

# **HOMINID**

**The Ancestral Code, Book 1**

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## *Hominid*

*Def.*, any of a family (Hominidae) of erect bipedal primate mammals that includes recent humans together with extinct ancestral and related forms and in some recent classifications the gorilla, chimpanzee, and orangutan

- *Webster's Dictionary*, 2015

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"Well now, you'll be amazed when I tell you that I am sure they exist."

*Jane Goodall, Animal Rights Activist, NPR Talk of the Nation, September 27, 2002*

# PROLOGUE

## TWENTY YEARS AGO

### ROGUE RIVER NATIONAL PARK, OREGON

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD TESS BRANNICK'S EYES FLEW OPEN. HEART POUNDING, she sat up, pulled her dark hair back from her face, and strained to listen.

Nothing.

But there should have been something. She and her twin brother were in a tent on the southeastern end of Rogue River National Park. She should hear crickets, owls, animals skittering through the surrounding forest.

Yet there was only silence.

"What is it?" Pax asked, turning on the lantern. His bright blue eyes reflected his fear.

Even though they were twins, and separated by only four minutes, Tess had always been the older sister looking out for Pax. Tonight was no different.

Although shaking inside, she tried to keep her voice calm. "It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

A snarl sounded from somewhere outside the tent, followed by a series of yells—her dad. Pax latched on to her hand.

Before the trip, Tess and Pax had begged their dad to let them sleep in their own tent. He'd finally relented. Now Tess really wished he hadn't.

"Tess?" Pax asked his voice shaking.

A shotgun blast sounded from close by. Tess jumped. "Get out of your bag," she hissed. They both squirmed out of their sleeping bags. Crawling across hers, Tess wrapped her arms around her brother.

When the tent flap flew open, they both screamed.

Their dad rushed in, his shotgun cradled in his arms. Gene Brannick was always calm and ready for a laugh. But now, his blue eyes were deadly serious, and no smile crossed his lips. As he crouched down in front of the twins, Tess could smell his sweat.

"I need you two to run for the ranger's station," he said. "Do you remember where it is?"

Tess was more terrified than she'd ever been in her life, but one look at Pax's face told her she had to be the brave one. She swallowed down the fear. "Dad, what's going on?"

He shot a glance over his shoulder before answering. His hands shook, and so did his voice. "Mountain lions," he said. "You need to go."

"But Dad, they shouldn't be here," Tess said.

While other kids read comics, Tess read everything she could find on animals. She knew lions shouldn't be out this far, and that even if they were, they stayed far away from people.

"There's been a drought. It must have driven them farther out than before. I never should have brought you here." He stared back at her, his eyes larger than she'd ever seen them. "There's too many of them, Tess. You need to run."

*Too many of them?* Tess knew that shouldn't happen either. Lions were solitary creatures, unless they were young males.

Her dad placed a trembling kiss on each of their foreheads. Then he pulled them to their feet and pushed them from the tent. "Go."

A crashing sounded from the trees to their right. Her dad pulled his weapon to his shoulder. "Get to the ranger station. Now! Run! And don't look back!" he yelled.

A shadow slunk from the trees as her father pulled the trigger.

The noise spurred Tess into action. She grabbed Pax's hand yanking him to his feet and ran. Behind her she heard footfalls. Then another shotgun blast sounded. And the footsteps went silent but a scream split the night air.

Pax stumbled. "Dad!"

Grabbing her brother by the shoulders, she pulled him to his feet even as tears ran down her cheeks. "You have to get up," she cried, tears clogging her throat. "We have to run."

A crashing sounded in the trees behind them. Oh my god. Her heart raced. Whatever was coming was massive.

Tightening her grip on her brother's hand, she yanked him forward. "Run, Pax! Run!"

Side by side, they sprinted through the forest, leaping over downed trees and small bushes. Thank God there was a full moon letting them see.

More footfalls sounded behind them, and then more joined in. Tess's heart threatened to burst out of her chest, but she didn't dare slow, not even to look behind her.

Movement to her left drew her eyes. In the trees, a shadow moved alongside them, keeping pace. As Tess glanced over, the shadow stepped into a shaft of moonlight.

*That's not a mountain lion,* Tess thought the tremor in her limbs increasing. Whatever it was, it had dark fur and incredible height. Panic clawed up her throat and threaten to stop her heart.

"Faster Pax!" She sprinted ahead, pulling her brother behind her, shooting him a quick glance. He didn't seem to have seen the creature.

Turning back, she didn't see the gully until it was too late. Racing forward, her foot stepped off into nothingness. With a scream, she and Pax plunged forward, hitting the embankment hard and rolling into the dry river bed.

Pain shot through Tess's ankle, but she got to her feet. Pax was holding his shoulder. "Pax?"

"I'm okay," he said as he winced.

Tess wrapped an arm around his waist. "Hold on to me."

He threw his good arm around Tess and they hobbled across the

narrow creek. Pain lanced through Tess's leg with every step. Tears pressed against her eyes. They couldn't outrun them like this.

On the other side of the bank, a wall of dirt and rock blocked their way. With her ankle, it would take her former to climb, if she ever managed it. She pushed Pax toward it. "Go. Climb."

He turned to face her, his chin trembling even as he shook his head. "No. I'm not leaving you."

A roar cut through the air, ending the argument. There was no time to run.

All the hairs along Tess's arms and neck stood straight up. Shaking so hard she knew she was going to fall, she turned. Two lions, both skinny, their ribs showing, slunk across the creek. The lions appeared to be in no rush; they knew this was an easy kill.

Her mind racing, Tess's breaths came out in pants. Pax moved closer to her, his shoulder brushing hers.

"I love you, Tess," he whispered. She gripped his hand and squeezed.

The lions stalked closer. They were smaller than adults. *Definitely young males*. Tess knew that male mountain lions were kicked out of their home after a year, and that they sometimes banded together. She'd felt pity when she'd first learned that.

