

Chapter One

The trouble began when my parents sat us down and told us to call them by their first names. My little brother, Perry, who was eight, looked as if he might burst into tears.

“Even at bedtime?” he asked.

“Honey,” Elissa—formerly known as Mom—said, “someday you’ll understand and thank us.”

Jeff—formerly known as Dad—was staring straight ahead. Elissa elbowed him, and he said, “It’s true. El and I agreed to do this way back in college, but—” He stopped suddenly, as if he’d lost his train of thought.

“We just forgot how important it was to us,” Elissa said. “We were so . . . busy. When you kids were younger, I mean.”

“So why not just forget it permanently?” I asked.

“We just felt it was important,” Jeff said, glancing at Elissa. “To clarify some things around here.”

“It’s about reaffirming shared values,” Elissa said, looking back at Jeff. “For all of us.”

“What shared values?” I asked.

They both opened their mouths, looked at each other, then shut their mouths. Jeff nodded for Elissa

to go first.

“When we were in college,” she started, then giggled.

Jeff looked like he wanted to roll his eyes, but he rubbed his forehead instead.

“We had all these ideas,” Elissa said, “about why the world was, well, the way it is. When we talked about the future—and then it seemed impossible that we would ever have kids, given the pollution . . .”

“El,” Jeff said, “cut to the chase.”

“Oh, you,” she said to him. “I was having fun. But, okay. We wanted to live in a world of . . . equality, where there were no hierarchies. Without hierarchies, there would be no . . .”

“Abuse of power,” Jeff said. “Honey, this is way over Perry’s head.”

“No, it isn’t,” Elissa said. “You know about evil, right, Perry? Bad guys? The powerful ones who always want . . .”

“To take over the world?” Perry said.

“You see?” Elissa said to Jeff, “he’s tracking perfectly.” Turning back to Perry, she said, “Yes, absolutely right. Hierarchy is when the evil kings and queens make the servants . . .”

“Do all the work? Like Cinderella!” Perry said.

“Right,” Elissa said. “That’s abuse of power. And we thought, in our own small way, that teaching you from the beginning that we are all, well, just people . . .”

“So does this mean, being equals, we get to make our own rules?” I asked.

Jeff glared at me. “You know very well . . .”

Elissa restrained him with a finger on his forearm. “We work together. As a unit. We work things out. Love is greater than any difference of opinion.

Isn't that right, Jeff?"

Jeff nodded, but he squinted as if he'd been yanked from an unpleasant daydream. He might have been thinking about those evil hierarchies, but the way he looked, I sensed it was something else. Something big was going to come down.

And I was right. The next day, Jeff's employer, the Department of Natural Resources—the DNR—announced that they intended to slaughter “excess” deer in Wirth Park. My family stopped saying anything more complicated than “Pass the salt” after that. Before the decision was made we'd listened to Jeff's explanations that the herd was vastly overpopulated. He even practiced his presentation to the city officials on us, using charts and graphs that were supposed to show how the deer were destroying the ecosystem and endangering the city's fresh water reserves.

“Like so many cows packed into a small pasture,” he said. “These animals have to be managed.”

According to Jeff, these sweet creatures had eaten everything green in the park and were now wandering through the city munching expensive flowers. He grossed us out with pictures of the parasites and germ-infested fleas they carried, then thrust a chart at us showing radical increases in deer-auto collision ratios.

“They're like giant rats on the prowl,” he said.

Elissa asked, “What kind of people would send men armed with weapons of death into our beloved nature spot?”

I added that perhaps the DNR had missed some of the good things the deer were doing. I described watching a doe clean up the park by eating a whole carton of McDonald's French fries.

Jeff threw down his charts and graphs about then. You might say that was the point when the trouble shifted into second gear.

From that point on, nothing my mother or I said (or Perry, if he mattered) helped. The DNR set the hunt date to begin on October 31. This wasn't terribly bright, according to Elissa.

"Halloween was once called Samhain by the ancient Celts," she told me when Jeff wasn't around. "It was ruled by a stag-headed god named Cennunos." She explained that scheduling the hunt on Halloween was their way of daring someone to stop them.

In the weeks that followed, we tried to pretend we were a normal family. Jeff went to work. Elissa went to her meetings. Perry and I did the zombie school thing. But we all knew something was brewing beneath the surface.

Despite our family's social life nearly grinding to a halt, Jeff and I continued to share our one peculiar ritual. On Friday nights, after Perry conked out and Elissa headed off to some spirituality meeting or another, we made popcorn and watched my favorite show, *Strange But True*. Just a cheap tabloid-style cable show, but I taped and cataloged it religiously. Mostly it rehashed stock monsters and unsolved mysteries, but it occasionally revealed information so significant people would call me a nerd if I tried to tell them about it.

