

November 1, 1889—*The Green Mountain Daily*

Mrs. Veronica Brown of Little River, seeks information on the disappearance of her daughter, Miss Lilian Brown. Widow of the late Charles Brown, an esteemed banker in the Little River area, Mrs. Brown is distraught over her fourteen-year-old daughter's disappearance.

Miss Brown was last seen walking on the logging road east of Little River, and was wearing a red hat and brown coat.

Hunters in the area stated that they had seen an animal of some kind, perhaps a bear, but no evidence has been found to signify that Miss Brown met an untimely death. The local sheriff's department, along with townsfolk, have been searching the area, but no signs of the missing girl have yet been found.

April 17, 1971—*The Green Mountain Daily*

"It were big, I can tell you that." These words were recorded during an interview of Reginald Jarvis, a local resident of Little River. On the evening of April 16th, Jarvis states that he was walking along the logging road just outside of Little River when he saw what he calls a "Sasquatch."

"I never seen nothing like it in all my days on God's green earth," Mr. Jarvis stated. "It stood up on two legs just like you and me, but was covered in fur. Looked like of them big apes at the zoo."

Residents in the area have been warned by authorities to take additional care with their trash cans and to cease feeding birds at backyard birdfeeders. They suspect that a bear has come out of hibernation early.

To that Jarvis says, "Ain't never seen no bear looked like that."

## **Chapter One**

Maria Rodriguez woke feeling as though she'd been running all night long. Her hair was tangled; a sweaty film lay across the back of her neck and knees. In her dreams, she had been running, chased once again by someone, or something, bad. When she was young her mother told her she had a sixth sense. Every morning Maria woke with this heavy twist of fear in her gut, and hoped her mother was wrong. That bad things really weren't lurking around corners waiting for her.

She rolled over, the air chilly after the sweltering blankets. Maria pushed her hair away from her face and sat on the edge of the bed, her finger pulling back the window shade. Outside, small puddles of sunlight formed on the already drying grass and piles of leaves. Vermont was beautiful in the fall and this was a day that was postcard-perfect.

For other girls, childhood had been filled with brightly colored balloons, lazy afternoons in the sun, dreaming about fairy tale endings. They had played dress up in gowns as frothy as cupcake icing, picturing themselves in Hollywood or on Broadway.

Not Maria. For her, childhood was an endless maze of dark tunnels, all of the what ifs and it could happens a constant weight on her shoulders.

“Break a mirror and it’s seven years of bad luck.”

“Don’t step on a crack or you’ll break your mother’s back.”

“Spilling salt is a bad omen for things to come.”

Maria had spent most of her childhood in perpetual worry that she would mess up. Do something careless that would ricochet its negative effects into all the years ahead of her. Or into her family’s.

Just in case became her mantra, the worry beads her mind went to over and over again. Date rape? Better not go to the prom, just in case. Moving away after high school? College was a financial risk. Better to stay in her hometown. Get a stable but boring job, just in case she wasn’t smart enough to handle something more challenging. Romantic relationships were fraught with unknowns. Better to stay single.

Maria rolled over on her side, drawing her knees up to her chest. She sighed. It was deep and heavy. “This trip is going to change your life,” her therapist, Addie, had said. “Ecotherapy is a new practice to me too, but Dr. O’Dell is very familiar with it. He assures me that he’s had clients who’ve undergone tremendous change in a short period of time. It’s more popular in Europe, where counselors give clients prescriptions for time spent immersing themselves in nature. The results are astounding. You’re going to break through barriers that would take us months of counseling sessions, Maria.”

Now Maria looked at the alarm clocks by the bed. There were two: the one she used every morning—its annoying bleat familiar and hated—and a second one. A backup.

Just in case.

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Clark Jenkins started cursing before opening his eyes. His head was pounding like a jackhammer on extra electrical current, his throat felt raw. His breath stank: a familiar brew of old cigarette smoke and sour gin. This time with an added hint of garlic.

What had he eaten for dinner? He focused on that detail. Easier to deal with than whatever had sent him on another bender. Bender. A stupid word to define getting drunk. What exactly was he bending? His opportunities?

He snorted and sat up in one motion.

Mistake.

The world spun one way and then another. He moaned for it to stop. Puking would make him feel better. Get the rest of this junk out of his system. But he didn’t want to. He hated retching over the porcelain bowl, staring at the remains of the previous night. With his other hand he tentatively explored the pillow next to him.

The spinning got a tiny bit better when he found the other side of the bed empty. At least he hadn’t brought Shelia or Beth home with him last night. Or anyone else. He couldn’t deal with the nagging, the clutching at him, this early in the morning.

What time was it anyway? And what had woken him? Clark fumbled on the nightstand. The clock was blank, a little black bar where the numbers should be. He swore again, and checked his cell phone which he'd forgotten to plug in before he'd fallen into bed face first.

He walked to the kitchen, hand trailing his way on the wall.

