

# The Jenson Adventures The Ghost of Crow Island



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Printed in the United States of America

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## Chapter One

Clay Jenson hopped off of his navy blue bike and wiped his hand across his forehead, the sweat flicking off in spatters into the grass.

“That is so gross, Clay!” said Haley Jenson, his eleven-year-old sister.

Clay looked over his shoulder at her and grinned. “You’re gross,” he retorted.

“She is not!” Lily Jenson protested, peddling next to Haley.

The twelve-year-old shook his head. There was no use arguing with his twin sisters. They were only a year younger than he was and were practically joined at the hip. In fact, they *had* been joined at the hip until they were ten months old and the doctors had spent hours performing surgery to separate them. Or at least that’s what their parents told them. He couldn’t remember any of it.

“Why are we stopping?” Haley asked, sidling next to her brother.

Clay pointed to the edge of the lake. “Can’t ride on the water.”

“We could if we had a ski boat!” she replied excitedly.

“We have our paddleboat,” Lily said helpfully. She set the kickstand on her lavender bicycle and carefully removed her shoes, placing them next to her front tire. She walked to the bank and sat down on the grass, dipping her feet into the cool water. It was summertime, her favorite time of year. It was actually all of their favorite time of year because they could play outside and, best of all, there was a break from school.

Haley and Clay joined her. “We’d have to go back home to do that,” Haley said.

Clay frowned. He wouldn’t have minded to go back home. He loved their house. His parents, after years of hard work and dedication, had been promoted and were able to buy their dream home: a house on the lake, complete with a dock that was their very own. It wasn’t a very large home, but it suited their needs and they were all happy there. When it was warm outside, they would go out onto the dock and fish, his mom seated cross-legged as she baited their hooks. He loved diving off of the end of the dock or doing whatever crazy flip came to mind. He could tell how deep the water was here so he couldn’t jump off the bank. Besides, he had no swimsuit here.

Their parents had bought a paddleboat and a canoe from a neighbor that was moving away to live in some condo in the city. He couldn’t understand why anyone would want to live in such a cooped-up place. He loved having the freedom to roam around his neighborhood on his bike, exploring. He didn’t even mind it when his sisters tagged along. They weren’t so bad.

“Why don’t we do that?” Clay suggested. “We could take the paddleboat out to Crow Island.” He wasn’t sure what the island in the middle of the lake was actually called. It could be seen from his house and, finally, his dad allowed him to check it out. They had taken the canoe out to it, paddling quietly as they marveled at their surroundings. It hadn’t taken as long as he had thought to reach the island, but when they had touched down, a crow had called loudly. It was at that moment that he dubbed the island “Crow Island” and his dad had approved.

The island was oblong-shaped with beige, sandy beaches that were soft underneath his bare feet. As he and his dad had explored further inland, the terrain became sturdier and dense with pine trees. The sun barely pierced their needles, creating deep shadows throughout the middle of the island. To his surprise, there was a meadow in the very center. It was beautiful and

filled with flowers. His dad had murmured to himself that he'd have to bring his mother there for a picnic.

"Earth to Clay!" Haley snapped her fingers in front of his face.

Clay winced. "What?"

Lily rolled her eyes. "You were daydreaming."

"Like you don't," he said.

"Why would I daydream?" she asked.

"Because you're a girl and that's what girls do," he answered simply.

She dragged her foot across the water, splashing him. "Oh, yeah?" she challenged. "You just got splashed by a girl!"

Haley high-fived her sister and Clay seriously thought about pushing them into the water. It'd be funny for a moment and then they'd tattle on him to their parents. He considered it for a moment and shook his head. Nope, it wasn't worth it. Instead, he suggested that they go home and get their paddleboat and see Crow Island. His sisters eagerly agreed and they put their shoes back on, peddled home quickly.

Their parents weren't home from work yet and he scribbled a note to let them know where they were going. Being the eldest, it was his responsibility to let them know their whereabouts and watch over his sisters.

His sisters protested when he asked them to reapply their sunscreen. Their skin was darker than his, but anyone's would be. He was tall and lanky with a shock of red hair on top of his head and a splash of freckles across his nose. They had learned about recessive genes in biology and he figured that's what he had received because the only person he resembled in his family was his grandfather. The twins looked like they were always sun-kissed and each had long, chestnut hair and soft brown eyes. His own eyes were bright green and he was sometimes self-conscious about how different he looked from the rest of his family. It was then that his mom would show him photos of his grandfather—her dad—whom he resembled so closely and tell him stories so that he would feel better. He wished he had known his grandfather; they could have had many adventures together.