Now, though, she felt no pity—only fear. Because even though they were young, they would have no problem overpowering her and Pax.

A shadow cut away from the forest behind the lions and moved down to the creek. Tess jumped. *Oh God, there's another one.*

The cats whirled around. The shadow fell over them with a scream that shook Tess to her core. Before she could understand what was happening, one cat went flying through the air, screeching. It slammed into a tree and fell to the ground, still.

Something wet splashed across her face. She reached up and wiped at it. Her fingers came away dark. Blood.

Her legs finally gave out. Dropping to the ground, she wrapped her arms protectively around Pax.

The shadow grabbed the second lion and broke its back across its knee. Then it ripped the big cat in two.

"No, no, no, no," Pax moaned, trying to bury his head into her chest.

The shadow paused only ten feet away. Although it was cloaked in shadows, Tess was sure it was looking right at them. She could only make out its shape— like a man, but huge. Wider, taller. She squinted. Hairier.

Pax moaned again. The creature watched them for a moment longer, then disappeared back up the side of the gully and into the trees.

Breathing hard, Tess and Pax stayed where they were, staring at the spot where the creature had disappeared.

"It ripped that lion apart," she whispered, not even recognizing her own voice.

Next to her, Pax only shook harder.

Her arms still wrapped around her brother, Tess stared into the trees. Was it gone? Why would it leave? She and Pax were easy pickings.

"Tess?" Pax whispered. She wasn't sure now who was shaking harder, her or him.

Opening her mouth to answer him, Tess couldn't. She had no words. Her entire focus was on the spot where she'd last seen the creature. Even through the blood pounding in her ears, Tess heard as the sounds of the forest returned.

The creature was gone. It had killed the lions and left. It had saved them.

Picturing it, she let out a shaky breath. It was so big. Her eyes were drawn to the carnage it had left behind. And powerful.

*What kind of animal could do that?*

# CHAPTER 1

## BEAUFORD, CALIFORNIA

### TODAY

TESS SLOWED THE ATV TO A STOP AT THE END OF THE PATH. TALL SUGAR pines with heavy evergreen leaves and long cones surrounded her. In the distance, the dense forest rose and fell over rolling hills. It was seven a.m., and she took in a breath, inhaling the early forest air with a smile.

She was at the northeast edge of Klamath National Forest—1.7 million acres of woods that straddled the California and Oregon border. The area was covered with a variety of trees—from Douglas firs and other pines to oak and madrone hardwoods. It was a densely packed forest—with more than five hundred trees per acre in some areas—and teeming with wildlife, from simple squirrels and chipmunks to more elusive animals such as foxes or even bobcats.

Tess's camp was a forty-minute hike from here, but this was as far as the ATV could manage. She grabbed her pack from the back as she climbed off.

Taking a drink of water, she looked around, getting a feel for the forest. It was quiet, which she expected. Her ATV had made enough noise to chase away all but the hardiest of creatures.

She pulled her rifle from the back of the ATV. Checking that it was loaded, even though she knew she'd loaded it earlier this morning, she looped it around her shoulder, just in case she ran into one of those hardier creatures. Bears, mountain lions, even wolverines lived in this natural safe zone. Tess respected nature enough to know that she could never be perfectly safe here.

After a last check of the gear in her bag, she started down the trail. It was a familiar path, but there was still always something new to see. She smiled. *Best commute in the world.* She made quick time, but she didn't rush. Rushing, even on a well-known trail, was inviting injury. And besides, it's not like she had a meeting.

She knew people would probably think she was nuts spending so much time in the woods. And to be honest, she wasn't entirely convinced she wasn't, but being out here... it did something to her, for her. It gave her a sense of peace that the craziness of the real world couldn't.

The appearance of her ATV had chased away all the sounds of the forest. But it didn't take long for them to return. Birds flew by overhead. Squirrels and the occasional rabbit skittered ahead of her. Every once in a while on these commutes, Tess even came across an elk in some of the more wide-open areas of the park.

Today, an endangered spotted owl watched her from a branch twenty feet up. Above, a bald eagle sailed through the sky. And it was a big one: at least a seven foot wing span. She smiled. *Yup—nothing better.*

For a year now, she'd been making this hour-and-a-half trek into the woods, every Monday through Friday. She stayed overnight at least a few nights a month. She tried to avoid more than that. Her friends and family were worried enough about her without her living out here.

But her escape to the wild wasn't some carefree lark. It was part of a very carefully laid out plan. A tingle of excitement ran through her as she wondered what today could bring.

Up ahead, she spotted one of her field cameras. She'd placed it six feet up the tree—at five foot six, she couldn't place it much higher. Pulling it down, she swapped out the memory card, and replaced the

battery. She doubted she had anything special on the card, though; her subject was decidedly camera shy.

After returning the camera to its spot, she continued up the trail, pausing at a boulder where the path forked. To the right was her camp. She'd chosen the location for several reasons. One, it was in a very secluded portion of the park. In fact, she'd never run into another human out here in the year she'd been using the spot.

Two, it was only a short walk from a small lake, which meant plenty of wildlife was nearby. Three, there was a clearing not too far away, so if she ever needed emergency help, there was a place for a rescue chopper to land. Four, it was a pretty.

And five, but most importantly, it wasn't far from where she'd found her first footprint.

Today, she turned left, away from the camp. The path continued over a rise and then down again. At the bottom of the hill, she stopped.

The food bag had been suspended above the trail, but now it lay on the ground, empty. She'd placed over seven pounds of food in there on Friday.

Looking around carefully, she stayed on the edge of the trail so as not to disturb the area. *Come on, old friend. Show me something.* She walked slowly around, seeing nothing, her hopes dimming. But then, to one side, she saw an impression. A footprint.

Kneeling next to it, Tess could make out the five long toes. The second and third toe were both bigger than the big toe, a condition known as Morton's foot. The print could easily have been mistaken for a human footprint if not for two things: the toes were disproportionately long, and the foot itself was much longer and wider than any human foot.