That night's show was about a humanoid goat that walked on two legs. The chupacabra had vampire fangs and an appetite for blood. It haunted Mexican border towns spooking illegal immigrants and mutilating farm animals. But it could be the most serious threat facing our nation.

While we watched, Jeff and I stared at the glowing TV, stuffing our faces with popcorn.

“You know why we do this?” he asked.

“Eat popcorn?” I said.

“Watch TV.”

I waited for his latest theory.

“Because cavemen sat in front of campfires for thousands of years listening to stories,” he said. He took another handful of popcorn, talking and chewing at the same time. “Our brains mistake TV for a campfire. We feel comforted and safe.”

“So the system lulls us to sleep so we’ll buy anything they tell us to?”

This was how it went with us. Theories and jabs.

A clomping on the stairs disturbed us. I turned away from the TV, which was showing a drawing of a quasi-satyr hiding behind a giant cactus. Elissa was putting on her trench coat over the blue-gray robe thing she wore to her Women’s Spirituality meetings. She’d told me not to tell Jeff it was called a Wiccan tunic, then asked if it made her look fat. Jeff had already warned me about women asking if they were fat. He said that in many parts of the world Elissa would be considered average, even small. If Jeff didn’t look so much like a squirrel monkey, they might have fit together better.

“I like your hair,” I said.

She looked at me funny, probably because she wore it medium length with bangs like she had in every picture since high school. “I was supposed to pick up Janine fifteen minutes ago,” she said.

As she walked toward Jeff, she held her coat closed. “I might be home pretty late,” she said.

Mouth full of popcorn, Jeff said, “Isn’t it a little

cold to dance around a maypole?”

“It’s not . . .” Elissa clicked her tongue. “We’re not . . .”

She sighed, shut her eyes and inhaled loudly through her nose, something she called a “centering breath.”

“I want you to know,” she said. “We’re doing something . . . with Stewart Spiranga.”

“What’s he selling?” Jeff said.

“You haven’t heard of him?” she asked. “I thought he might be on your villain list. He’s the activist who wrote *Releasing Your Inner Wild Person*.”

Jeff looked up as “Strange” cut to a commercial for a fishing lure. Bits of popcorn stuck to his beard.

“Isn’t he that guy who lost his job at the university? The one who’s into weird stuff like mercy killing disabled people?”

She forced a laugh. “I figured you’d know that much. Everything he says gets garbled by the media. He stirs people up, that’s all. He said people would throw that at us.” She stepped toward the door. “No, he’s not into anything like that. Not at all. He loves the . . .” she searched for a word, “environment.”

“Don’t we all,” Jeff said.

Elissa inhaled sharply. “We’re doing something . . . in the park.”

Since the deer controversy had begun, the word “park” in our house meant only Wirth Park.

Jeff jumped up. “Don’t get me in trouble, El. You know the park closes at ten. I can’t afford any hassles at work.”

“Everything isn’t about you,” she said. “This is about me.” She looked suddenly happy and alive, as if an espresso had just hit her blood stream. “Don’t wait up,” she sang happily as she disappeared out the front

door. A cold gust of wind reached as far as the couch.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Jeff said.

He watched from the front window while her white minivan pulled out of the driveway. Then he moved as if in a trance to our big picture window, the one that faced the park. He aligned his toes to a piece of tape on the carpet. If you keep your toes on the tape and your head perfectly still, you wouldn’t see any other houses from this spot. People teased him about that, but I’d come home and find him standing on his spot, just staring.

I told him I’d tape the rest of the show, then headed off to bed.

Perry and I still shared a room. Mostly I hated it, but occasionally it was funny to see him all knotted up in his Batman quilt, dumb as a cat. The room was hot, so I cracked open the skylight. The cold night air made me think about Elissa and her ragtag band of witches out there in the forest doing desperate magic to save the deer. I was proud of her.

I shucked off my jeans and T-shirt and flopped onto my bed in my underwear. I picked up *The Grave Robbers of Arkkorn*, a book I reread for tips on guerrilla tactics. Science fiction was comforting because it reminded me there are millions of intelligent creatures in the universe as unsatisfied with their lives as I was. They lay on their beds or cave floors or in their gelatinous pods, wishing they were somewhere else.

Perry shouted from a dream. “No!” He thrashed around and said something about his Mr. Hairy. I was tempted to whisper something nasty about his toy bear, but I didn’t. Eventually, I heard Jeff thumping up the stairs. He poked his head in.

“Goodnight, Sam. Sorry about . . .” he glanced

around the room, “everything.”

“No problem,” I said, following my rule: Never show adults they’ve gotten to you.

Then I just couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about Elissa out there in the forest. I knew more than she’d told Jeff. This Spiranga guy wanted them to communicate psychically with the deer. I’d sworn myself to secrecy when she told me this.