He smeared extra sunscreen across his nose and they all changed into their bathing suits. They threw on old t-shirts as well and grabbed their life jackets before heading down to the dock. He held the paddleboat steady as his sisters walked on board before untying it from the post and jumping inside of it. The paddleboat rocked dangerously, his sisters squealing. He laughed and they each began to paddle, Haley having to paddle backward since she was on their opposite side facing the other direction.

"I did not think this out," she said seriously as she paddled.

Lily suppressed her laughter and Clay guided them toward Crow Island. The lake was fairly quiet for a Monday afternoon, the sound of their faint splashing as they glided across the water blending in with the birds squawking overhead.

Reaching the island, the twins hopped out, leaving Clay to heave the boat further up the beach so that it wouldn't drift away. They took off toward the trees, his sisters darting amongst them as they played a game that only they could understand.

The meadow came into view and they stopped, confused at the sight in front of them. Instead of a beautiful clearing, there were several pieces of equipment and part of a structure that

looked like a shack. "What is this?" Haley asked, curious. She began to step into the clearing for a closer look when someone suddenly shouted at her.

A large, burly man appeared. "What do you think you're doing here?"

## Chapter Two

Clay stepped in front of his sisters. “Exploring. What are *you* doing here?”

“This is a closed movie set.”

“Oh. That makes more sense than what I thought,” Haley said.

Lily’s brow knitted as she looked at her sister. “What did you think this was?”

“A wealthy squatter came out here and had a fetish for cameras. He ran out of money and that’s why there’s no fourth wall on his shack or a ceiling.”

Lily stared at Haley for a moment. “Is that what you really thought?” she finally asked.

Haley merely shrugged.

Lily nodded. “I can see that,” she said.

“You’re filming a real movie here?” Clay asked excitedly.

The man nodded and stepped closer, his hand outstretched. “Paul Matthews. I’m the security guard around here.”

Clay shook his proffered hand. “I’m Clay Jenson and these are my sisters, Haley and Lily.”

“Hello,” they said in unison.

“Where is everyone?” Clay asked.

“They’re just setting up. The crew is out having a late lunch right now.”

“When does the movie start?” Haley asked.

“What kind of movie is it?” Lily interjected. She paused and pointed at her sister. “Her question first.”

The security guard chuckled. “They start shooting on Thursday. It’s about a man and his wife who witness a crime and have to escape somewhere off of the grid while the police hunt down the criminal.”

Clay wrinkled his nose. “That doesn’t sound very good.”

“It doesn’t?” Paul asked, his brow raised. “What kind of movie would you want to see?”

“A superhero movie!” Clay answered excitedly. “Could they add one to this movie? It’d make it more interesting.”

“What do you girls think?” Paul asked, looking at the twins.

“Superheroes are overrated and the market is oversaturated with them anyway,” Lily answered.

“Are you nuts?” Clay asked his sister in disbelief.

“A little,” Lily replied, smiling.

“I would want to see a mystery. With a flying unicorn.” Haley nodded to herself. “Yes, that would be my jam.”

“You mean a Pegasus?” Paul corrected.

Haley blushed. “That’s what I meant to say.”

Paul stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I guess that wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe mix all three ideas?”

Clay scoffed. “No way. Superheroes all the way and definitely no Pegasus.”

Lily winced. "Have an open mind, Clay. It could be interesting."

He shook his head vigorously. "I don't think so."

"Say, how did you kids get over here anyway?" Paul asked, looking behind them at the unmarked trail that they had taken to the meadow.

"We swam," Haley said, smirking.

"We have a paddleboat," Clay answered, gently elbowing his sister in her ribs. "Don't lie," he murmured to her.

"You should be going. The crew will freak out if they saw you here. They chose this place to film because it's quiet." Paul motioned for them to go. "I won't say a word that you were here."

"Thanks, Mr. Matthews," Lily said as they left.

"You're welcome. Be careful on that lake," he warned.

Once Paul was out of earshot, Haley said excitedly, "Can you believe that? They're filming a movie right outside our backyard!"

"That's not our backyard," Lily pointed out.

"It pretty much is," Clay said, agreeing with Haley. "Just think of it as flooded." He laughed at his own joke, his sisters rolling their eyes. He led the way back to their paddleboat and shoved it back into the water. The twins sat next to each other, leaving Clay on the other side. He began to paddle, guiding the paddleboat.