The animal was flatfooted, Tess noted—the print was uniform in depth—and must have been very heavy, as the impression sunk three inches into the ground.

Placing her pack on the grass off the path, Tess pulled out a can of aerosol hairspray and sprayed the track. While it dried, she pulled out her white gypsum cement mix and added water. After a little stirring, it was ready. Carefully she poured the plaster into the footprint.

It would take about twenty minutes to set, give or take, so while

she waited she inspected the rest of the area. She found only one other print—a shallow heel mark—a short distance away. She cast that as well.

“You were careful,” she murmured scanning.

She thought he’d probably stayed as much off the path as possible, limiting the chance for footprints. She carefully inspected the ground around the path, but the vegetation made it too difficult to find any traces left behind. She hoped that maybe a piece of hair had gotten caught in the burrs she’d glued to the tree, but no—her little traps were empty.

She headed back to the original cast. Testing it, she smiled when she met resistance. Carefully prying it from the ground, she lifted it up and gently wiped away some excess mud. She pulled out her water bottle and poured it over the underside, cleaning off the rest of the dirt. Finally, she blotted the cast with the towel she always kept in her pack.

Returning the water and towel to her pack, she took a breath, trying to calm herself and act like the scientist her degrees said she was. She needed to look at it objectively. It was possible it was just a bear footprint. She knew that when two bear footprints overlapped, they could be mistaken for her quarry.

But when she inspected the underside of the cast, she saw no sign of an overlap. Whatever had created this print was a single creature.

She looked next for the one mark she hoped she’d find.

And there it was. On the ball of the foot was an old scar that had healed over, leaving a jagged line.

Placing the cast on the ground next to her, Tess pulled her tape measure out of her bag, and measured it. She confirmed what she already knew: the widest part of the foot was eight inches, and from toe to heel, it was sixteen inches.

Tess smiled. “Hello, bigfoot.”

# FROM THE BLOG

## 'BIGFOOT AMONG US'

### BY DR. TESS BRANNICK

This week's question comes from Ted Hanks in Chicago, Illinois. Ted writes:

**I don't understand why people still believe there is a bigfoot. Isn't this all just a big hoax?**

*Thanks for the question Ted. It's a common belief that all footprints found or sightings are the result of hoaxers. And to be fair, some are. But the pure scope of the sightings makes it difficult to swallow the idea of a hoax. Bigfoot sightings have been found not just in the United States but all across the globe: in China, Russia, Australia, Ireland, Nepal, South America, and more.*

*Moreover, the sightings go back hundreds of years. Native American stories have for centuries spoken of their giant brothers in the woods. And other countries have similar ancient tales. In fact, Medieval Europe even had some reports of a bigfoot being caught and held in captivity.*

*So is bigfoot a hoax? Well, if it is, it's one that stretches back hundreds of years and has been coordinated by unrelated cultures all across the globe.*

## CHAPTER 2

AS EXCITED AS TESS WAS BY THE LATEST FIND, SHE HAD TO CUT HER workday short. She was heading out of town for a few days for a conference. Refilling the food bag, she left extra, knowing she likely wouldn't make it back until Friday at the earliest.

When she reached the ATV, she cast one last look at the path, hating to go. She'd been seeing more and more prints in the last few weeks, and she couldn't help but feel she was close to making a breakthrough.

Honestly, if she had her way, she'd spend all her time in the woods right now. The fever was hard to ignore. But she also knew there were bigfoot researchers who'd spent their lifetimes searching for the elusive creature without ever catching sight of anything more than footprints.

With a sigh, she glanced at her watch. She was cutting it close. Hopping on the ATV, she pushed it as fast as she could.

Forty-five minutes later, she spied her red barn. Pulling the ATV through the open barn doors, she wiped it down, grabbed her pack, and jogged over to the cabin.

Her home was set on ten acres that abutted Klamath National Forest. She'd bought the property two years ago. A long porch wrapped around the front of the old cabin, and inside was a large open living room with a kitchen off to one side and a bathroom off the other. The place had two decent-sized bedrooms, one of which Tess had

turned into her office, plus a loft bedroom above the living room, which could be reached by a metal staircase.

When Tess's mother learned she was buying this cabin in the woods, she had nearly had a heart attack. After losing Tess's dad, her mom had never been comfortable with them going into the woods.

But she also recognized Tess was drawn to the great outdoors. They'd fought about her career choice for years. Tess knew that offering to renovate the cabin was her mom's way of saying she'd finally accepted Tess's career choice.

Originally Tess had resisted, not sure she wanted anything too fancy, but she gave in eventually. And seeing as how her mother passed away only a month after the renovations were complete, Tess was very glad she did. She knew being involved had made her mother more comfortable with Tess's career choice.

Besides, her mother had been right—having a comfortable place to come home to *did* make all the difference. Tess loved being off the beaten track, but there was something to be said for modern conveniences.

When she opened the door, her ten-year-old yellow Labrador, Shelby, was waiting for her. Tess knelt down and gave the dog a good rub. "Hey, girl." Then she stepped back and let Shelby out.

Tess zipped into her office. She dropped her pack on the desk and carefully pulled out the casts she'd made. She jotted down the coordinates where she'd found them as well as the time and date, then placed them in the glass-encased bookcase across from her old wooden desk. She already had over two dozen casts in there, the majority of them with the same mark on the bottom of the foot.

Her gaze roamed over the collection, her heart rate picking up. The footprints ranged in size from fourteen to eighteen inches long and six to eight inches wide. These were proof that unknown hominids roamed the woods in Northern California.

The alarm on her phone beeped, and she grimaced. She really needed to move. With one last lingering gaze, she left her collection behind and ran for her bedroom. She had one hour to shower, pack, and get out the door.

*I really don't want to go*, she thought as she stripped out of her clothes and turned on the water.