Five after ten, the hands on the ugly gold face told him. What day? He leaned on the counter, willing the room to stop its orbit. Saturday. Saturday ... Saturday ... what was it he was supposed to do today? Coffee would help. His stomach burbled. Clark straightened and moved toward the pot. Then he remembered.

The trip. His counselor, Dr. O'Dell.

A string of curses rose to his lips. But the bile got there sooner. He bolted toward the bathroom.

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Alaska Baines was running her heart out. At least, that's how it felt. It thumped and banged in her chest, begging her to stop, begging her to rest. What was that saying, no rest for the wicked? Then there was the other one, no pain, no gain, which pounded in her head along with the sound of her heartbeat.

Alaska was full of mantras; try, try, try again, and only quitters quit, and there's no time like the present. And more. Many, many more. She used mantras and sayings and proverbs and whatever else she could to motivate her team of junior ad executives. Rising to the top in the advertising department at the software firm and being a woman (doesn't being a woman always come in second?), Alaska needed all the help she could get.

It's why she did this. Running. She didn't even like it. But it served a greater purpose. Like so many things in her life—eating healthy, exercising like a mad woman, taking every personal and professional development seminar she could fit into her Type A, perfectly organized, color-coded schedule—it was necessary if she wanted to stay on top.

And Alaska did.

The trip this weekend would be a new experience for her. She'd been invited by her therapist to join the small group of clients that were going on an Ecotherapy weekend. Alaska had never been camping before, let alone backpacking. So of course, she'd said yes. It would be hard to be out of contact with work for a four-day weekend, but she'd made it work.

Feet slapping against the pavement, Alaska used a breathing technique her personal trainer had taught her to moderate her breathing. The stopwatch on her wrist told her she had three minutes to get to the mile marker if she was going to beat yesterday's record. She intended to.

Eyes on the prize. Focus, Alaska. Focus!

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Gabe Southly moaned when his alarm clock went off, slapping at it with only one hand emerging from the cocoon of blankets. It was dark in there, and warm. He had no desire to emerge into the real world. While he drifted half-in and half-out of sleep he saw images. People from his past flitting across the screen of his mind, but in unusual ways. There was his favorite aunt, her lower body powerful horse's legs and she was riding a unicycle. And then the little dog they'd had as a family pet when Gabe was small appeared. It was dressed in a suit though, and when it turned its head to look at Gabe, it said, "Why do you think this is a good idea?" More images came, some humorous, some darker, all vivid.

It was this dream-wake stage that Gabe relished. That period between being completely conscious and still sleeping was when his creative mind flourished, feeding him images and ideas that were hard to capture in the rest of his busy day. Working as a freelance graphic designer wasn't at all what Gabe had pictured when he went to art school. No, he was going to be the one that stuck to his ideals, the purist who never dirtied his hand or his curriculum vitae with commercial art, who was never swayed by what a client wanted but only by his muse.

Gabe sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. His full consciousness was accompanied by the familiar tightness in his gut. The worries and fears always found their way to that spot and coagulated into a tight ball of stress and anxiety. Money, fame and fortune. Why was it that the things he wanted most seemed further out of reach every year?

He pushed himself up, out of the cocoon of blankets and checked the clock. He was meeting Alaska in just over an hour and still needed a shower and to finish packing his bag.

"This trip might just change your life," Dr. O'Dell had said.

Gabe had been seeing him for months now. Or was it more than a year? In fact, it was Gabe who had referred Alaska to his therapist. She was the one person he'd become friendly with at the tech company where he'd taken on some increasingly larger freelance graphic design jobs.

He yawned and pulled himself to standing. He didn't make friends, not easily, and he didn't want to let Alaska down. If nothing else, this weekend should cement the account with TriTech, something that would mean lots more business, and money, in his future.

## **Chapter Two**

"Tell me again why you're going on this trip?" Adeline Preston's son, Ben, asked. Addie stopped shoving rolled up polypropylene clothes into her backpack. She looked at

her youngest. He was handsome; dark hair and eyes like his father. The only trait of Addie's he'd inherited was his nose, straight and sprinkled with freckles. She hated her own dusting but on Ben they looked charming.

At twenty-three, he was charming, sweet. A worrier though, even since babyhood. Ben had always looked back to check for her permission: when he was learning to walk, when he was sampling his first solid foods. Not like Michael. Three years older and miles apart in personality, the boys had never gotten along. "The Swindler," she and her ex had nicknamed Michael when he was a toddler, because he always got what he wanted, one way or another.

"It's a group therapy session," Addie said and returned to stuffing. "Dr. O'Dell and I are leading the group. It's called Ecotherapy, a sort of immersion into the natural world. It's been used in Europe for a long time. It's effective," she grunted as she pushed the final piece of clothes into the too-tight bag. "And I get a chance to see Dell, I mean, Dr. O'Dell, in his own environment."

"He lives in the woods?" Ben's voice was sarcastic.

Addie looked up and smiled. "No, but he's spent enough time there to teach me a lot about nature."

"I could teach you anything you want to know about nature, Ma." Ben made a noise of disgust in the back of his throat. "You don't even like nature."