Haley groaned.

"What?" Lily asked.

"Once again, I have chosen the wrong side," she muttered as she paddled backward.

Clay laughed before relenting, turning the boat around so that his sisters were in the lead, taking them back to their dock.

## Chapter Three

Melissa Jenson stirred the spaghetti and pulled out a strand, popping it into her mouth to see if it was *al dente*. Satisfied that it was, she poured the spaghetti through a colander. As she placed the pasta back into the pot, her husband, Bruce Jenson, added a few more spices to his famous spaghetti sauce. Even Melissa wasn't entirely sure of the ingredients, but she knew that it would sell well if her husband would let them bottle it and sell it at the local farmer's market. He had politely refused, telling her that it was a Jenson recipe only.

Clay set the table while the girls grabbed drinks for everyone, Lily making her favorite, an Arnold Palmer. Melissa plated the dishes and everyone sat down to eat. They chatted idly about their day, catching up with each other. The kids were strangely quiet. "What did you three do today? We saw your note. Is that all that you did? Go to Crow Island?"

"We rode our bikes for a while," Clay answered. "Then we went out there."

"We saw a movie set!" Haley said breathlessly.

Bruce tilted his head thoughtfully. "Where did you see a movie set around here?"

"Crow Island," Clay responded. "It's out in the meadow."

Melissa stopped her fork midway to her mouth. "You didn't mess with anything, did you?"

"No," the kids said innocently.

"We did see the security guard. He told us they're starting this Thursday and it's some cheesy movie about a couple who has to run away because they saw something they shouldn't have."

"That sounds like it'd be good," Bruce said. "Date night?"

"Deal," Melissa said, smiling at her husband.

"So gross," Haley whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Lily burst into giggles.

"What was the security guard's name?" Bruce asked.

"Paul Matthews," Clay answered.

"Paul Matthews?" Bruce mused. "Wait, he's not *the* Paul Matthews?"

Clay looked at his dad quizzically and shrugged. "I don't know," he said through a mouthful of spaghetti.

"Chew your food before speaking," Melissa warned.

"Sorry," Clay said, his mouth still full.

The twins exchanged glances and laughed.

"What would he be doing working as a security guard?" Melissa asked.

"Who is he?" Lily chimed in.

"He's an actor. Or, at least, he used to be. He was on that television show called *Silver Ropes*. It was really popular," Bruce explained.

"When was that?" Clay inquired.

"Back in the eighties."

"Late eighties," Melissa clarified, winking at her husband.

"Oh, so a really long time ago," Lily deadpanned. She innocently sprinkled more parmesan cheese onto her pasta, never making eye contact with her parents.

“That wasn’t so long ago,” Bruce protested.

“To them, it was,” Melissa said, wiping her mouth. Her eyes were twinkling with laughter.

“Paul was really famous. He was in all sorts of movies as well. He was what you would call a child star.”

“He’s not famous anymore.”

Bruce shook his head. “No, Haley, he’s not.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes the transition between being a star as a child and being a star as an adult is difficult. It’s not so smooth for most people.”

“Drew Barrymore was just fine,” Lily pointed out.

“She had some trouble,” Clay said.

“What kind of trouble?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” he replied.

Bruce and Melissa laughed as Clay smirked while Lily pouted.

The doorbell rang and Melissa checked her watch. “Your brother’s early,” she said, looking at her husband.

“Uncle Charles is here?” Clay said, grinning broadly.

A short, stocky man filled the kitchen doorway. “Hello!” he greeted them happily. His beard was even bushier than Clay remembered, and it had only been a couple of weeks since he last saw his uncle.

As if reading his mind, his father said, “When are you going to shave that thing?”

Charles pointed at his face. “What? This? What are you talking about? This is great!”

“As long as you think so,” Melissa said, glancing at him from the corner of her eye as she entered the kitchen.

He ran his hand over his beard. “I thought this was the look these days.”

“I think you’re supposed to look like you haven’t shaved in about three days, not a month.” Bruce grimaced jokingly. “It looks like some kind of animal has taken up residence along your jaw. You got some birds living in there that you’re feeding? Are you a mama bird now?” He poked at his brother’s beard.

Charles took a step backward, swatting away at Bruce’s hand. “Shush. I think it looks good and that’s all that matters. Isn’t that right, kids?”

Clay nodded in agreement while Haley and Lily looked at each other hesitantly. “Sure,” they finally said.

“If they finish building that shack and leave it out there, Uncle Charles can go live there. He looks the part,” Haley said.