*But you really need the grant money*, her rational side countered. Blowing out a breath, she acknowledged that truth. Academic curiosity might be a wonderful thing, but it didn't pay the bills. For that, you needed donors—or better yet, grants.

Tess still had money from her mom's life insurance policy, but she didn't want to touch it—not for this. Her mom had supported her, but Tess knew how much her mother had worried about her, so Tess promised herself she would use that money for something that would have made her mom smile.

And right now, she knew if she didn't get a grant at this conference, she was most likely going to have to close up shop.

Stepping into the shower, she let the water run over her, and closed her eyes. *Please let me find someone as dedicated to this project as I am.*

*And let them have very deep pockets.*

## CHAPTER 3

### SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA

CARTER HAYES FLIPPED THROUGH THE PAPERS ON HIS DESK WITH A SCOWL. *Everyone wants a handout.*

Each year, his foundation donated to a variety of philanthropic endeavors. It was good publicity, and the tax breaks were huge. But people were so greedy. *What ever happened to standing on your own two feet?*

Carter Hayes had never taken a handout in his life. He was a self-made man. After graduating Yale, he hadn't gone to work at his father's company. He'd taken his trust fund and gambled on himself. And he'd won.

He curled his lip. American Cancer Society, Children's Charities of America, the Boys and Girls Club of America. The list went on and on. And all these people wanted him to hand over his money to them.

"Sir, have you made any decisions?" Thaddeus Regan asked.

Carter eyed his assistant. Thaddeus had been with him for over twenty years. The two had grown up together in Michigan, although they hadn't been friends; Thaddeus had been the son of the groundskeeper on his parents' estate.

Carter shoved the papers away. "I don't care. You decide."

Making a note on his tablet, Thaddeus nodded. "Very well, sir. And I may have found a researcher for your special project."

All thoughts of the charitable donations disappeared as a tingle of excitement danced along Carter's skin. He held out his hand. "Let me see."

Thaddeus handed him a folder.

Stamped across the front were the words *Dr. Tess Brannick, PhD*. Carter flipped it open and scanned the resume quickly. She had a BS in Zoology (Anatomy & Physiology) from Michigan State University, an MS in Zoology (Anatomy & Physiology) from Kent State University, and a PhD in Anatomical Sciences (Physical Anthropology) from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. She'd also completed a postdoctoral visiting assistant professorship at Duke University Medical Center.

And she had a well-received blog called "Bigfoot Among Us." It had received over one point five million hits last month.

Carter's eyebrows rose when he flipped to the next page, which detailed her blog. The topics revolved entirely around the scientific validity of bigfoot.

*A kindred spirit*, he thought. Carter had been obsessed with tales of bigfoot since he was a kid. He'd first seen the Patterson-Gimlin film when he was seven, and had been equal parts fascinated and terrified at the idea that a powerful eight-foot hominid was alive and at large in North America.

That year he'd asked his family to get him a bigfoot for his eighth birthday. His family already had a zoo on the estate, so to him, it didn't seem like such a big request. But he'd been given a gorilla instead.

He curled his lip at the memory. The thing had never liked him. And it had been old, just sitting there, its fat belly flopping over its legs. Carter's family had finally gotten rid of it two years later.

But while Carter had lost interest in the gorilla, he'd never lost interest in bigfoot. Owning a bigfoot had grown from a childhood wish to an adult goal.

And Carter Hayes always achieved his goals.

"She's well credentialed," Thaddeus said.

"So I see," Carter replied as he continued to flip through the file. He

stopped at a photograph of the scientist. *And very attractive*, he thought. She had that girl-next-door beauty, with dark brown hair, deep blue-green eyes, and a spray of freckles across her cheeks.

"Her approach is a departure from most," Thaddeus said. "I think she may be exactly what you're looking for."

Starting back at the beginning of the file, Carter skimmed through the information once again, liking what he was seeing even more on the second go round. Then he paused. "What's this?" He held up a police report. He hadn't noticed it on his first flip-through.

"Her father was killed by a mountain lion on a camping trip almost twenty years ago. She and her brother were also there."

Carter's eyebrows rose. "And she still goes into the woods? Alone?"

Thaddeus nodded. "Yes, sir. In fact, according to unofficial reports, she and her brother were saved by a very tall unidentified animal. I believe that may be the reason behind her research."

*A strong scientific background, beauty, and guts—an unusual combination.* He smiled. *And the perfect combination for me.*

"She's presenting at the annual cryptozoology conference tomorrow in San Diego," Thaddeus said.

Already inserting Dr. Brannick into his plans, Carter nodded. "Make sure we have someone there to record the presentation."

"Yes, sir," Thaddeus said making another note on his tablet.

Carter flipped back to the picture. It wasn't a posed shot. She was laughing, her head tilted to the side. He smiled. *Yes. She may be just what I need.*

## CHAPTER 4

### BEAUFORD, CALIFORNIA

TESS DROVE AROUND A BEND IN THE DIRT ROAD, REVEALING THE WHITE farmhouse and red barn in the treeless clearing ahead. Shelby started wagging her tail immediately. Reaching over, Tess rubbed Shelby's head. "I know you love it here, but you could at least act like you're going to miss me a little."

Shelby grinned back at her, her tongue hanging out of her mouth, her tail hitting the passenger seat repeatedly with a resounding thwack.

"Okay, fine," Tess grumbled but then laughed as Shelby licked her arm. She pulled to a stop in front of the wide porch steps just as the screen door opened.

Seventy-seven-year-old Madge Rollins stepped out. Her long gray hair was pulled back into a bun, her faded jeans and denim top immaculately clean. "What took you so long?" Madge demanded.

"Sorry." Tess stepped out of the truck, and Shelby leapt out behind her. "Got back to the cabin late."

Shelby scrambled up the stairs. Madge leaned down, a grin on her face. "Hello, girl. We are going to have some fun."