I studied a poster of Middle Earth left over from more innocent times. In maps of fantasy worlds, evil places are clearly marked with dark clouds or dragons lurking in caverns. In real life, you have to figure it out when you might be in one.

In half-sleep, Perry walked over and climbed onto my bed. He curled up at the end of it like a dog. In the old days, I’d kick him off when he did this, but that night I watched his chest go up and down rhythmically.

I don’t know how much time passed, but a loud crash woke me. I jumped out of bed in my underwear. My light was still on. I heard a second crash and remembered how raccoons got into the garbage. Then an eerie noise like a human wail came through the cracked skylight. I knew cats in heat sometimes sounded like angry babies, but I wondered if a chupacabra might sound like a cat in heat.

Curiosity finally led me out of my door. A man in boxer shorts was running down the stairs. I knew it was Jeff, but in the dark he looked leaner and more muscular. In a minute, he was at the front door, putting on his boots.

“Something’s going on out there,” he said mysteriously.

I followed him out. Despite the weird thrill of being in my underwear, it was much colder than

I'd expected. Jeff crouched down on the front lawn, moving his head back and forth as if scanning for animal tracks.

"What?" I said, crossing my arms for warmth.

"Look."

He pointed at Elissa's minivan parked in the street. It should have been in the garage. Something was wrong, something involving Elissa. Then he pointed to our garbage can rolling on its side. Another bumping sound came from our backyard.

"Someone's going up the attic stairs," he said.

Running to the backyard, he paused at Perry's sandbox and picked up a plastic shovel. I made a gesture that questioned his sanity, but he ignored me. He pointed at the open door of the stairwell, the only way to get to the unheated attic over the garage.

Our attic is a weird place, full of my grandfather's outdoorsy crap that Elissa couldn't get Jeff to throw away: mounted animals, old fishing tackle, ancient leather gloves, meaningless awards and plaques for hunting and fishing, a lifetime of outdoorsy loot passed to Jeff when his dad had died.

Jeff moved quickly through the darkened doorway, walking in a low martial arts crouch. I followed up the stairs, mainly out of fear of being left behind. I heard the sound of boxes falling to the floor. I was sure someone was trying to lure us up there to hurt us. It was a trap. I wanted to warn Jeff, but he was too far ahead.

As my eyes adjusted, I saw Grampa's trophy deer mount lying on the floor. Other stuffed animals were scattered about. I saw a pheasant, a fox, a northern pike frozen in its last lunge for a jig.

"Elissa?" Jeff said.

"Go away." It sounded like a little girl version

of Elissa's voice.

I looked over Jeff's shoulder and saw Elissa sitting on the floor in the corner. Moonlight passing through a windowpane striped her with dark lines like an old-fashioned prison uniform. Her face glistened with tears.

"Hon? What happened?" Jeff said. "Are you okay?"

"I can't live like this anymore," she said, still a pouty child.

"Like what, Hon?" Jeff said softly.

"This!" she shouted, kicking a mounted pike on the floor. "Live with all this!"

Jeff bent over and gently picked up the fish. He placed it on one of the piles of boxes.

"What happened?" Jeff whispered to her.

"Nothing *happened!*" she snapped.

Just then, hysterical screams came from the base of the stairwell. I grabbed my dad, completely spooked.

"Perry," Jeff said. "Go see. And turn on the light."

Perry sat at the bottom of the stairs clutching Mr. Hairy. When he saw me, he screamed again. I flicked on the energy-saving light bulb, which sent a pale yellow glow over us.

"It's okay, Perry," I said. "It's just Elissa."

He cried, "Momma!" opening his arms toward the attic, his hands open and closed, clutching at empty space.

"Don't be a baby. Just go to bed. Everything will be fine in the morning."

"What's she . . ." he was hiccupping and shivering, which made him hard to understand, "doing out here?"

“Working,” I said. “Reorganizing the attic.”
“Everyone . . .” hiccup, “was gone . . .” hiccup,
“when I woke up.”

“Just be quiet,” I said as kindly as I could
stand.

“Momma!” he screamed at full volume.

In a moment, Jeff was beside me.

“I think he needs you,” I said in my best
exasperated adult tone.

“Okay,” Jeff said. “Stay with El a minute, would
you?” He snatched Perry off the stair. “C’mon, kiddo.
Everything’s going to be fine. Let’s put Mr. Hairy to
bed.”

This was my only chance to find out what really
happened to Elissa. I was sure she wouldn’t tell Jeff. I
hurried up to the attic, which was now bathed in weird
yellow light. A box full of her old cow-pattern tea crap
was open next to her. She held up a black-and-white
dappled teapot, the one that vomits tea into its calf
cups.

“This is the only thing of mine that’s up here,”
she said.

