

The Journey Begins



“There must be something in north-west America that needs explaining, and that something leaves man-like footprints.”

- Dr. John Napier

Chapter 1

The Journey Begins

The taste of salt was in the air as waves broke along Point Reyes National Seashore. It was all I could do to maintain my balance, battered by ruthless gusts of wind, as I descended the uneven staircase to the lonely and weatherworn Point Reyes Lighthouse, rust-covered and standing sentinel on a rocky promontory overlooking the Farallon Islands.

The Farallon Islands, a chain of towering granite spires, erupts from the Pacific like jagged teeth from the jaws of a great white. They are inhospitable but for seabirds and seals, inaccessible but for researchers and scientists.

I leveled my binoculars toward the jagged silhouette of the Farallones, just visible through the spray of the sea. There was a haunting figure, a dragon's tail cloaked amidst the Pacific fog.

"The devil's teeth," I whispered, a fog horn sounding from atop the lighthouse.

"Huh?" Through the panes of her sunglasses, Melissa was surveying the 313 steps that she and I had just descended.

"The devil's teeth," I repeated. "That's what sailors have called the Farallones for the better part of two centuries."

"Oh, yeah?" she replied, leaning against the cast iron railing that encircled the lower gallery of the lighthouse.

I took a deep breath of the ocean air before clarifying: “Those are some of the most dangerous waters in the world.”

And it was true. The waters surrounding the Farallon Islands are littered with the debris of centuries-old shipwrecks. They are crimson with the blood of seabirds and seals, victims of the ancient predators lurking just beneath the pounding surf.

“Sharks?” Melissa gulped.

“The devil’s teeth are home to the largest great whites in the world,” I replied. I could almost hear Quint’s voice from all those years ago on Amity Island: “Not like going down the pond chasin’ bluegills and tommycods. This shark, swallow you whole.”

The fog horn sounded once more from atop the lighthouse.

“I guess we won’t be doing any snorkeling,” Melissa laughed, clutching her safari hat as a strong gust of wind nearly stole it away. A gull, exhausted from battling the breeze, settled onto the railing beside us.

“Sharks are ancient creatures, far older than most,” I continued. “They shared this planet with the dinosaurs.” I watched as a small trawler rose and fell on the Pacific Ocean, tossed about by the powerful current. “Northern California is no stranger to ancient creatures.”

Melissa and I were a day out of San Francisco, winding north on California’s legendary 101.

It was Tennessee Williams who once wrote, “America has only three cities: New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans” (Leavitt, 1984, p. 70). I know not whether it was Williams’ intention to slight America’s other great cities or simply to reveal the ones closest to his heart, but I tend to agree with him: There’s something quite remarkable about New York, New Orleans, and especially San Francisco. Leaving the City was never easy.

After a brief stop at Point Reyes and lunch at Pick’s in Cloverdale, Melissa and I were nearing our destination, Willow Creek. Sitting on the banks of the Trinity River, Willow Creek is an outpost on the edge of civilization, a cluster of humanity surrounded by the untamed wilderness of the Six Rivers National Forest. It is the promise of adventure—camping, fishing, and hiking—that has drawn visitors to Willow Creek for generations.

It was the gold rush that built Willow Creek and the cutting and logging of timber that has sustained it. Today, the settlement has found a new identity, not through the panning of creeks or the felling of timber, but through its role in American folklore and its solemnity in Native American

oral tradition. It is, after all, the “Bigfoot Capital of the World.” Indeed, Willow Creek is the first stop on the Bigfoot Scenic Byway, the picturesque stretch of highway that adjoins Willow Creek and its neighbor to the north, Happy Camp.

In the annals of Sasquatchery, a term established for the subject of the Wildman, the wilderness surrounding Willow Creek is not only lovely, dark and deep: It is hallowed ground.

It was nearly dusk as Melissa and I were passing the weatherworn wooden sign that read, “Welcome to Willow Creek!” We were far later than we had anticipated: Our arrival had been delayed by a series of rockslides along the 101. Whole sections of the roadway were either blanketed with debris or missing completely, a common occurrence in the Golden State.

“Well,” I stated, “we’re here.”

“Yeah.” It was the only word Melissa offered as I brought the Wrangler to a crawl.