Madge might have been skinny as a pole, but Tess knew she was strong from her many years working the farm. Now, though, she had

sold off most of the acreage, and she had people do her planting for her. Her three sons worried about her being out here alone. They wanted her to move in with them. Madge's response when they'd suggested it had been a snort, followed by: "What, so I can be a glorified babysitter? No thank you."

Her sons knew better than to try and fight her on it. Besides, Madge seemed to like her own company, and one of the boys came up every weekend to help out. Still, Tess knew Madge's sons wanted her to sell the place. And it wasn't just because of her advancing years.

Madge stood up from giving Shelby a good rub, a twinkle in her blue eyes. "So, you're off to see my boyfriend?"

Tess grinned. "Madge, you know Shawn's gay, right? And married to my brother?"

The older woman cackled. "Well, he might be gay in real life, but not in my imagination."

Groaning, Tess couldn't help but laugh. "I am *so* not telling Shawn or Pax that."

Madge held the screen door open. "You got time for tea?"

"I could be persuaded," Tess said, following her in. She'd checked the plane's status on the ride over—it was delayed, so she had a little time before her friend Sasha Bileris came by to pick her up.

Shelby headed straight for the dog bed in the corner with her toys and bones. Whenever Tess had to be out in the field for a few nights or out of town, this was Shelby's home. Tess knew Madge would like to get another dog of her own, but after what happened to her last dog, she wasn't quite ready for that.

Tess took a seat at the table, where Madge had already set out the tea and a plate of lemon cookies. Taking a sip of her drink, Tess asked, "Any visitors last night?"

Sitting across from her, Madge crossed her arms with a sigh. "Oh, they were in a fine mood. Hooting, hollering, a few large branches came down. I'm surprised you didn't hear the racket."

A couple of miles and a large hill separated Madge's place from Tess's. The terrain tended to trap the noise on one side.

"Where about?" Tess asked.

Nudging her chin toward the back of the house, Madge said, "Up the hill. Right about where you put those new cameras."

"Oh, crap," Tess grumbled as she pictured her cameras in pieces.

Madge grinned. "I told you they don't like being spied on."

Taking a cookie, Tess muttered. "I know. I know."

Madge was the reason Tess had bought the cabin down the road. For years, Madge had had "visitors" on her property. She'd spot them in the distance now and then, but they kept to themselves. Every once in a while, though, Madge would come across a deer or elk that had been ripped apart. Sometimes she found footprints. And at night, especially in the spring, it wasn't unusual for her to hear them making a racket all over the place.

Tess had learned about Madge's visitors when she was a kid. She and Pax would regularly bike out to see Madge and pepper her with questions. Well, Tess would pepper her with questions. She was pretty sure Pax only made the trip for Madge's oatmeal cookies.

And Madge's nightly visitors were the reason why Madge didn't have dogs. Her last dog had been so terrified that he'd reached a point where he wouldn't leave the house. Madge finally had to give him to one of her sons. It wasn't fair to the poor animal.

Luckily, Shelby was partially deaf and didn't seem bothered by the activity. But Tess knew if Shelby ever got near one, that would change. Dogs were not fond of bigfoot, and the feeling was mutual.

"Did they get close to the house?" Tess asked.

"Nah. We've established a respect of sorts. They keep to their space, I keep to mine. Never had problems before; can't see why I'd start having some now," Madge said with a shrug before taking a sip of tea.

Studying Madge, Tess knew that she was considered the expert by the world at large. But Madge was also one. "I keep seeing tracks of my friend in the woods."

Madge raised an eyebrow. "You sure it's the same one?"

Picturing the scar on the casts, Tess nodded. "Yeah, same one."

"Hmm." Madge took a sip of her tea.

"What do you mean, 'hmm'? What are you thinking?" Tess asked.

"Seems to me he's *letting* you find those tracks. They're usually a little more careful," the older woman offered.

Tess sat back, surprised. Madge was right. In all the cases she'd read about, no one had ever found tracks so consistently. She just thought it was because she was so far in. But what if it wasn't?

Frowning, Tess asked, "Why would he do that?"

Madge shrugged. "I don't know. But I'm betting he'll let you know sooner rather than later."

## CHAPTER 5

### SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

*BUT I'M BETTING HE'LL LET YOU KNOW SOONER RATHER THAN LATER.*

Madge's words had been a constant fixture in the back of Tess's mind for the whole plane ride to San Diego and all through the night. Now, as she walked across the University of San Diego's campus, she couldn't help but focus on them. Was Madge right? Was that possible?

Tess shook her head. Bigfoot was an animal. She shouldn't attribute higher thought processes to it. That's where people stepped over the line from scientist to fan girl. And she planned on staying on the side of science.

In the distance, a giant welcome banner was strung across the brick and cement front of Meyers Hall: "The Seventh Annual Cryptology Conference." Tess smiled at the sight. It was pretty amazing that the university was allowing it to be held here.

Due to its somewhat tainted reputation, cryptozoology was not a specialty that had its own department. In fact, it rarely received even a modicum of respect. Most people used the term cryptozoology interchangeably with pseudoscience.

But it was so much more. Cryptozoologists studied the animals that *could* be, those that were rumored to exist. And in recent years, several success stories had helped to bolster the field's reputation. One of the

most well-known finds was the Bili ape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

For years, the people of Congo spoke of giant chimpanzees that ate lions, fished, and howled at the moon. In fact, the animal was called “lion killer” by the native people. Of course, traditional scientists attributed the rumors to a highly imaginative indigenous group whose bedtime stories had gotten a little out of hand.

Besides, the descriptions seemed to more closely match a gorilla than a chimp. It was said that the animal lived in nests on the ground, rather than in the trees; that it was not aggressive toward humans; that it walked on two feet for longer distances than was typical for a chimp; and that it grew to as large as five and a half feet tall. All in all, it was too incredible to be real, at least for the Western world.