“He can live off of the land!” Lily added.

“What are you talking about?”

Lily quickly filled him in on their afternoon discovery.

“Crow Island? I can’t believe they’re filming there.”

“Charles,” Melissa said, her tone low. “Don’t.”

“Why don’t you fix yourself a plate? We’ve got plenty left,” Bruce offered.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Charles replied, already piling spaghetti onto his plate. He settled

next to Clay.

“Is something wrong over there?” Haley asked.

“So, Charles, how’s the tackle business?” Melissa asked, quickly changing the subject. Taking the hint, Charles followed Melissa’s lead. “It’s just fine.”

The kids looked at each other curiously. What was the big deal with Crow Island?

After dinner, the girls washed the dishes and dried them while Clay swept the kitchen floor for crumbs. They joined their parents and their uncle in the living room where they sat chatting.

“What’s wrong with Crow Island?” Clay pressed.

Melissa glanced at her husband and he waved his hand dismissively. “It’s all in good fun,” he said. “Kids, your uncle here knows all of the good folklore.”

“Why don’t you know it?” Haley asked.

“Because he’s not interested in the town’s history like I am,” Charles answered for Bruce. “Isn’t that right?”

Bruce nodded in agreement.

“And this town has many, many secrets!” Charles said spookily.

“Like what?” Lily asked, intrigued.

“Starting with your Crow Island. That’s not what the townspeople call it.”

“They don’t call it anything,” Bruce interjected. “That’s why it was fun that Clay named it. It’s our nickname for it.”

“I’m talking about the older townspeople. The ones that were young when it happened,” Charles explained.

Melissa yawned and leaned her head against Bruce’s shoulder. The kids sat on pillows in front of the unlit fireplace, staring at their uncle in wonder. Charles gently rocked back in the rocking chair. “So what was it called?” Clay questioned.

“The Unspeakable Place,” Charles said, his voice low and eerie.

“Knock it off, you’ll scare the girls,” Melissa said, her eyes narrowed.

“They’ll be fine,” Charles said. He paused and waited for Melissa to incline her head toward him, motioning for him that it was okay to continue. “Long ago—” he began.

“How long ago?” Lily interrupted.

“This was the fifties, I believe,” Charles said thoughtfully. “Yes, the fifties. That lake out there is fed by a dam. When it’s winter, they lower the water and, in the summer, the water rises. It used to rise so high in the summer that only a small portion of what you call Crow Island was visible. One day, towards the end of summer, a girl was out with her family. They were water skiing and the line got tangled.”

“How old was the girl?” Haley asked.

“Maybe ten. Just a year younger than you two,” Charles said. “Now let me finish my story. I’ll take questions at the end.”

Bruce and Melissa exchanged a secret smile.

“As I was saying, the line got tangled. When you’re water skiing, if anything happens to the line, you bail. You let go of the line. She wasn’t the best swimmer, but she had on her life jacket. Her parents didn’t realize that she wasn’t behind them and, when they didn’t immediately

turn around, she tried to swim to the nearest bit of land. She saw Crow Island and, remember, there was only a fraction of it visible in the summer then. She waited for her parents and, when they finally noticed her absence, they began to search all over the lake. They couldn't hear her shouts over the sound their boat engine and she went unnoticed. Days went by with them searching, never hearing her. The parents were heartbroken. They figured she had drowned and hoped that her body would turn up.

"Well, it did all right. When the lake was lowered, some people went out for a nice picnic lunch on the island. That's where they found her body."

"What had happened to her?" Clay asked.

"She died of thirst."

"Thirst? She was surrounded by water."

"Ah! Exactly!" Charles said, his finger pointed toward the ceiling. "Her father was a doctor and she knew more than your average ten-year-old about bacteria. She was too afraid to drink the water because she didn't want to get an infection. That's the assumption, anyway. She figured she'd get rescued before the thirst got her. Even at the end of summer, it's still hotter than blazes."

"Why not just swim back to the edge of the lake?" Lily asked.

"She wasn't a good swimmer. Even with a life jacket—which weren't made then the same way they are today—she would have tired easily."

"Is that another assumption?" Haley pressed.

"My, aren't you bright. Yes, it is." He spread his hands. "We only have theories. Her parents were in agony. How could they not have heard her cries for help? Why didn't they get a kayak and look for her in something that was quiet? They left town, never to be heard from again. They say they both died from a broken heart over the loss of their daughter."

"What was her name?"