Willow Creek rests at the junction of the Trinity River Scenic Byway (Highway 299) and the Bigfoot Scenic Byway (Highway 96). While it offers motorists multiple overnight accommodations (Melissa and I had booked Cabin #7 at China Creek Cottages), Willow Creek offers little in the way of fine dining.

It was quiet. Ours was the only vehicle on the road.

“Look!” Melissa was pointing toward an enormous sculpture of Bigfoot, carved from the wood of an ancient redwood tree, standing guard at the entrance to a local museum.

“I feel like it’s watching us,” she whispered uneasily. She was right. I could feel its sunken eyes scrutinizing our every move.

Ahead was the Bigfoot Motel, a shabby relic of midcentury Americana. There was an empty Bigfoot-sized cage at the far corner of its vacant parking lot, rusty and swaying in the gentle breeze. *Creak.*

The roadside motel was once a symbol of the incorruptible spirit of America: the open road, the promise of small town values, the myth of the American Dream. Today, they have succumbed to the whips and scorns of time, to the whips and scorns of progress.

Further down the road and opposite another towering sculpture of the hairy beast, a mural on the side of a hardware store depicts Bigfoot helping the early settlers of Willow Creek cut timber and plant trees.

“Weird.” Melissa’s voice was a whisper.

The sun was setting on the mountain town as I brought the Jeep Wrangler to a stop in the parking lot of Bigfoot Books. Somewhere, a mourning dove sounded our arrival. I recognized the whistling of its wings as it darted into the night.

Bigfoot Books—like Early Bird, its neighbor to the south, serving patrons its famed Bigfoot Burger—is a frequent stop for those on the trail of the Wildman. Indeed, many of the titles that now adorn its shelves were written by those who once ventured to Bigfoot Books in search of their own answers.

In recent years, Bigfoot Books has become a lightning rod in Bigfootdom, an archive of fact and fiction that rests at the crossroads of science and superstition. It was a difficult line to straddle, and I did not envy its proprietor, a man by the name of Steven Streufert, whose bookstore had more than once been the target of gunfire.

The soft chirping of insects was the only sound restraining the clutches of silence as Melissa and I clambered from the vehicle. There was a warm glow emanating from the building as we approached. Climbing onto its wooden porch, I noticed that the entrance to the bookstore was guarded by an army of tomes and volumes, hardcovers and paperbacks, stacked high beneath the portico.

Through an open window, we could see Steven Streufert combing through a stack of paperwork. He must have heard the pop of the floorboards beneath our feet, because, without glancing up from his work, he shouted, “Welcome!”

“I’m sorry we’re late,” I stated. “We ran into one rockslide after another on the 101.”

“I don’t mind rockslides,” he replied. “They’re nature’s way of reclaiming its own.”

And I knew that he was right: Above all else, rockslides were an unmistakable tribute to the awesome power of nature, not unlike the ancient predators lurking beneath the pounding surf of the Farallones.

“I see them as a reminder,” he continued, “that nothing lasts forever.”

Steven Streufert was a bearded man in his mid-fifties. His piercing eyes were mounted under a thick head of tousled, brown hair. His eyes were sincere. His enigmatic smile was also quite sincere.

“So what brings you to Willow Creek?” he questioned.

“I just hope we make it out of these woods alive,” I stated, surveying the map that was sprawled on the desk in front of us. It was a topographic map produced by the United States Geographic Survey, its title, “Lonesome Ridge,” printed at the top in an officious font.

“You’ll be all right,” Streufert replied, “as long as you’ve brought precautions.”

I wondered if he was referring to the abundance of black bears and mountain lions that roamed the Six Rivers National Forest.

There was a look of concern on Melissa’s face.

“We’ll be fine,” I replied, trying to sound convincing, trying to hide my own trepidation, both for her sake and for mine. “We have a can of bear spray.”

“It’s not just the wildlife that you need to worry about,” he clarified, a shadow passing over his face. “This is the Emerald Triangle. You don’t have to go too far from here to find a marijuana operation. They’re all over these mountains.” He took a moment to clear his throat. “Not all of them are legal.”

“Outlaws have cultivated marijuana on these lands for generations,” he continued. “They’ll defend them if they feel it’s necessary.”

Nearby, a cat was nosing through an empty tin of cat food.

Streufert was quick to satiate the animal’s hunger: He opened another tin and placed it on the floor. The cat quickly began to devour its contents.

“That’s the thing about cats,” he explained, shaking his head. “If you feed them, they keep coming back.”

