

CHAPTER ONE

“**H**e’s alive!” I yelled. “We have to go back for him.”

The Hairyson sisters ignored my pleas as they dragged me down the mountain trail and away from our cave home. Away from the baldface hunters. Away from my dad. I struggled to break free, but they’d locked their arms around me so tight it felt like our hair had tangled. Ruth sniffed the air for signs of hunters while Hannah glanced back to make sure we weren’t followed.

“My dad’s hanging off the ledge,” I cried. “I saw his hairy knuckles.”

“Shut up,” Ruth hissed.

“Hairy armpits! Let go!” I yelled at the sasquatchewinian sisters.

Hannah clamped her hand over my mouth. “Sour berries, do you want the baldfaces to find us?”

I bit her hand. She let go.

“I don’t care,” I said. “I have to save him.”

She bared her yellow teeth and shook her blonde beard at me. “Barnabas, the hunter shot him and he fell off the mountain.”

“That’s not true. My dad’s alive.”

I kicked at the sisters, forcing them to let go. I ran back up the trail, but Hannah tackled me. Her brown-furred sister Ruth jumped on my back and pinned me down on the cold, damp soil.

She whispered, “Great mossy rock, Barnabas. You’re getting your hair tied in knots. Think about it. If your dad didn’t fall off the mountain, the baldfaces probably have him.”

Hannah added, “And if you don’t stuff a hairball in your mouth, they’re going to nab us too.”

I sniffed the night air. Baldfaces surrounded us. There was no mistaking their stench: sharp and foul like a forest fire, mixed with rotting

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lilacs. While I could pick out their scent, I couldn't smell my father. I stopped struggling.

"Dad," I sobbed.

Hannah stroked the back of my head. "Barnabas, it's all right. Groom your hair. Shh, shh."

As much as I hated to admit it, the sisters were right. If Dad did survive the fall, the baldfaces would have him. The best way to help him would be to find out where the baldfaces were holding him, and I couldn't do that if they caught me. "I'm okay. Let me up. I won't yell any more. I promise."

The sisters climbed off my back and let me sit up. I glanced around the dark forest, checking my bearings. How far had we run?

"Where in the hairy tangle are we?" Ruth asked.

"The base of the mountain," Hannah replied. "The baldface camp is a few thousand strides to the east."

Ruth sniffed the air. "We'd better head to the west in case they come this way."

Her sister shook her head, her blonde rat tail swinging from the back of her neck like a dog's tail wagging. With her gorgeous blonde

beard and full moustache, Hannah was easily the hairiest sasquatch in the tribe, but she was also the brightest. I hoped she was smart enough to keep us away from the baldface hunters crawling through the woods.

Ruth growled, her brown shoulder hair bristling at her younger sister. “We have to meet up with the other sasquatches. Maybe Dogger Dogwood’s found a safe place for the tribe.”

I straightened up. “Why is he in charge?”

Neither sister said a thing.

“My mom’s still leader of the tribe, right?”

Finally, Hannah spoke. “Ruth, I smell some baldfaces coming from the east. See how far away they are. And be careful.”

She nodded and slipped away into the woods, her huge feet barely making a sound. Hannah patted the ground. I sat down beside her.

“It’s a hairy tangle, Barnabas,” she started.

“What happened?”

“Your mom and grandparents didn’t come back from their scouting mission.”

“They shouldn’t have been gone that long.”

Hannah twisted her beard and stared at her gigantic feet. “When you went missing,

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we thought they might have gone searching for you.”

I shook my head. “Why didn’t you look for them?”

“Two sunsets after you were gone, the baldfaces came. They set traps everywhere. Do you remember the one I stepped in?”

I nodded. That trap had started the trouble in the first place. The hunters had hidden the trap well among the trees and Hannah set it off. Ruth and I rescued her and I had to lead the baldfaces away to give the sisters a chance to escape, but the baldfaces caught me.

“Well, they set more around the mountain. And they sent scouts to flush us out. We couldn’t look for anyone because we were too busy hiding.”

“Maybe she’s doing the same thing, waiting for the right chance to come out.”

Hannah shook her head. “We couldn’t smell her or your grandparents anywhere near the mountain. Some of us think the baldfaces caught them.”