“Mom?” I whispered. “Elissa? What
happened?”

“Sammy,” she said, breaking into a smile. She
touched my face with a cold hand.

“Who did this to you?”

She told me about Spiranga, how he went on
and on about why the ancient religions required blood
sacrifice.

“Can you believe he was saying this to a bunch
of middle-aged women who won’t even allow their
kids to play with toy guns?” she asked.

Then she explained that she’d thought they
were just going to talk about how they could help the

deer, maybe have a snack.

“I didn’t want to hear about it,” she said. “I mean, if people chain themselves to trees and want to call that human sacrifice, fine. That I can handle. You know I’m against violence of any kind.”

She’d wandered away from the group, she explained, and got lost. She said it was like that scene in the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy came across those mean trees that grabbed at her. It was all brambles and thorns. She’d lost her coat and begun crying.

Then she smiled strangely at me.

“But something really cool happened, Sam. I can tell you, but keep it quiet. Don’t tell Jeff. Something really cool.” She looked years younger.

“What?” I said.

“I saw him.”

“Who?” I asked as a chill went through me.

“Big Buck. You know? The biggest buck in the woods? The one the DNR named Big Buck? I saw him. Just for a few seconds. He looked at me with these intelligent, loving eyes.”

I began sweating. I was sure Jeff would pop up behind me.

“He sent me an image,” she said. “Like the tarot card of the hanged man, only it was a buck deer hanging upside down from a tree, only . . .”

“Only what?”

“He was smiling, or at least peaceful. Like Christ on the cross, but upside down. It was like he was doing this on purpose, letting himself get killed this way. Spiranga would call it a sacrifice, I suppose.” She shuddered again.

“What do you think it meant? He meant?”

She reached out and held my hand. Her hand was still cold.

“I don’t know,” she said. “That we all have to sacrifice ourselves to stop the hunt? I don’t know. My spiritually group will help me with it.”

I was buzzing inside with her unsolved mystery when Jeff showed up.

“Well, I got him to bed,” he said as if Perry were the big problem of the night. “Sam got your whole story?” he asked Elissa. He stroked his beard with a weird smile on his face. “Heavy stuff?”

“Yes,” Elissa said. “Heavy is appropriate right now, don’t you think?”

Jeff all at once looked tired. “Yeah, it’s been a big night for all of us. Let’s not jump into anything . . .”

I was heading for the stairwell when Elissa screamed, “You don’t understand anything, do you?”

I practically stumbled over Perry, who was once again lurking on the stairs.

“You don’t understand how violence in one place creates violence someplace else,” she said. “Go ahead, kill them! Go on! Take your stupid hunters in there and kill all the deer. Who needs them? They’re nuisances. Cockroaches! Kill the ants, kill the mice, kill the squirrels, even kill the goddam raccoons. Kill everything!”

“I like raccoons,” Perry whispered.

“Shut up,” I said quietly as I crouched beside him.

“Are you finished?” Jeff asked.

“You know what my friends say?” Elissa shouted. “They say I married a murderer.”

“And what do you say back?” Jeff was dangerously calm now. The eye of the hurricane.

“We should go,” I whispered to Perry.

Instead, he put his arm over my shoulder, and

amazingly I let him. His eyes were wide open.

“I say I’m starting to believe it,” Elissa said.
“Maybe you are a murderer.”

“You’re going over, El. You’re really going over now. Your brain’s so full of this New Age bullshit it’s turning to mush. Christ, you need help. And I’m not talking about spirituality groups or action committees. I’m talking real doctors here!” Now he was yelling.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” she yelled back. “Real doctors—
ha, ha, ha.”

“Oh, that’s good,” he shouted back. “*Ha! Ha!
Ha!*”

Jeff made a halfhearted attempt to close the door, but one couldn’t close that door without concentration. He gave up, leaving it half-open.

Then they really let it rip.

They yelled about the deer kill, about Grampa’s stuffed deer heads and mounted fish, about Jeff taking the stupid DNR job. Why did he have to give up on his old business and throw in with “a bunch of right wing extremists?” she yelled. He yelled back something about her turning into “a goddam witch or Wiccan or whatever the fuck she called it.” They yelled about hippies and rednecks, environmentalists, and lesbian daycare workers, hunting and animal rights. Finally they started calling names.

“Macho man!”

“Witch!”

“Murderer!”

“Bad mother!”

Something hit the door with a hard knock. The momma cow’s head from Elissa’s favorite teapot rolled into the open space of the door. As many video cow mutilations as I’ve seen on *Strange But True*, the decapitated ceramic cow was still a shocking sight.

I felt Perry's arm tighten on my neck. We crouched down and held on to each other. He was sobbing quietly, but his body was jerking. I hate to admit it, but I was crying too.