Still, in 1996, when word of the giant chimps got out, researchers descended on Congo. Although scat, hair, and other evidence was found, it wasn’t until 2005 that the chimps were actually seen by a Westerner. Primatologist Shelly Williams was in the Congo, searching for the creatures, when four of them emerged from the trees, charging at her. They were at least five feet tall, with wide flat faces, a pronounced brow, and gray fur. Yet when they noticed Williams’s face, they stopped their charge and walked away.

This lack of aggression toward humans was repeated in other encounters, including those of Cleve Hicks of the University of Amsterdam, who spent eighteen months observing the creatures following the Williamses’ encounter. He, too, found that they had no fear of humans, but rather seemed to recognize humans as a cousin of sorts. Which, in a sense, they were. Most primatologists classified the species as something in between a gorilla and a chimp. Some even suspected they were a missing link between humans and chimps.

But whatever they were, their discovery was a boon to the public image of cryptozoology.

*A giant chimp that lived hidden in the forest for ages, Tess thought. Just like the giant ape that lives in North America.*

The parallels were there. In Congo, there had been rumors about the existence of the Bili apes for years, but the stories were dismissed as nothing more than tall tales told by the natives—until the Bili ape

was found. Similarly, Native Americans had told tales of their large brother in the woods for literally hundreds of years.

And it wasn't only Native Americans, either; one of the earliest recorded encounters with the wild, hairy men of North America was documented by Leif Ericson. In his journal, he wrote about seeing huge hairy men with dark eyes after he landed in Newfoundland around 1000 CE. The huge creatures, he said, towered over the Vikings, emitted a rank odor, and had a terrifying shriek.

Yet despite centuries of sightings—and a commonality in the descriptions of the creature, from very different native groups across the continent—bigfoot was still written off as a fairy tale.

One of the biggest barriers to widespread belief in bigfoot, Tess suspected, was bigfoot's bipedal nature. For generations, humans had felt smug in the knowledge that we were the only truly bipedal primate. Oh, sure, apes or chimps could stumble along for a few steps, but they were not two-legged creatures. Most of their travel was done on four limbs. And this faith in human exceptionalism created an unconscious bias against the idea that we might share our bipedalism with any other primate.

Recently, however, Tess had seen changes in the field that seemed to indicate that people, and scientists in particular, might be growing more receptive to the idea of bigfoot. For one thing, a greater understanding of the diversity in the history of primates had led to more openness about the possibility of humans having a more extensive family tree.

For another, discoveries had demonstrated that bipedalism had developed independently in multiple parts of the world—and that it was *not* a strictly human trait. But perhaps most importantly, scientists coming into the field today had grown up with bigfoot. Every kid in America had heard the story by the age of eight, and that alone predisposed them to adopting a more open-minded approach.

Tess hiked her messenger bag a little higher up on her shoulder. She was pleased that science might be more open to the possibility of bigfoot, but she knew that without a grant, *she* would not be a part of furthering the field.

And to get that grant, she needed to work her magic at this confer-

ence. Here she would find more people interested in the field than she could find in any other one place—which meant this was where she needed to be.

And it wouldn't hurt to give a phenomenal presentation.

*So here's hoping.* Tess climbed the cement steps of Meyers Hall and pushed through the heavy doors. The large atrium was packed. Students eagerly chatted in groups. Older students, or more likely the public, wandered through as well, occasionally stopping to chat with one another. The sound of the milling crowd rose up toward the arched ceiling, which only seemed to enhance the noise below.

All told, there were easily two hundred people milling in the foyer or making their way through to the seminar rooms. And that didn't include the hundreds of others who were already seated in the dozens of presentation rooms.

Tess stepped to the side of the room, trying to calm her racing heart. She'd had this problem often lately. Spending so much time in the quiet and with very few people tended to result in her having a small panic attack when she was faced with a large group of people.

Taking a calming breath, she watched as the lines for registration began to dwindle. After a few minutes, she composed her face and walked up to one of the registration hosts as they finished up with the last person in their line.

The young blonde co-ed smiled as Tess approached. "Name?"

"Dr. Tess Brannick."

The young woman turned to the bins lining the wall behind her. She made her way to one of them and pulled out a folder. Opening it as she walked back, she stopped, her eyes growing large. "You're the bigfoot expert!"

Tess was taken aback by the woman's enthusiasm. "Um, yes."

"I *so* want to see your session! I'm hoping someone will cover my shift so I can go. I read your blog, too. I really love it."

"Well, thanks. I appreciate that." Tess was always surprised when someone recognized her. She'd started doing the blog as a way to share what she was learning and generate some interest. But she knew that really, it was just her sitting in a room typing on her computer. She was always surprised when she learned people were actually reading it.

The young woman handed over the file. "This is all your information. Good luck with the presentation."

"Thanks. I hope I see you there." Tess took the file and stepped away.

"Well, I see you have a fan," a male voice said, with an amused tone.

Tess turned to the tall, gray-haired man with the matching beard standing behind her. She grinned. "Dr. Sloane. I was hoping I'd see you."

He smiled warmly and offered his hand. "Jeff. You're done with school. We're colleagues now."

"Okay, Jeff." She knew he was right, but it was hard to shift gears from "Dr. Sloane" to "Jeff." He'd been Dr. Sloane to her for five years.

They fell in step together, heading to the main conference room. "So, I see you're presenting," Jeff said.

"Will you be attending?" She asked.

"I wouldn't miss my star student in action," he replied.

"Really?" Tess asked as she studied his face.

He sighed. "Tess, you know I wish you had chosen another area of study. You have an incredible brain, and you could do a lot. But bigfoot? It's a mocked field. No one takes it seriously. You have a promising future. I just don't want it derailed before it even begins."

It was an argument she had heard many times before. "I appreciate your concern. But I need to do this. And you know as well as I that animals are being discovered every year that we've never heard of, heard of only through legend, or thought were extinct."

Tilting his head to regard her, he reminded her, "But those animals are a lot smaller than an eight to ten foot ape weighing over a thousand pounds."

