

## CHAPTER ONE

**W**hen your family name was Bigfoot, size mattered. My ancestors were proud of their name, but they were even more proud of their massive feet. Etchings of my great, great, great grandparents and their gigantic feet filled the rocky walls of our cave home: my great, great, great uncle Boondoggle picked fungi from between his massive toes; great aunt Brunhilda balanced a boulder on top of her hairy foot. On the cave roof was the largest etching: Grandma Bertha doing a double kick, lifting her huge feet so high they were level with her bushy eyebrows. The pictures invited the next Bigfoot to join them on the cave's walls. Every Bigfoot could claim to have the largest feet in the tribe. Every Bigfoot, that is, except me.

Everything else about me was completely normal. I stood seven feet tall, a little above average for a sasquatchewinian boy of twelve winters. Long soft brown hair covered every single part of my body like moss on the shady side of a stone. I knew how to blend in with the surrounding fir trees and disappear from sight, a survival skill every sasquatch needed against the baldfaces who camped at the bottom of our mountain home. I could disappear better than any other sasquatch in the tribe, so quickly that you'd think I was a ghost, but while I was the best at hiding myself, I couldn't hide my tiny feet from my curious tribe members.

Jackrabbits had long ears. Moose had huge antlers. Sasquatches had large feet. Our tribe believed in the power of the foot so much that the sasquatch with the largest pods always served as tribe leader. Grandma Bertha had a saying: "You'd better have big feet to follow in the footsteps of the leaders who walked before you." She had led the tribe for many winters, just as her father had ruled and now just as my mother did. Grandma Bertha had high hopes that I'd be the next tribe leader.

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When I was eye high to a hairball, she squeezed my foot and told me stories about her dad protecting our mountain home against a wandering grizzly bear. She claimed he kicked the angry bear off the mountain with his giant tootsies and that after that, no bears ever bothered us again. This kind of courage ran in the Bigfoot family. Mom had travelled to a faraway mountain to save our distant cousins, the Yeti clan, who were separated from our tribe and lost in a snowstorm. I couldn't wait for my feet to grow, so I could take my rightful place as leader and set off to do hairy deeds that would become well-groomed tribe legend.

When my eleventh winter passed, I began to bloom. Every sasquatchewinian child longed for the blooming, because it meant they could finally set off into the woods without asking for permission or having an older sister go with them. Like every other sasquatchewinian kid, the hair on my chest sprouted from a bald patch to a lush meadow. I grew tall and straight like the mighty mountain pines near our cave home. My hairy hands grew as large as beaver tails and my scrawny arms and legs became

as thick as tree trunks. The only things that didn't grow were my feet.

My parents told me I was a late bloomer and not to worry, but Grandma Bertha treated me differently. Instead of squeezing my feet, she started to pull on my toes and told Mom to keep me in the cave until my tiny tootsies grew. She didn't want the other sasquatches to see me, arguing that our tribe survived because we learned to avoid anything that was odd or out of place. Different meant dangerous. A grizzly bear was different. A mountain lion was different. My small feet were different. Grandma Bertha said she didn't want my feet to scare the others.

But I knew the truth: she was disappointed in me. Her dreams of another Bigfoot taking over the tribe and carrying on the family tradition had shriveled like a dried blueberry. While she didn't say it aloud, I could see her bushy eyebrows droop as she stroked her beard and glanced sideways at my feet. She was right about keeping me away from the others. Sasquatchlings would tease me as soon as they saw my tiny feet. They'd cough up hairballs of sloppy nicknames: Barnabas, the tiny terror,

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Tippy Toes Barnabas, Littlefoot, Pine Cone Toes, Small-squash. Sasquatchlings could be very cruel. I agreed to stay inside the cave until my feet grew, but Mom wouldn't hear of it. She said she was proud of me because the size of my heart made up for the size of my feet.

Mom and Grandma Bertha argued about what to do. If I hadn't been so upset about my feet, I would have found it funny to see my mother argue with Grandma Bertha the same way I argued with Mom.

"Barnabas is staying in the cave," Grandma Bertha stated.

"He's going out," Mom argued.