The three of us watched as the cat finished its meal and scurried off into the bookstore.

“So what do you hope to find out there?” he questioned, placing his finger on a particularly threadbare section of the topographic map.

“I’m not sure,” I replied after several seconds of consideration. “Answers?”

“Just as long as it isn’t Bigfoot, you’ll be okay,” he replied, folding the topographic map and placing it on a shelf behind his desk. The man quickly went to work rolling a cigarette. “Bluff Creek is more of an archaeological site these days.” He laughed. “If there ever *was* a creature out there, it’s been gone for a long time... a *very* long time.”

A moment later, a lit cigarette in hand, Steven Streufert was bidding us farewell from the wooden porch of Bigfoot Books. “Is there anything else I can interest you in before you go?”

“These will do just fine,” I replied. There were two books tucked beneath my arm, *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* by Ivan T. Sanderson¹ and *Strange Abominable Snowmen* by Warren Smith². The sky was an inky black as we climbed into the Jeep Wrangler.

Melissa, through the vehicle’s open window: “We can’t thank you enough.”

“No worries,” Streufert replied. “Just be careful out there.”

“We may give you a call tomorrow if we get into trouble,” I stated.

“No,” he replied. “You won’t.” He took a long pull on his cigarette. “You won’t have cellphone reception for miles.” He exhaled the words with a mouthful of smoke and followed them with a listless smile. “You want my advice? Avoid flat tires. Don’t get hung up. And, for God’s sake, don’t wander off the trail. It could cost you your life.”

An hour later, Melissa and I had settled into Cabin #7 at China Creek Cottages, a charming accommodation on the banks of the Trinity River. I was perusing the cabin’s guestbook while Melissa finished unpacking our overnight bag.

“I’m nervous about tomorrow,” Melissa shuddered, removing a bag of toiletries from our suitcase.

“Why?” I closed the guestbook.

“It’s just... Do you really think bear spray will be enough to protect us?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, reaching for the backpack that was sitting next to the bed. “Either way, I’ve got a bit of a contingency plan.” My hand closed on the polymer grip of the Glock 23 that had been hidden inside the backpack. I carefully tossed the handgun onto the bed next to our hiking poles.

Deep in the California woodlands, far from the din of civilization, there is an overgrown trail that plunges into an enchanted valley. It is an ancient wood, an old-growth forest, that is bisected by a whispering stream.

¹ *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* (1961) by Ivan T. Sanderson is considered by many to be essential reading for those with interest in the Bigfoot phenomenon. More information regarding *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* (1961) can be found in the bibliography of this publication.

² *Strange Abominable Snowmen* (1970) by Warren Smith is considered by many to be essential reading for those with interest in the Bigfoot phenomenon. More information regarding *Strange Abominable Snowmen* (1970) can be found in the bibliography of this publication.

Getting to this faraway place on the edge of the North American continent is not for the timid. The road is long and increasingly primitive, beset by boulders from the cliffs above. One poorly-marked road leads to another, each of which is hazardous but for vehicles with high clearance and four-wheel drive. Finally, pilgrims come to a berm, an earthen barrier designed by the forest service to prevent further passage. From there, one must continue on-foot along the steep trail that winds into the deep, narrow canyon.

“*Damn,*” I whispered, taking a seat on a fallen tree. Through the canopy of leaves, the midday sun was bearing down on Bluff Creek. I removed the safari hat that adorned my head and wiped the sweat from my brow. “*Damn,*” I repeated.

Earlier that morning, Melissa and I had stopped at Pectah Mart in Weitchpec to purchase fuel and supplies before setting out on our expedition.

“Where are you headed?” the station’s attendant had asked.

“Hiking,” I replied.

“It’s going to get hot out there today,” she cautioned. “You had better take plenty of water.”

On the banks of Bluff Creek, I raised an aluminum canteen to my mouth and took a long swill of its contents. Melissa, who had taken a seat beside me, was polishing off the contents of her own canteen.

“This place is beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It sure is,” I replied.

Surrounded by dense brushland that was blanketed with pine needles, the crystalline waters of Bluff Creek cascaded over fallen trees and moss-covered rocks. Sunlight shone onto the flowing water, casting a prismatic glow, a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes, onto the surrounding forest. But for the gentle murmur of water, the grove was wrapped in an aura of quietude: It was wrapped in the deafening embrace of silence.