

CHAPTER 1



RUINED!

Most legends start with an adventurer setting out on some epic quest. This story starts with a sequin in my eyeball, courtesy of my best friend and super-annoying person, Calvin. As beginnings go, it may not seem that exciting, but it sure as heck hurt.

“Sorry, I was aiming for your mouth,” Calvin said as I picked the offending sequin out of my eye socket.

“Uck, it’s covered in eye goo. Look.”

“Yeah, that happens.”

I crushed the sequin between my fingers and glared, but Calvin being Calvin, I couldn’t stay mad. It’s basically a

superpower. No matter what he does, he has this way of making you forgive him for everything ever, no matter what. Mom says it's in the eyes—and I don't mean like a sequin in the eyes, but a feeling. Then again, Mom's an artist, so she says a lot of stuff about feelings I don't understand. When she looks around, she's not looking at the boring, regular world like you and me. I mean, she is, but to her boring stuff looks extra beautiful and full of meaning.

Anyway, this one time she tried to draw Calvin's eyes, which are brown and deep and kind of sad, but she could never get them right, because according to her some people carry around their feelings in their eyes. Apparently, eye feelings are something you can't capture in paint.

“How does that look?” Calvin said, holding up the WELCOME HOME sign we'd spent the last hour decorating. In that moment, sitting in our favorite booth in The Friendly Bean, sun beams shining in through the front window making all that glittery stuff sparkle like stars, that sign was the most beautiful sight in the whole wide world. Even more so because it meant that Mom was finally coming home.

“We might not be artists, but I'd say this baby's sheer perfection,” Calvin added with one of his irritating smiles. Irritating because I was trying my best to stay in

angry mode—hello, eye sequin!—but I had no choice but to agree.

After that, we settled into our usual routine, enjoying half a Jelly Belly donut apiece, Merline’s specialty, and Sasquatch Smoothies on the house, thanks to Big Vic. To get you up to speed, Merline and Big Vic own The Friendly Bean, the best and only coffee shop in Tanglewood Crossing, and it’s located in our famous downtown, nestled next to a dozen other shops, all in colorful storefronts stacked one on top of the other like presents.

My favorite shops are Wild Man Books, Bigfoot Burger, Heavenly Scoops, and A Yeti Sits Down for Tea, because tea is fancy and tastes really good once you try it. As you can tell, most of the shops here are bigfoot themed, since that is Tanglewood Crossing’s main claim to fame. We’re home to more bigfoot sightings than any other place in the country, according to Dr. Eliza Day, aka Gram, and she’s never wrong.

Gram is the whole reason that everyone in Tanglewood Crossing loves bigfoot, me included. She’s a world-famous researcher, or at least she was until she broke her hip hiking the Ouachita Mountains. Now she spends her days cooped up in the Shady Pines nursing home, waiting for her hip to heal. Last week, she said she might have to quit bigfoot hunting for good.

That's why Calvin and I want to make a real bigfoot discovery this year. Something rock-solid, like a hair sample or maybe a piece of poop. That way, Gram will have to stop being sad and get back to hunting. That's the plan anyway.

I have a lot of plans, in case you can't tell.

"Looks like you're ready to celebrate," Big Vic said, coming over to admire our sign, which was clearly a true work of art. Here's a little more about Big Vic. He looks kind of like Gimli from *The Lord of the Rings*, except he's super tall and his beard is all gray. "Why don't you and your mom stop by tomorrow? I'll give you a Heartbreaker Special, on the house."

"You stop giving away all my food," Merline called over from her perch. She was currently balancing atop a ladder, hanging up shiny red bigfoot cupids to go with her streamers and fuzzy hearts. Merline was by far the coolest old lady I'd ever met, with her buzz cut, tongue ring, and super-scary eyebrows. I definitely wanted to be just like her when I grew up.

"I'll agree to stop giving away freebies if you come down here and give me a kiss."

"Here we go." Calvin pretended to gag into his smoothie. "This is all your fault, you know."

“Sorry,” I said, but I couldn’t argue. Technically, Merline and Big Vic being lovey-dovey all the time was my fault, since I was the one who got them together. To be fair, it hadn’t taken much persuading, but it had still cemented my status, at least according to Mom, as Tanglewood Crossing’s premier matchmaker.

Merline screwed up her mouth, eyeing Big Vic with her famous icy cold stare. As someone who’s known her since forever, I could tell it was just a show. “The day I kiss you, Victor Hudgins, will be the day bigfoot strolls in and orders up a latte.”

Big Vic laughed, that kind of deep, rumbling laugh that made his whole belly shake, and he went over and gave Merline a slobbery smooch.

“Shouldn’t there be laws against that sort of thing?” Calvin said, grimacing.

“Look away, my friend. Look away,” I advised.

