning pulse detector: part radar, part video recorder.” She positioned the thing on her shoulder and aimed at the fridge. “Trust me, if a creature walks past, this thing will catch it one way or another. Isn’t it amazing, Bean? Someone on *Bigfoot Files* recommended it.”

Every one of her mother’s words was a tentacle, covered in suckers, reaching out, feeling for human contact—and it made Miranda want to fold in half, limb and hair, and hide beneath a rock.

“And this,” Kat said as she unwrapped a stainless-steel canister, “is for scat samples . . .”

Miranda’s attention drifted like flotsam, wandering to the fridge where a printed article hung on a cheeseburger

magnet: “Patterson-Gimlin’s Bigfoot, Fifty Years Later: The Real Deal, Or Gorilla Suit Hoax?”

Another paper was below it, a newspaper clipping yellowed with age—it might be older than Miranda—about the sighting of a leather-winged, long-beaked prehistoric-looking bird in the Rio Grande Valley, silhouetted against a flaxen harvest moon.

If Kat was correct, the whole world was full of creatures and mysteries and magical things, around us all the time. Things most people couldn’t—or wouldn’t—see. *Who knew so many of us were blind?* Miranda thought.

She used to think it, too, or something similar. Miranda remembered when she would wake up every day seeing sparkles in the corners of her eye, when she would walk with her hands open and loose because she knew, any second, a falling star could land in her palm. A time when she would check outside every window, behind every tree, and peek into every backyard—just in case. Just in case she caught a glimpse of something that no one else saw.

Kat still held the contraption, as proud as if she’d birthed it herself. “I can’t wait to try it this weekend.”

“This weekend?” Miranda said.

“Olympic National Park, remember, Bean?” Kat tested all the buttons on her new gadgets. “We’re going to find Bigfoot.”

And then the right words gushed from Miranda’s mouth. “Mom? About this weekend—I’m not coming.”

Stars belonged in dreams and in doodles and in night skies. Miranda's hands clenched into fists now, tight enough to crush and smother a star even if it dropped into her palm like rain.

Kat filled a mason jar with water and lifted it to her succulents in the garden window—plants renowned for being easy to keep alive, and yet Kat killed a new batch every year. “I know it seems like we just got home, but this could be it.” Her eyes twinkled behind her teacup-round glasses. “Uncle Bob's in Tahoe with the Tessie crew. He won't be able to break away, not for days—so it'll just be us. Just you and me, Bean.”

Beneath Miranda's skin, her blood sizzled. “Mom, no.” She breathed in. “I cannot miss any more school. I've already missed so much!” Ten days, Ms. Palmer had said, a number that still made Miranda's breath snag in her throat.

“We haven't been gone that much—” Kat started, but Miranda held out her fingers and counted.

“Sharlie in Idaho. The Mothman back east. Arkansas for the Howler.” Miranda listed every trip they'd taken since summer vacation had ended until she wiggled seven fingers. “Seven trips, Mom. Plus all the driving time, there and back—that's ten whole days of school I've missed. I haven't even made up my late work from Ohio.”

Kat considered it. “They'll just have to miss you for a few more days. It's not like you're skipping school for

Disneyland—this is a major scientific discovery, Bean! It's been months since there's been a sighting with such specifics, and this is a new site for us. A real rain forest. It's the perfect habitat for a humanoid creature: freshwater rivers and valleys and high ground—”

“We never find anything!” Miranda burst in. “No matter where we go, it's always the same. It's footprints, footprints, footprints.”

“Not true!” her mother crowed. “What about Tennessee? We found the hair of an Appalachian black panther!”

“That was dog hair,” Miranda said.

“Quit being such a cynic—as soon as Bob finishes the DNA analysis, we'll know what it really was.”

Miranda instinctively tuned her mother out. The DNA analysis would come back with the same results that all the others had: zero evidence of the existence of any new species.

DNA was real science, and in real science, if the facts don't match the hypothesis, you didn't throw out the facts—you made a new hypothesis. You adjusted. You rearranged, you took new observations and tried again. Real science freed itself of all expectations, sorting the evidence as it came.

Which is why Kat would never be a real scientist.

“If I miss any more school, they'll drop my credit for this term,” Miranda informed her mother.

“All right.” Kat said, taking in her daughter’s sullen face. “We’ll slow down after this trip. Weekends only—no more absences after tomorrow. And Monday. And possibly Tuesday, and that’ll be the last time you miss school—unless we need Wednesday, too. But it’ll be worth it, Bean. It’ll all be worth it when we find one.”

Miranda knew there was no point in bringing up the leadership camp, no point in explaining to Kat that her work trips dangled over the camp like an ax on a string—Kat couldn’t comprehend that anything was as important as Bigfoot. She probably thought Miranda could brag about it at school, convince her science teacher to let these trips count as extra credit.

And then this obsession of Kat’s, this fixation on creatures mysterious and unknowable—it would billow and strangle and burn everything else in their lives—it had already taken Emma.

Miranda wasn’t going to let it take anything else.

“No.” She was surprised to hear how quietly it came out; she found she didn’t need volume to make her point. Instead she found the old anger, rising like a storm within her—and the more she concentrated on this word *no*, the more powerful she felt. She could topple thousand-year-old trees, she could grind the Critter Mobile into axles and rubber and metallic mulch, she could blow away the whole Fable Forest, shadows and waterfalls and Bigfoot and all—but she would not go on this trip.

The leadership camp, she thought, and it was a beacon in the swirling madness. Anything to get into the camp. Anything to break free from Bigfoot, from this weird house cluttered with fake artifacts and oversteeped dreams.

Free from her mother.

Kat pretended to be wounded. “Other kids would be thrilled to have a mom who lets them miss school for trips around the country.”

Miranda resisted a snort. What did her mother know about other kids?

What did she even know about this one?

“I’m not other kids,” she finally said.

Her mother exhaled. “All right, Bean. I’m not sure who you can stay with—Uncle Bob is still out of town—”

“I’m twelve years old,” Miranda said. “I’m old enough to take care of myself.”

Kat shook her head. “This isn’t one evening watching a movie alone with a pizza. This is a whole weekend. Maybe longer.”

“I’ll go to sleep at a decent time,” Miranda vowed, “and I won’t make any messes or watch anything trashy. *Please*. I can’t miss any more school.”

As Kat regarded her daughter, the daylight from the living room hit her unicorn earrings, making them gleam. Making their purple eyes sparkle, almost like they were alive—to anyone else they would have seemed alive. To Miranda they were just the gaudy details of the biggest

wound in her life. “Promise me, Bean,” her mother said, “that you’ll make at least one mess, okay? Blow up a potato in the microwave or something. And only let three teenage boys over at a time—they’ll eat all my Funyuns.”

Miranda spared her mother half a smile. “Your Funyuns are safe with me,” she said, holding back a high-pitched glee because she’d won—she’d won!

No trudging through yet another national park, which should be a sublime experience, a chance to celebrate the natural heritage of the country—but was always ruined when they spent the whole time tracking cryptids. No crawling through grime and mud to spy, for hours, on a watering hole that’s deader than the school halls after the bell, no pretending to be excited about bushes that appeared to be trampled in a very specific way. No footprints or stray hairs or errant growls in the twilight.

No disappointment.

“Indian okay for dinner?” her mother asked.

“Yes. Good. Anything you want.” Miranda went back into her bedroom, where she shut the door and promptly leaped onto the bed, mouthing, “Yes!” silently, so Kat wouldn’t hear her celebrating the first time she’d ever successfully turned her back on Bigfoot.

When Miranda was finished gloating, she went back to the laptop.

She had finished her homework, accomplished all of