THE BIGWOOF CONSPIRACY

DASHE ROBERTS



nosy crow

Look out for:

THE THING AT BLACK HOLE LAKE

For J & M

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CHAPTER 1

Encounter of a Weird Kind

After all the times she had insisted that something was out there, after all the times no one believed her, after the lifetime of sniggering she had endured – tonight, Lucy Sladan would prove she was right.

With a CLICK, she loaded a roll of film into the old camera she had "borrowed" from her parents. She needed proof, the kind that was hard to fake. *People of the world,* she thought, *prepare to learn the Truth.*

Her skin tingled with excitement. She still couldn't quite believe it. Just the night before, while taking the dog out for a gallop in the woods,

Lucy had seen something in the sky; something that looked remarkably, amazingly, like the out-of-focus flying objects pictured on her favourite website: *TheTruthHasLanded.org*.

A flash of lightning outside the round attic window cast jagged shadows across the sloped walls. For a fleeting moment, Lucy's bedroom seemed full of motion. She twisted a lock of purple hair and counted out six Mississippis before she heard the corresponding rumble of thunder. Pushing her plastic-framed glasses up the bridge of her nose, she reread a highlighted article in yesterday's newspaper:

SECOND DISAPPEARANCE IN STICKY PINES

Beloved candy-store owner, Mandy Millepoids, 66, has been reported missing. He was last seen birdwatching in Molasses Grove on the evening of September 1. Meanwhile, police are still searching for factory worker Alastair Chelon, 37, last seen fishing at Black Hole Lake on August 17. Authorities are looking into sightings of large wild animals in the area.

Wild animals, Lucy scoffed. She knew the truth. *These guys weren't attacked. They were abducted. By ALIENS.*

She imagined the article they would write about her tomorrow: *Lucy Sladan, 12-year-old genius, rescues missing Sticky Pines residents while awesomely confirming once and for all the existence of extraterrestrials. Former critics are amazed and deeply apologetic.*

All she needed to do now was sneak out without getting caught.

A knock on the door sent the newspaper flying out of her hands in a dozen fluttering pieces. Her nine-year-old sister Willow entered without waiting for an invitation. Lucy wondered why she bothered to hang the "Keep Out, Unbelievers" sign on the door.

"What are you doing up here?" asked Willow. "Listening for radio signals from space?"

"Too much cloud cover." Lucy glanced at the clipping from *The ET Bee* pinned to the corkboard above her desk. The headline read:

"Do Aliens Use Bad Weather to Hide from Sight?" Lucy knew the answer: *You bet they flippin' do.* She gathered up the newspaper and put it back together in no particular order. "I think I'm gonna hit the hay early tonight."

"Your bedtime's not for two hours," said Willow.

"What can I say?" Lucy stretched her arms and yawned, fairly convincingly. "I'm bushed."

"You're not in your pyjamas."

"I was … just about to change." *Keep it together, Lucita. Sneaking out is all in the details.* She had googled it.

Willow kicked a pile of dirty clothes and hopped over to sit on the rumpled bed. "Did you hear there was another Bigfoot sighting?" She chewed the strings of her pink unicorn hoodie. "Dad says Sasquatches only eat boys, but Mom says they're equal opportunity."

Lucy snorted. "Please. Only babies and tourists believe in dumb stuff like Bigfoot."

"You believe in fairies," Willow sneered.

"I believe in transdimensional beings who've been MISTAKEN for fairies."

"Whatever." Willow rolled her eyes. "Errol ran off after dinner again. You're not supposed to feed him people food."

"Eating only dog food is boring, Will." Lucy checked the clock. "Did you want something?"

"Mom and Dad wanna know if you're gonna come make up songs with us," said Willow.

Three nights in a row? "Thanks for the invite, but like I said, I'm bushed."

"It's only eight o'clock," Willow complained. "What are you, five?" She picked up a toy Yoda from the bookshelf and started messing with its ears.

Lucy snatched the precious Jedi out of her hands. "OK, time to go."

"I wasn't gonna break your doll."

"Figurine," Lucy corrected. She scooted her sister out to the golden pine landing. "Tell Mom and Dad not to wake me up. It's a school night."

"Fine." Willow stuck out her tongue and,

mercifully, headed downstairs.

Lucy turned off all the lights and got into bed fully clothed. She stared impatiently into darkness until it was well past Willow's nine o'clock bedtime. Nobody came upstairs to check on her. *It's time*.

She slipped on her hiking boots, red hoodie and grey rain poncho, grabbed her backpack and tiptoed down the stairs, keeping her feet on the inside edges to minimise creaking. Cautiously, she inched her way along the hallway of the weathered log cabin. She ducked behind the kitchen island to avoid being seen by her parents in the living room, then slid out the side door and into the garage. The twangs of her father's banjo and her mother's cackling laughter faded as she dipped under the garage door – always open halfway so that Errol could get in and out.

Outside, a bolt of lightning splintered through the low clouds, the sky briefly resembling an undulating sea of jellyfish.

Lucy headed into the ancient moss-draped forest. She had grown up in these woods, and she and Willow had given names to the most distinctive-looking trees.

"Hey, Arnold." She saluted a knobby blue pine that had fallen sideways but managed to find a way to keep growing; its contorted two-pronged trunk twisting to resemble a capital letter A. She steered clear, knowing from experience that its bark was thick with dark, glue-like sap. A gust of wind allowed its tangled branches to shudder in response.