Calvin focused on sipping his smoothie, and I sat back, admiring the sight of sunbeams twinkling on the world’s most beautiful sign.

“You know,” Calvin said, after Big Vic headed off to help a group of tourists in jean shorts and fanny packs, “it’s almost time for the Bigfoot Ball.”

“Yup, hence all the sparkly decorations,” I said, but I was only half listening. My brain was wrapped up in thoughts of Mom coming home. I scanned my to-do list again. The only thing left was to finish this piece of true and utter beauty, and then pick up Mom’s gift.

“June?” Calvin said, clearing his throat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I said. Again, not much with the active listening.

“It’s about the Bigfoot Ball.”

“Okay, but first hold up that sign. I want one last look before— Yikes! Is that the time? We’ve got to go!”

I gave the sign one final glance before rolling it up, very carefully, and sliding a rubber band around the outside. Boy oh boy, was it a beaut! “This’ll have to do. It’s officially go time. Get your stuff, and let’s head out! I still have to pick up Mom’s gift!”

“What? Now?” Calvin said, looking more flustered than usual. “I thought we still had a few minutes. I wanted to ask you about . . . um . . . never mind.”

“You can ask me later, okay? There’s no time!” My hands flew, stuffing glitter and scissors and markers into my bag. “This gift is the most important part of Mom’s

Welcome Home Extravaganza. Without it, everything will be ruined.”

“I’m coming. But I didn’t finish my drink.”

“No buts! I don’t want Mom to think that we’re only celebrating my birthday. This is her day too, and she needs the perfect gift.”

Calvin tried to chug the last of his smoothie, but I snagged him by the sleeve and pulled him toward the door.

“Okay, I’m coming already,” Calvin said, bending down to tie his shoe.

I explained how I’d make it up to him if he’d just hurry, and how Mom’s gift had to be absolutely freaking perfect, because if it wasn’t, then the whole surprise party/birthday would be officially ruined, and I would be forced to crawl into a cave somewhere and starve to death.

“At least you’re not being dramatic about it,” Calvin said, which was another one of those times when he was being super annoying, but I didn’t even get mad about it. Like I said, he has a superpower.

“Just hurry up, pleeease,” I said, strangling the door handle.

“Sigh, fine. Where is this place anyway?”

“You’ve never been to Mountain Musings? It’s the only

place in like a million miles with decent art supplies!” I said, with zero drama in my voice.

Calvin laughed. “Whatever, lead the way.”

Mountain Musings was actually awesome, even for a total nonartist like me. Inside, the walls were covered in murals of Tanglewood Crossing, including twenty-seven hidden bigfoots. Seriously, I counted once. Looking around at the walls was kind of like playing the world’s biggest game of Where’s Waldo, except with a lot more hair and fewer stripes. It was also the place Mom liked to hang out most, when she wasn’t painting in her closet/art studio, taking one of her long walks in the woods for “inspiration,” or Skyping with her old friends in New York, where Mom is from.

Finally, Calvin finished tying his shoe, and we stepped outside into a wall of muggy heat. Seriously, within ten seconds of hurrying down that hot, cobbled street, I could taste sweat dripping into my mouth. To our left, we saw one of the big yellow bigfoot buses that stop in town twice a day to pick up tourists and drive them deep into Tanglewood Forest. They’re pretty hard to miss because of the color and the giant hairy foot perched on top. To our right, Main Street curved around to form a semicircle of shops, like something straight out of Diagon Alley, except you won’t

find any wand shops or pubs with magic brick walls—trust me, I’ve checked.

Even though I’ve lived here all my life, the tiny downtown with its cobbled streets and old-fashioned oil lamps still fills me with wonder, like I’m walking into a fairy tale. Except it’s mostly tourists and overflowing trash cans and a pee smell that never goes away, but still . . . magical.

I led the way around the bend, Calvin wiping his face with the inside of his shirt, and stopped at the opening to a narrow alleyway. I could hear barking from the pet shop on my right, and squealing from the day care on my left, but the alley stood dark and silent.

“You first,” Calvin said. So. Rude. But I let it drop. This was gift time. One final check on my list, and this would officially be the best day ever. Mom was coming home. Which meant that the thing she’d needed five weeks to “think” about couldn’t have been that important after all. Right? Pretty soon, it would be me and Mom and Dad, back together again, just like on my vision board, and just in time for my birthday!

I stepped from the sunlight into the shade of the alley. A chill wind swept past, despite the heat, sending prickles up my skin. The cobbles angled down, becoming almost like

stairs, and I had to bend my knees to keep from falling forward.

“Come on,” I said, tugging on Calvin’s sleeve to make him follow.

There were no other shops down here, and we only passed one other door, a large, elaborately carved one that had been painted a shocking shade of pink.