"Her name was Agatha." Charles dropped his voice. "They say that her ghost still haunts that island. At night, you can hear her cry out for help. But no one will ever be able to help her."

"That's stupid. We've been to Crow Island lots of times and never heard anything or saw anything," Clay said.

"There's a perfectly good explanation for that," Charles said smoothly.

Clay frowned. "And what's that?"

"You've never been out there at night."

## Chapter Four

It was Wednesday night and Holly Richardson was alone doing final checks on the set before shooting began the next morning. The security guard, Paul Matthews, was nowhere to be seen. She didn't mind being by herself. The night was warm with a soft breeze, the water soothing as it lapped gently against the shore in the distance. She had taken one of the small fishing boats that the studio had provided to access the island and tied it up around a tree base, hoping that she didn't run into a snake in the dark. She reminded herself to ask the crew to set up lighting down by the docking area.

Satisfied that everything was in order, she turned to leave. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a faint light on the other side of their now fully-constructed shack, complete with movable walls so that the camera could have better access. They'd gotten the idea from the bathroom set on *Psycho*. Holly strode over to the shack wondering what the light could be and, as she got closer, saw that the light began to bounce from wall to wall. She squinted, confused. That wasn't possible! The light sharpened and came into focus, resembling a small girl in a white dress that floated behind her.

The ghost darted around the trees and Holly stared, transfixed. She was too scared to move, too scared to scream.

Slowly, the ghost crept nearer to Holly. A twig snapped from behind her, breaking her out of her trance. She cried out in surprise and began to run, her feet never stopping until she reached her boat. Anxious, she fumbled with the rope before she finally got it untied and threw it into her fishing boat. The water splashed around her feet as she shoved the boat further into the water. Holly didn't even notice. She yanked the cord, relief flooding through her as the engine started.

She was almost to the shore when she turned around to see the island. The ghost was still there, lingering amongst the trees as if sadly watching her bolt away.

"Did anyone see the light last night over at Crow Island?" Clay asked the next morning. He stabbed his fork into his scrambled eggs and waited for a reply.

His sisters merely shrugged while his mother looked pointedly at his father.

"What? It was just a story," Bruce said defensively.

"I knew it'd upset the kids," Melissa muttered, pouring her coffee.

"I'm not upset. That didn't scare me," Clay interjected. "I just saw a light coming from the middle of the island."

"They must have been doing some kind of lighting check," Bruce said thoughtfully. "I wonder how much filming at night they'll have to do. I'd hate to navigate my way back to the shore at night."

"Are you scared?" Melissa teased.

"Dad's afraid?" Haley asked, her brows raised.

"No, your dad is not afraid," Bruce replied. "It's just awfully dark and, if you don't know your way around the lake, it's possible to get lost."

"I think he's a little scared," Haley whispered to her sister.

“Of getting lost?” Lily said. “No, if he was scared of getting lost, then he’d stop and ask for directions. At least that’s what Mom said.”

Melissa’s face reddened.

“I don’t get lost. The GPS sometimes doesn’t work as accurately as it should.”

“Uh-huh and yet buying a map for a backup when the digital maps you haven’t updated on the GPS lead us in the wrong direction is just another silly idea.” Melissa smiled sweetly at her husband. “I love you, dear,” she said.

“Love you, too,” he replied begrudgingly, though he winked at her as he spoke.

Noticing the time, Melissa ushered her husband out of the door, following closely. “Be good!” she called over her shoulder as the door shut behind her.

“Let’s check out Crow Island,” Clay said.

“We just did that yesterday,” Haley objected.

“He wants to see about that light.” Lily sighed and looked at her brother. “You can’t see that kind of thing during the day. Don’t you know how ghost stories work?”

Clay’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

“Fine, we’ll go, but I want to go to the park later,” Lily said. “The good one,” she clarified.

“That’s too far for us to ride on our bikes,” Clay argued.

“Not if we don’t spend a lot of time on the island. We can ride over there, play for a couple of hours, then come home.”

Clay shook his head. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I don’t think Mom and Dad would want us going that far.”

“He’s a chicken,” Haley whispered.

“I am not!”

“Now you’re just being rude and eavesdropping on my and Lily’s conversation,” Haley chastised.

“But I’m sitting right here.”

“Yes, but a good brother would know that this is a private conversation.”

“You’re talking about me, though.”

Haley breathed out sharply and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, and it would be easier to do if you weren’t here.”

Lily burst into giggles. “She’s kidding,” she said.