The hair on my back stiffened. I wondered if Dr. Samson, the baldface who had taken me, had anything to do with this. Everything

had turned to mould when this creature and his hunters had shown up on our mountain. They had shot me with sleeping arrows. When I woke up I was in a baldface truck, where I learned Dr. Samson wanted to use my hair to cure baldness in his kind. I escaped and found myself in a giant cave they called a mall. A baldface girl, Jaime, helped me by shaving the hair off my hands and face so I could blend in. This kept me hidden for a while, but Dr. Samson's hunters caught us. He brought me back to the mountain so he could round up the rest of the tribe, but thanks to the Hairyson sisters, I escaped. I wondered if he had told other baldfaces about us. I plucked at my leg hair, trying to yank out the horrible thought that I might be responsible for this hairy tangle.

I asked Hannah, "What did you do about the baldfaces?"

"Dogger Dogwood said the tribe should leave the mountain right away, but your dad pointed out that would make it easier for the baldfaces to spot us and there was a chance some of us might get caught. Dogger Dogwood didn't seem to care."

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I spat on the ground. “He only thinks about saving his own hide.”

“Your dad reminded everyone the baldfaces weren’t the only dangers in the woods.” She glanced up at the night sky and the nearly full moon.

“The Bone Eater,” I whispered.

She nodded.

This giant beast roamed the mountains in search of sasquatches. Some thought the creature was an old sasquatch tale meant to scare little ones from wandering too far from home, but I believed the beast was real. I had heard tales that the Bone Eater’s teeth were as long as trees and that it could tear a bear in two with one swipe. It came out only when the moon was full.

Hannah said, “Dogger Dogwood told everyone to stop trying to scratch a ghost itch. The real problem was the baldfaces and not some story about the Bone Eater, but the older tribe members wouldn’t listen. They sided with your dad. He said without shelter we’d be in danger. He said we should send more scouts to find a new cave. The younger sasquatches

thought Dogger Dogwood's plan was better. They argued for many breaths."

"When Mom's away, Dad's in charge," I said. "Everyone should have listened to him."

Hannah shook her head. "Dogger Dogwood convinced the younger sasquatch families to leave. He claimed the baldfaces had captured you, your mother, and your grandparents. Then he accused your dad of putting the Bigfoot family ahead of the tribe. That's when some of the older tribe members turned on your dad."

"My dad always puts the tribe first," I said.

"I know. When the baldfaces showed up on the mountain, he helped us make false trails leading away from our camp. Ruth and I helped him a couple of times. If it wasn't for your father, they would have caught us all."

"How did the baldfaces find the tribe?" I asked.

Hannah looked down at the ground for a few breaths. Then she explained, "I was one of the scouts. I went to the camp where we first played Baldface Chase. Remember?"

The scene was etched in my memory. Hannah and Ruth had taken me to the creatures' camp to play the game. The point was to see which

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sasquatch could lure a baldface the furthest, but the game was the sisters' ploy to get me to distract the baldfaces so they could steal their food.

"Well, some of the hunters brought dogs," she said. "I nearly got caught three times. Finally I thought I'd lost them and made my way back to the caves, but they must have picked up my scent. It's my fault."

Her blonde moustache sagged and her shoulders slumped.

"Don't tear your hair out, Hannah. If they had dogs, they would have found the caves sooner or later." I patted her shoulder, but she shrugged me off.

"When we heard the dogs barking, we knew the baldfaces were close. Your dad tried to calm everyone down, but no one would listen. Dogger Dogwood had ruffled everyone's hair. Sasquatches panicked. Then the baldfaces came and everyone scattered. Dogger Dogwood and his family ran away. The tribe tried to follow, but some of the older sasquatches couldn't move fast enough."

"The hairless coward," I said, spitting on the ground.

“It was your dad who saved our hides,” Hannah said. “He rallied the remaining tribe members and told them to go west and then he tried to lead the baldfaces east. My parents and Yolanda Yeti stuck around to help, but when we spotted the baldfaces with boom sticks, your father sent them away. He made enough noise that the baldfaces went after him. He led them up the mountain and gave us enough time to get away. And then . . . well, you saw what happened.”