She shrugged. "The Bili ape is pretty big."

Sighing again, he shook his head even as he said, "True. But that's just one."

"Dr. Sloane," Tess said.

He raised an eyebrow.

She smiled. "I mean, Jeff. I do appreciate you looking out for me. But I promised myself that I would give this a shot. This is what I went

to school for—all those degrees were so I could bring science to this search. And that's what I intend to do."

"I know. And part of me envies your ability to break new ground. I mean, if you're successful, it will not only change the field, it will change the world," he said.

Tess felt the little trickle of fear at the back of her mind that always appeared when she thought of the ramifications of her research. She wanted to prove bigfoot existed, but she tried not to think too much about what would happen after she'd succeeded. Right now, she simply needed to keep herself focused on the work.

Jeff continued, "But Tess if you don't find anything or prove anything soon, your degrees won't help you. You may never be able to work in this field again. Your reputation will be irreparably damaged."

Tess knew he was right. It was okay to go out on a limb in science, but if you did, you had to be successful, or you risked cutting the limb out from underneath you. "I know. So let's just hope I find something."

## CHAPTER 6

THE ENERGY OF THE CROWD WAS A TANGIBLE THING AS TESS PAUSED IN HER presentation. She was almost finished with it and so far, it had gone incredibly well. Now all she had left to do she was the question-and-answer portion, which she always enjoyed.

The room was packed. The crowd consisted mainly of college students from the university, but she also saw some of the regulars—the folks who attended almost all conferences involving bigfoot.

And right now, everyone seemed to have a question or want to make a comment. Tess couldn't have asked for a better response.

She called on a student in the second row. With a crooked smile, he asked simply, "New Jersey? Seriously?"

With a small laugh, Tess gestured to the map on the screen behind her. Displayed there was a map of North America with dots indicating all the locations of bigfoot sightings. There had been sightings in almost every state. The biggest clusters were in the Pacific Northwest and New England, but there were also plenty of sightings in the Midwest and down south in Texas and Florida.

"Well, not in downtown Trenton—but in the more remote areas of Sussex County. In fact, back in the nineteen-seventies and eighties there was a rash of sightings of a giant animal, eight feet tall with red eyes, in those more remote areas. It was called the Big Red Eye. Arms hanging by its knees, horrible stench."

"That's not possible," someone called out.

"You have to remember," Tess said, "Jersey is not all smokestacks and factories. The Appalachian Trail cuts through it. There's a substantial area for a large animal to survive, and more importantly, to go undetected."

About a dozen hands flew in the air. "Third row from the back in the red shirt," Tess said.

A man stood. He had a long beard and a t-shirt that read "Eat at Frank's." Tess prepared herself for a sensational question.

"Do you think the bigfoot are the same beings mentioned in the tales of Merlin and the troglodytes?"

Tess struggled not to laugh. *That's what I get for judging based on appearances.* She saw a lot of confused faces and knew she had to back up and fill them in. "I'm sure most of you have heard of Merlin—the ancient Celtic magician. What some of you may not know is that Merlin was said to have lived with a group of wild, hairy men in caves. Those men were called troglodytes.

"What's really interesting, at least to me, is that in 1735, Carl Linnaeus wrote the first codex on all the animals in the world—he called it the *Systema Naturea*, and it included nine thousand species—and in it, he said there were two types of humans: man and the troglodytes.

"Reports from more modern times say that bigfoot does indeed make use of caves and tunnels to keep away from humans. So yes, I do think it's possible that the troglodytes could very well have been another group of bigfoot."

Hands went up again, and Tess called on a woman in her thirties. "Yes?"

"So what do you think Bigfoot is?" The woman asked.

Tess studied the crowd while carefully weighing her answer. As a scientist, her job was to follow the data and let it determine her answer. Yet she also knew that that particular answer would not go over well with the crowd.

"Right now there are two schools of thought," she said. "One holds that bigfoot is an animal, a giant ape, possibly one that has existed hidden from mankind for thousands of years. The other holds that

bigfoot is actually a man, a primitive man, who for whatever reason has not developed like the rest of us."

"A man, like *Homo sapiens*?" The woman asked.

Tess shook her head. "No. Over twenty different types of hominids have been found in our past. We are related to them, but there *are* distinct differences. It is believed that bigfoot may be one of these cousins of *Homo sapiens*."

"But what do *you* believe?" the woman pressed.

"I believe it is most likely an ape, a giant ape," she replied.

"Apes are not ten feet tall," someone called out.

Tess smiled good-naturedly. "Well, maybe not now, but they were in the past. There was a giant ape named *Gigantopithecus* who is believed to have gone extinct one hundred thousand years ago. It was at least ten feet tall and weighed in at over one thousand pounds. Due to its size, scholars believe it made nests on the ground, like the Bili ape. At first, it, too, was considered merely a legend. That was before a molar of the giant primate was found in 1938. And soon, more jawbones and teeth were found all across Asia."

"So you really think bigfoot's a giant ape?" the woman asked.

"I *suspect* that is the truth," Tess replied and then grinned. "But hopefully, in the next year, I'll be able to prove it."

## CHAPTER 7

TESS KEYED OPEN HER HOTEL ROOM AND SHUFFLED THROUGH THE DOOR. IT had been a good day, but she was exhausted. After the talk, she'd stayed to speak with members of the audience who hadn't had a chance to get their questions addressed. It had been a long but interesting two hours.

She'd been surprised that Jeff had waited. The two of them had gone for coffee. He was working on geospatial distribution of *Homo denisova* in comparison with *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals. Tess could tell he wanted her help, and to be honest, part of her wanted to—the possible interactions of ancient humans fascinated her. But her passion was with her current line of research. Until she answered the question of what bigfoot was, she wasn't going to be able to focus on anything else.

Kicking off her heels, she dropped her bag on the desk across from the bed and pulled off her suit jacket. The worst part of these trips was always the wardrobe. The person who invented heels must have hated women.