"Don't you take that tone with me, young sasquatch."

"But, but, but . . ."

"No buts, Bernice Belinda Bigfoot."

"It's not fair, Mom."

"That's the way it has to be."

At one point in the argument, it looked like Mom was holding her breath to get her way. Grandma Bertha had a way of turning my mom — the tribe leader — into a sasquatchling. In the end it was my dad who unknotted the

mat of our hairy problem: he made a disguise for my feet.

At the foot of my bedrock sat two hairy things that looked like bird nests that would cover what Grandma Bertha called my “special condition.” I didn’t like wearing them, because they made my feet itch, but Grandma Bertha insisted that I wear them whenever I left the cave.

“Barnabas,” yelled Dad from outside my rocky room. “Wake up.”

“I’m up, Dad!” I yelled.

“Time to forage for leaves. Are you ready?”

“Almost.”

“Do you need help?”

“Dad, I’m twelve winters old. I can do it myself,” I shouted. “I’m not a little kid.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Barnabas Bonner Bigfoot.”

“Sorry, Dad!” I yelled, then I muttered to myself, “Saying my full name isn’t going to make me move any faster.”

“I heard that!”

I climbed out of my bedrock, but as soon as my feet touched the ground I started to topple over. My hands shot out and caught the wall in

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time to avoid a full-on face plant. The problem with my puny feet was keeping my balance, especially when I tried to stand up too fast. Instead, I sat back down on the bedrock and crawled across the stony surface to grab my fake sasquatch feet.

Dad made the fake fuzzies from a pair of foot-hides Mom had found near a baldface shelter. The baldfaces were the gruesome hairless creatures who sometimes camped near the base of our mountain. These beasts covered their ugly hairless bodies with bright-coloured hides, including the foot-hides my mother had found among the garbage the baldfaces had left behind. They were wasteful beasts, tossing old food away and leaving behind their possessions when they migrated south. Often we'd find their garbage and tried to make use of it so as not to let anything go to waste.

White strings crisscrossed the top of the foot-hides and strange etchings covered the gummy soles. These things were so big I had to stuff leaves inside to keep my feet from slipping out. Even the puny baldfaces had bigger feet than me. Grandma Bertha had a saying: "The hungry crow can't complain when there are

only slugs to eat.” Either I could let everyone in the tribe see my small feet, or I could wear these things until my feet grew.

The good news was that the foot-hides not only hid the ugly truth about my feet, but they also gave my feet a wide enough base that I didn’t topple over every time I stood up. Dad had covered the foot-hides with his own hair so they looked like regular feet. As long as no one looked too closely, the fake pods seemed real. The only problem was the trail they left behind. The foot-hides made weird zigzag patterns in the dirt. I had to shuffle when I walked to erase the patterns, which made for very slow moving. I was always the last one out of a cave, last one to climb up a tree and last one to jump in the lake. The sasquatchewinian kids called me “Snail-Squatch” to my face. I could only imagine what they called me behind my hairy back.

“Hurry up! The Hairysons are waiting for us,” Dad yelled.

“I’m putting on my feet now,” I said.

My fake left foot was a bit loose, but as long as I didn’t run the foot-hide would hold. I walked outside and spotted Dad and Mom



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talking to Juniper Hairyson, one of the nicest sasquatches in the tribe. She always gave me the first pick of blueberries when she came back from harvest and she never had a mean word for anyone, which was why I was so surprised her daughters turned out to be so cruel. Ruth and Hannah Hairyson pelted me with rotten blueberries whenever I wasn't looking, and they were the ones who came up with my nickname, "Snail-Squatch."

Grandma Bertha had a saying: "You can't tell if it's day, unless you have night." Everything in nature had an opposite. For day, there was night. For fire, there was water. For sky, there was land. For the sweet Juniper Hairyson, there were two sour daughters.

Ruth and Hannah were mountains of mischief not just for me, but for every sasquatchewinian kid. A few moons ago, they bugged some girls who rubbed hairy honeysuckle under their arms to smell fresh. The sisters badgered the sasquatchlings mercilessly, claiming the honeysuckle attracted cougars. They claimed smart sasquatches smelled like bear droppings, because the harsh scent kept cougars away; dead sasquatches smelled like

honeysuckle. Since then, every sasquatchling rolled around in bear droppings, more likely to keep safe from the Hairysons' teasing than from prowling cougars.