“He’s not dead,” I said.

“Barnabas, I’m sorry, but he fell.”

“My dad is a great climber.”

“If he had survived, the baldfaces would have made a lot of noise about catching him.”

“You don’t know that,” I shouted, and then words tumbled out of my mouth like a wind-blown nest from a branch and scattered across the ground in a big mess. I blamed the sisters for letting my dad fall and how they didn’t care about the Bigfoot family. I blamed myself for not getting to my dad fast enough. I blamed everyone.

Hannah wrapped one of her arms around me. Around us, life went on. Mergansers

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quacked in the nearby bog. A barred owl hooted in the distance. The wind whistled through the firs. I could even hear my own heartbeat. None of it seemed real, like I was listening to the sounds from underwater. They were familiar and strange all at the same time. I didn't know if the mountains had changed or if I had changed. I wished for silence — the only thing that sounded right.

Hannah patted my shaved hand, then stopped. She hissed and pulled away from the touch of my bare skin. I glanced up, confused. She forced a yellow smile, but I could tell by the way she looked at me that my hairless hands and face bothered her.

“It's still me,” I said. “I just shaved the hair off to blend in with the baldfaces. That's all.”

“Sorry, Barnabas . . . it's just . . . your face is so bare. I'm still getting used to it.”

“The hair will grow back,” I snapped.

“Sour berries, you look so much like one of them.”

“I'm not,” I said. “See? There's some stubble already starting on my chin.” I stepped forward to show her, but she backed away, her

feet crunching on the yellowed leaves on the ground.

“I wonder what’s taking Ruth so long,” she said.

She whistled. I counted several breaths and listened. No answer. Sasquatches could pick out a squirrel titter from a thousand strides away, so Ruth should have heard her sister. Hannah stuck her fingers between her lips and whistled again, louder this time. The shrill sound pierced my eardrums. She sounded like a hawk about to attack. The only noise that came back from the woods was the distant squawk of an overhead osprey. I sniffed the air and my nostrils were filled with the odour of rotting lilacs and smoke.

“The baldfaces are near,” I said.

“We have to go.”

I shook my head. “I want to see if they have my dad.”

“You got hair in your eyes?” she asked. “The baldfaces have boom sticks and we don’t know if he’s with them.”

“They might have Ruth too.”

Hannah hesitated.

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“Why else wouldn’t she answer your whistles? Are you coming or not?” I didn’t wait for her.

“Hold your hair,” Hannah cried. “They have traps and I know how to spot them.”

She walked past me and strode toward the smell of baldfaces. I had to catch up to her, but my tiny feet slipped on the damp soil. I cursed nature for giving me such small feet. With a family name like Bigfoot, size mattered. I came from a long line of sasquatches with huge feet, but the line ended with my tiny pods. Mom claimed that I was a late bloomer and my feet would eventually grow, but we both agreed the other sasquatches didn’t need to see how small they were. Dad had made me a pair of fake feet using baldface foot-hides so I could fit in with the rest of the tribe, but they were mostly for show and not very good for moving quietly or quickly through the woods.

Hannah slowed as she neared a clearing. She knelt down, scooped up some earth and took a whiff. I looked over her shoulder at the ground. Something had caught her attention.

“What is it?” I asked.

She held up a clump of dirt to my nose.

The soil smelled foul, like a baldface machine had spilled its liquid guts on to the ground. My nose hair curled from the stench and I had to take a step back.

“Hairy armpits! The baldfaces have a rolling cave,” I said. “That means they can move as fast as us in the woods.”

Hannah looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “How do you know?”

“Trust me,” I said. I had spent a few sunrises in the baldface world, which was enough time to give me a glimpse of their machines. They moved everywhere in rolling caves of different sizes and shapes. No doubt these baldfaces would have a rolling cave that could get them through the forest. If we kept to the dense woods, the baldfaces would have to go on foot, which would give us an advantage. Right about now we needed all the help we could get.

A bright light flashed at me. I shielded my eyes against the harsh glare, but I could make out several short figures and I could smell the tell-tale odour of rotting lilacs and smoke. The baldfaces had found us.