When the path came to a fork, she pulled out a hand-drawn map, oriented herself, then tramped off-road, straight into the shadowy foliage.

Twice, she slipped on the muddy ground and nearly lost her balance. She picked up a fallen tree branch, shook off a yellow banana slug as big as her forearm and snapped off the narrow end to make a walking stick.

Stabilised, she set off again, rain spattering her glasses. She wiped the lenses with her sleeve

and scanned the patches of sky for any sign of unnatural activity. As she picked her way around a patch of brambles, she heard something out of place – a dull mechanical hum echoing above the forest. Lucy's heart began to pound. *This could be it.*

Squinting at the leafy shadows overhead, she ran towards whatever was making the artificial noise. It seemed to be hovering just over her head, hidden by the canopy. A glint of blue light darted across an opening in the leaves as the flying object she could not identify shot off deeper into the woods, the mosquito-like hum growing fainter by the second.

Oh no you don't! Lucy chased after it, twigs whipping at her cheeks. She leapt over an overgrown patch of ferns and slid on a slimy patch of mud, sprawling face-first on the soggy forest floor.

Out of breath, she rolled on to her back, the rain falling on her face. She was in a clearing in the trees under the stormy sky. There was no

sign of the Unidentified Flying Object. *Come on, come on, I know you're out there*. She shivered. Her trousers were soaked through and she felt cold to the bone.

Then she heard an unmistakable sound: footsteps. Lucy hopped to her feet and clutched her walking stick. *Who would be crazy enough to be out here on a night like this? Besides me, I mean.*

CRUNCH. CRUNCH. CRUNCH.

Something was moving through the trees behind her. Something big. Anxiously, she remembered the news report about "large animals" in the area. Maybe the missing people really did get eaten by a mountain lion…

She brought the stick over her shoulder like a baseball bat and closed her eyes – then, "HIYAAHHH!" She spun at the darkness, swinging her staff blindly, hitting nothing. A burst of lightning revealed a large creature, wiry grey hair matted to its muscled frame, grimacing to reveal long, sharp teeth.

Lucy dropped the stick.

"Errol!" She had never been so happy to see the family wolfhound in her life. "Oh man, I'm sorry, bud!" She smiled with relief and took a step towards her shaggy pet. "C'mere, doggo."

But Errol wasn't looking at her, he was looking past her, and he clearly did not like what he was looking at.

Ears flat, he snarled in the kind of menacing display usually reserved for the weird guy who ran the candy store at the centre of town. *The guy who disappeared the other night*.

"What is it?" Lucy's smile faded. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to see what was frightening the forty-kilo dog, or if she should rethink her life choices and run home, not stopping until she was in bed with the dinosaur covers pulled over her head.

Curiosity won out over her sense of self-preservation. Slowly, she turned around.

What the…? For a moment, she forgot to breathe.

Not six metres away, cloaked in shadow near

the edge of the clearing, stood a massive hunch-backed figure staring up at the sky. It looked almost human, except for the stringy, tangled hair that hung wetly over its pot-bellied body, like some kind of golem made of moss.

From where Lucy was standing, it looked like those pictures in tourist traps throughout the valley. The ones they sold to suckers.

Holy. Flippin'. Crudballs. "Bigfoot?" she whispered.

The creature swivelled its head like a grotesque bird of prey, its massive body motionless. It issued a low, insect-like hiss from deep within its throat. A bolt of lightning flashed, revealing wide-set black eyes on a blunt, bulldoggish face.

That doesn't look like any Bigfoot picture I've ever seen… Her heart thundered in her chest. She was unable to move; out of awe or fear, she couldn't say.

Errol barked ferociously and lunged towards the hideous thing. The monster unhinged its froggish head and let out a dissonant wail, like a

wolf being attacked by a swarm of bees.

Whoa.

Errol panicked and bolted through the trees, whimpering pitifully as he ran towards home.

"B-buddy?" Lucy swallowed. Errol was gone.

The monster tilted its head and stared at Lucy, its muscular, too-long arms hanging limply at its sides. She couldn't leave, not now. Not without proof of what she'd seen.

The bipedal beast swivelled its gaze back to the sky. Lucy strained to see what it was looking at, but saw nothing beyond the swirling gloom.

Then she heard it – the eerie electrical humming sound. Following the noise, she spotted something hovering high above the clearing: four ghostly blue lights set in a diamond formation.

Her skin prickled. This was it, the supernatural proof she had been searching for. *A real-life UFO and a freaky Bigfoot, both at the same time!* She could already picture the image on the cover of *Weird Enquiries Weekly*. This was by far the

greatest day of her life.

Regaining the ability to reason, she dug the camera out of her backpack and unscrewed the lens cap with shaking hands. If she pulled this off, she would be a hero. They might even rename the town in her honour. *Welcome to Sladanville, where things get weird!*

She brought the camera to her eyes. *Crudberries*. She could see nothing but darkness. Hastily, she checked to make sure the camera's flash was on. She was going to need it.

The exquisitely weird creature whined like a walrus and pointed at the hovering lights, its crooked finger raised as if in awe.

Don't worry, Ugly, I see it too.

Lucy took a deep breath. She pointed the camera, hoping to get both the creature and the UFO in frame. *This is going to be epic…*

She fumbled for the trigger, and pressed. The flash went off. The creature screamed. There was a blinding bright light, a tremendous, deafening boom and then, darkness.