Hannah was forever curious about anything to do with baldfaces. Every summer night, the furry blonde sasquatch spied on them at the base of the mountain. Mom warned that if the baldfaces found out where we lived, they'd probably round us all up and throw us in cages like their tiny fluffy dogs that yipped and yapped. Hannah claimed she was learning about baldfaces to protect us, but I think she secretly liked them.

On the other hand, Ruth liked making fun of me and she made no secret of it. When she discovered that the hair on my cheeks curled into ringlets whenever I was embarrassed, she wouldn't stop teasing me. She called me names. She made me the butt of her jokes. She found a head full of hairy ways to embarrass me.

Watching the dark-furred Ruth whisper to Hannah now, I knew she was plotting to curl my beard again. As long as Mom stood nearby, I was safe. No one ever dared to cause any trouble around the tribe leader. I lumbered to

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my parents and Juniper Hairyson. I wanted to stick to Mom like honey to fur.

Ruth Hairyson cut me off at the pass and cracked a crooked yellow smile. “Hey, Mom, don’t Hannah and Barnabas make a sweet sasquatchewinian couple?”

My cheek hair curled so tightly that it looked like my face had broken out in pine cones. I shuddered to think what Ruth would do if she ever learned about my small feet.

Juniper Hairyson shook her head. “Hairball, you know better than to tease Barnabas.”

She plucked at my curly beard. “Don’t have a hairy, Mom. He doesn’t mind. Do you?”

I said nothing, glaring at her as I batted her hand away.

She smirked. “Besides, I think Hannah is tied up in knots over him.”

Hannah flashed me a smile, flashing her dingy buck teeth. A stringy, half-chewed leaf dangled from between her front teeth. She twirled a finger around it and winked at me. I felt hairy tornadoes whipping up all over my beard.

“Look, he feels the same way about her,” Ruth said. “Isn’t that hair-dorable?”

I looked at Mom, hoping our tribe leader would put her foot down and end the sisters' pesty plucking. Instead, my mother nudged Dad. He chuckled as if he had just heard a good joke.

"Say, I have an idea," said Ruth. "Can Hannah and I go with Barnabas to forage for leaves this morning?"

Mom nodded. "Of course."

Juniper Hairyson warned, "Don't go near the baldface camp."

Hannah smiled. "You know us, mommy."

"My dad needs help picking berries," I said.

"Barnabas, are you a Snivel-Squatch," Hannah whispered. That was her insult for whiners.

Hannah was trying to goad me, but I wasn't going to fall for her trick. Nothing was going to move me from my spot.

"Go with the girls," Dad insisted.

"Yes," Mom agreed. "It'll be fun."

"Hairy armpits!?! " I screamed. "Why are you making me do this?"

"Groom your hair, Barnabas," Dad said. He wanted me to relax, but there was no way

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I could, knowing that I'd be alone with the Hairyson sisters.

Mom brought up one of Grandma Bertha's sayings: "A chick that never leaves the nest will never learn to fly."

"Spread your wings, little chickie," Hannah giggled.

Dad scooped up two sticks of celery from Mom's gathering basket, tied them together with strands of his hair, and tossed them to me.

"You can share a snack with the girls."

"Forget it," I said.

"Don't you take that tone with your father, Barnabas Bonner Bigfoot."

"But, but, but . . ."

"No buts," Mom interrupted.

"This isn't fair," I mumbled.

"That's the way it has to be. Go with the Hairysons," she ordered.

Ruth grabbed one of my hands, while Hannah took the other, and they dragged me into the woods. I dug my heels into the dirt, but sasquatchewinian girls were stronger than boys. The sisters yanked me down the trail and into the woods.

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Behind us I could hear Mom telling Juniper Hairyson, “Ruth is right. I think Hannah and Barnabas make a hair-dorable couple.”

My cheek hair curled again, so tight my cheeks hurt.