“Let’s hurry up,” Calvin said, his arm brushing mine. “This place gives me the creeps.”

The alley made a sharp turn up ahead, and I hurried to the bottom, only to be greeted by the tinkling of a dozen different chimes. The chimes were made from all sorts of unusual materials, like spoons, fishing lures, and, in the case of my favorite, plastic dinosaurs with tiny bells dangling from their feet. Mountain Musings sat nestled in a cozy nook with a lime-green door—usually propped open—and cheery murals of flowers and unicorns outside to brighten up the otherwise dreary brick.

Except today the door was closed.

“Okay, I’m sensing a freak-out coming on,” I said, even though I don’t like to think of myself as freaking out, but let’s be serious, my gift-buying plans had “impending doom” written all over them.

“Look, there’s a note,” Calvin said. He read the piece of sketch paper taped to the front door. “‘Mountain Musings is closed so that we can attend our annual meditation/yoga retreat. Best of luck, fellow artists, and see you back next week.’”

“Next week?” I said. My mouth had gone numb like I’d just left the dentist. “But it can’t be closed. I preordered my gift days ago! It’s a mug with Vincent van Gogh’s face, and when you add hot liquid, he loses an ear. It’s perfect!” I rattled the knob—it was locked—and banged on the door, and then waited, before banging some more.

This. Could. Not. Be. Happening. Mountain Musings was the only place to get art stuff in all of Tanglewood Crossing, unless you counted the Walmart one town over, but they only had crayons and markers and little-kid paints, and Mom was a real artist.

“There’s always Wal—”

“Don’t even!” I said, and then I felt bad because maybe I sounded a little mean, but I could tell that Calvin understood, because . . . Calvin.

I banged some more, and Calvin helped, before I finally gave up and sank into a lump on the concrete. “That’s it. My plan is officially ruined.”

Calvin slid down beside me. “What is that thing your mom always says? That if we just walk and let the world speak to us, we’ll get inspiration. We could try that.”

“How can I walk around when I’m busy crawling into a cave to starve to death?”

“Hmm, true. But you’ll have to get to the cave somehow, right? Unless you learned how to Apparate without telling me.” I looked at Calvin, because once again, rude, but did I mention that he has this way of smiling that always makes me feel better? As in no matter what, which is great, but also weirdly annoying.

I glared. He smiled. I felt better. What is up with that anyway?

“Fine, let’s walk. But this is so not good. My plan had five parts. Five very important parts, and if I leave one out it’s . . .” I racked my brain for the right word. “I don’t even know! It’s not a plan!”

“Come on, we’ll figure it out.” He helped me to my feet, and we started up the dreary alley.

You know in olden times when people would walk behind dead bodies and there would be all this crying and sad music, because they were going to somebody’s funeral? That’s what it felt like. Also, it was really steep, and even

though I live in the mountains, my thighs aren't made for climbing.

Still, I tried to stay positive. I wasn't just a matchmaker. I was a problem solver. When one door closed, another one opened, right? Sure, sometimes you had to force it open, with a crowbar or dynamite or something, but so what?

This was happening.

We could do it.

Cre-e-e-e-a-k!

We were halfway up the dark and creepy alley when it happened. A door, a literal door—remember the one from before that was painted in shocking pink—eased open, hinges shrieking. I might, occasionally, be dramatic, but Calvin literally jumped, screaming, and then tripped on a cobble and fell, dragging me down with him.

“Dramatic much?” I said, dusting myself off and helping Calvin to his feet. I held my breath, checking the poster board that was lovingly stuffed in the side pocket of my backpack. The Sign of Perfect Beauty and Sparkliness was, thankfully, undamaged.

“Sorry.” Red splotches crept up Calvin's cheeks and neck. “Can we pretend that never happened? As in erase it from your memory forever?” He stared down at his shoes, mortified,

and I decided to go easy. Calvin could be a total wimp sometimes, but he was still my best friend.

“Pretend what never happened?”

“You know, the whole me falling on my butt thing . . . oh . . . right. Thanks.”

“No worries. Hey, let’s go inside.”

“Wait, what?!”

“Look, there’s a sign.” It was true. I had totally missed it at first, but now that I looked closer, I saw a single line of printed text, no wider than a pencil, taped to the outside of the door.

“‘The Shop of Last Resort: Purveyor of Mysteries,’” I said, reading the sign aloud. “This could be just the place to find a unique and totally non-Walmart-related gift. You were right, Cal! All we had to do was walk around a little and, whammo, inspiration!” I swung the door wider, but Calvin lingered on the steps. “What? You’re not still scared, are you?”

Calvin tore his eyes away from his shoes and met mine. If I was reading his eye feelings right, he was totally freaked, but doing his best to be brave. “Me? Scared? Not in a zillion years. Come on.”