"That's not true." Addie turned to her son again. Looking up from the floor made him seem even taller. "I love nature."

"Wildlife shows on TV don't count," Ben said. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. His corduroys were oversized and his shirt hung out over the waistband, making him appear thicker around the waist than he was.

"Here, I got you this." He pulled something from the right-hand pocket and tossed it in her direction. Addie grabbed it right before it smacked her in the face. The object was thin, cylindrical and gold-colored. It looked like a fancy tube of lipstick but when her fingers moved to where the cap should be, there was only a tiny hole.

"Careful, it's pepper spray," Ben said. "Miniaturized. It'll fit easily into the pocket on your pants."

"Thanks, but isn't it a little small to stop a bear?"

"I got you a bigger version for that," he said, handing her another cylinder. This one was red and white and screamed "STOPS" along the side. In smaller print was a miniature bulleted list of all the animals the spray would halt in their tracks: bears, snakes, wolves, mountain lions, panthers, coyotes, raccoons (!), humans.

"Raccoons? Should I be worried about those? I thought they were just greedy with leftovers." Addie laughed but Ben didn't join in.

"Rabies make any animal a danger," Ben said sounding like a professor. "The small one is for humans, just enough to surprise someone, give you a chance to get away." Ben had already reminded her several times of the attacks over the years on single women while hiking the Long Trail in the state. Addie had reminded him of the attacks that happened everywhere else. She was much more worried about animals than people.

“I’d feel better if you’d take this, too,” Ben said, handing over a small pouch. It was heavier than it looked, with a nylon strap hanging from one end.

“What is it?”

“The stun gun. Look, I know you said—”

“No, Ben. Let’s not talk about this again.”

Ben crossed his arms, then let them hang loose, a sigh raising his shoulders up and down.

“Did you leave your itinerary somewhere?”

“Of course,” she said, glad he wasn’t going to start another argument about the stun gun. His concern would be sweet ... if it wasn’t so smothering. Instantly she felt badly for thinking like that. As a therapist, she knew the seriousness of anxiety, how it could choke a person’s mind and smear their outlook with potential dangers.

While friends wouldn’t define her as reckless, she’d grown up in the ’70s. It wasn’t all peace, love and drugs; though she’d had her fair share of those. She’d done the typical college kid thing, taken a term off school to travel around Europe. Sometimes she cringed, thinking back to the dangerous situations she’d put herself into. She’d hitched rides from strangers, gotten tipsy in bars and one night had slept on a park bench in Berlin because she couldn’t remember the name of her hotel. Ben would have a heart attack if he knew. But she had refused to live life like a caged animal. That’s how the American dream always felt to her: white picket fence, a dog, and a car payment.

In the end wasn’t it partially that—her refusal to accept the cage, to do things the way that was expected of her—that finally broke her marriage? Ben had so much of his father in him. Too much anxiety about all that could go wrong instead of grabbing the moments as they came and letting them be what they were without trying to control every second. But it was how he was wired. While she embraced change and trying new things, these made Ben uncomfortable. She’d always worked hard as a parent to recognize his strengths: he was very smart and excelled at working with computers and troubleshooting problems, something that Addie had no patience for. And he was tender-hearted, always standing up for the underdog. In fact, the one time he’d gotten in trouble for fighting at school had been when a bigger kid was picking on a younger, smaller child. She’d given him an ice cone and a hug after collecting him from school, rather than a lecture.

He cleared his throat and she looked up.

“Sorry,” she said. “The itinerary is on the kitchen counter by the coffee pot. Don’t worry about me, Ben,” she tugged on Ben’s pant leg and looked up at him. “Dr. O’Dell is very capable. We’re going to be fine.”

Butterflies tickled her ribs but she spread a wide smile over her face. She ducked her head, hoping Ben wouldn’t see. She’d be lying if she said that Dr. O’Dell himself wasn’t part of the reason she was so interested in this trip. For purely professional reasons, of course.

“What are your plans for the weekend?” she asked. “Are you getting together with Lacey?”

Ben shook his head, rubbed a hand on the back of his neck. “Nah. She’s busy. Well, not busy really. Just doesn’t want to see me.” The last part of this was muffled as Ben’s

hand moved from the back of his head to rub the skin on his neck and face. He scrubbed at it vigorously, then let the hand drop.

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you were having problems.”

“Yeah, me either.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Addie stood, stretching her back which was aching from the position hunched over her backpack. Her legs tingled.

“Not really,” Ben said, shuffling his feet. “I’ve gotta run some errands. What time are you leaving?”

Addie glanced at her watch.

“Dr. O’Dell is picking me up in an hour.” Not Dell as she’d been calling him for the past couple of months. Like he’d asked her to. Her cheeks were getting pink and Ben frowned. His dark eyes probing, lips already parting to ask a question.

One that Addie wouldn’t want to answer.

“So, I’m almost done here. Sure you won’t join me for a coffee and a chat about Lacey?”

Ben shook his head, breaking eye contact. Guilt twisted her gut. What kind of mother uses her son’s love life to avoid talking about her own?