She grabbed the remote off the top of the TV, flopped onto the bed, and closed her eyes. *Just ten minutes. I'll relax for ten minutes, and then I'll go back down for the meet-and-greet.*

She knew that if she was to have any chance of getting funded, the

meet-and-greet was where connections would be made. The presentation was just the audition; now she needed a sit down with a director.

Turning on the TV, she flipped through channels without really focusing on them. Finally she shut it off and closed her eyes. *A quick nap and I'll be ready to go.*

The hotel phone rang right next to her. She groaned. *Oh, come on.*

But she slapped on her "I was not just trying to sleep" voice and answered. "Hello?"

"Dr. Brannick?" A male voice asked.

"Yes?"

"My name is Thaddeus Regan. I am the assistant to Carter Hayes."

Tess's mouth fell open. Carter Hayes was a world-renowned businessman who had a habit of turning small ideas into million-dollar ones. "Um, yes, Mr. Regan, what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Hayes was able to view your presentation today, and he would like to speak with you."

"He was there?" Tess asked.

Thaddeus gave a small laugh. "No, no, of course not. But we recorded it for him. He was very impressed and would like to meet with you. Are you available now?"

Sitting up, Tess scanned the room for her shoes. "Uh, sure. Where would he like to meet?"

"We've set up a video conference in the business center. Fifteen minutes?" He asked.

"Great. See you then," Tess said.

Hanging up the phone, she jumped off the bed, grabbing one shoe from in front of the TV. She got on her hands and knees and retrieved the other one from under the bed. Grabbing her makeup case, she hurried into the bathroom and did a quick refresher. Slipping her feet into her dreaded heels, she threw on her jacket and grabbed her messenger bag before she pocketed the room key and made her way out the door.

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Ten minutes later, Tess was sitting in a conference room that had been reserved by Carter Hayes' people. A monitor sat on the table in front of her with a camera aimed right at her face. Tess squirmed. She was not a fan of seeing herself on camera. It's why she wrote a blog instead of doing podcasts.

Pulling out her water bottle, she took a nervous sip and then tapped her pen on the legal pad she'd brought with her.

The screen in front of her beeped. Taking a breath, Tess pushed the button to connect the call.

A man in his forties with pale blue eyes and light brown hair beginning to thin at the peak appeared. He smiled, but it was not overly warm, more perfunctory. "Ah, Dr. Brannick. It's nice to meet you in person. I am Thaddeus Regan."

"Mr. Regan. It's a pleasure," she said.

He gave her another perfunctory smile. "Please hold for Mr. Hayes."

Tess's heart gave a little leap. Carter Hayes. He'd been on the cover of *Time* magazine at least four times that she could remember, and every time they'd debated whether he was a sinner or a saint. His standard mode of operation was to take over a floundering company, restructure it, and then turn it into a financially solvent corporation. But there was always a cost—pensions were lost, people were fired. His methods had gotten him likened to barbarians of old—nothing and no one was left standing when he was done.

The camera shifted as it was placed on a desk. Mr. Hayes came into view. Tess had read that he was Scandinavian, but she would have known that anyway from one look. He had a narrow face, blond hair turning to white, and piercing blue eyes. He was a little thinner than the last picture she'd seen of him. *I wonder if he's ill or just cutting out carbs?*

"Dr. Brannick, it's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice," he said.

Clasping her hands together out of view of the camera, Tess tried to keep the nerves out of her voice when she answered. "The pleasure is all mine. It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Hayes."

He waved his hand. "Please. Call me Carter. I've read your recent papers and your blog."

The idea of Carter Hayes hunched over a computer reading her blog brought a smile to Tess's face. She hastily hid it with a cough.

"Tell me," Carter said. "Why do you think you've been able to continually find evidence where others have failed?"

Tess had prepared for just this question. Feeling more confident she said, "Usually, researchers go to a place when they hear there has been a bigfoot sighting. They stay for a few days, sometimes weeks, and then they move on to the next reported sighting. I believe that approach is misguided."

"How so?" He asked.

"Well, bigfoot know their surroundings well—they know what's supposed to be in their environment and what's not. And they tend to stay away from the things that are not supposed to be there—say, for instance, a visiting scientist." She smiled. He did not return the gesture.

Tess hurriedly continued. "As a result, I've set up my base in an area that has had bigfoot sightings on and off for years, and I have been out there almost every day for over a year. So I'm not new to the environment—I'm now viewed as part of it. I think that's what has enabled me to get the casts I have."

Flicking a glance down as if checking notes, Carter asked, "And you seem to think you're repeatedly finding prints from one bigfoot in particular."

Picturing her latest find, she nodded. "Yes. I noticed a consistent feature on many of the casts—a scar that tells me that they all belong to the same individual."

Returning his gaze to her, he asked, "Have you actually seen a bigfoot yet?"

Contemplating her answer, Tess hesitated. But she knew lying would only come back to haunt her. "No. But I know one has been nearby."

"How?" He asked.

"They have a rather strong scent—if you smelled it, you would understand. It's a mix of woods, decay, and feces. It's really remark-

able. I've smelled it twice, and both times I found footprints shortly thereafter."

Carter sat back in his chair. "People often refer to sasquatch or bigfoot as an animal. Is that what you believe him to be?"

Tess shook her head. "Belief has nothing to do with it. This is science."

"All right then, what does science tell you?" He asked.

She smiled. "Science tells me we need to do more research."

This time Carter laughed, the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkling. "Good answer. So tell me, Dr. Brannick, do you think you will ever see one?"

Once again she paused, thinking over all the evidence she'd found. She thought of the times she'd felt eyes on her in the woods. But the memories of the night in the forest with her father and brother pushed to the forefront. Nodding, she said, "It's only a matter of time."

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*Tess is standing at the edge of a truth that could rewrite history. Take the next step—read Hominid today!*