“Is she?” Clay was doubtful.

“She really is,” Lily insisted.

“Okay, fine, we’ll go to Crow Island and then the park.”

Lily’s brown eyes brightened. “Really?”

“Really.”

She bumped her sister’s elbow with her own. “The good park!”

Clay frowned. “Aren’t you too old for the park?”

Haley grinned. “We’re not too cool for the park yet. Maybe when we’re your age, but that’s not today.”

Half an hour later, the three were seated in the canoe, each with a paddle. They sliced through the choppy water, Clay watching the sky uneasily. Dark clouds loomed nearby but his

curiosity drove him further away from their dock, leading them to Crow Island.

They pulled the canoe onto the beach, the twins chattering excitedly about a new book they wanted to read. Clay pressed his fingers to his lips to shush them and they glared at him in response but ceased to speak. Quietly, they walked towards the trees, careful to not make a sound as they wandered toward the clearing.

As they drew nearer, they could hear people talking. One in particular—the director—was giving instructions and Clay could see two people listening intently to him. “They must be the actors,” Clay whispered to his sisters.

“Okay, Jake, they get it,” they heard someone mutter.

Clay looked over to the direction of the voice: it was Paul Matthews. He was watching the scene unfold, a scowl on his face. His arms were crossed and he attempted to look casual by leaning against a tree.

The siblings watched in awe as the actors exchanged lines smoothly. They had never seen something like this before; it was even better than seeing a play! There were a lot of breaks as camera angles changed and the lighting was repositioned, but the moments when an actor flubbed a line were priceless. They suppressed their laughter when that happened, careful to not be detected. When another break was called, the stand-ins took the place of the actors as the lighting was readjusted. The dark clouds had disappeared, the sun shining brightly overhead.

Clay felt a tug on the end of his shirt and he turned around to see Lily. “It’s time to go. You promised we could go to the park.”

“Oh, come on, Lily. This is so much more fun!”

Lily shook her head firmly. “No. Haley and I want to go, so we’re leaving now.”

Haley sidled next to her sister and nodded in agreement. “If you don’t come with us, you’ll be stranded and have to swim back to our dock!”

“Okay, fine,” Clay said, disgruntled.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash from behind them. A soft, painful moan followed.

“Jillian!”

Greg Doherty rushed to Jillian McMahon’s side, his eyes wide with concern. “Jillian, are you all right?”

His fellow stand-in moaned again, her eyes rolling back into her head.

“Medic!” Greg shouted.

The director, Jake Caldwell, stood rooted in place, dumbfounded. “I don’t understand what happened,” he said worriedly. “How did that light crash down? The rigs were pre-checked last night!”

A medic attended to Jillian while crewmembers cleared the broken, crashed light fixture. Another crewman checked the rigging for the lights. “It looks like the wire broke,” he said.

Jake yanked off his ball cap and threw it angrily onto the ground. “How in the heck did that happen? Holly!”

The security guard shook his head. “Holly isn’t here today. She took the day off.”

“Why in the world didn’t I know about that?” Jake demanded.

“She sent everyone an email. Something about feeling sick,” Paul replied.

“Didn’t you see her last night? Did she look sick to you?”

“No, sir. She looked spooked. She was ranting about a ghost and ran away. I watched

her.”

“Why didn’t you stop her?”

Paul shifted uneasily. “You know how some of these crewmen want to become actors themselves. I thought that she was rehearsing for some part.”

“She’s fired is what she is. No one jeopardizes the safety on my set!” the director shouted furiously.

The medic approached Jake, his face grim. “The light fell onto her leg. I’m afraid that it’s broken. We’ll transfer her back to the shore so that we can take her to the hospital. I can’t set it out here.”

Jake nodded in reply, though his thoughts were miles away.

As the medic and Greg, who had offered his help, carried away Jillian, Jake called for his actors to get ready for the next scene.

“Absolutely not,” Sara Kelly refused. “I want a safety check.”

“I’m sure that was just an accident,” said her co-star, Clark Muraz.

“I don’t care. I will not stand here and get *my* leg broken or suffer any other injury just because some crewmember had some silly fright and took off!”

“Sara, you’re being melodramatic.” He lowered his voice. “If we take off now, that delays the schedule and you’ve got that other movie that you’re scheduled to start shooting soon. You’ll have to cancel.”

Sara bit her lip apprehensively.

“Lisa Miller will take the part instead,” Clark warned, baiting her.

Her eyes narrowed. “No. No, she will not. But I am not going to work another minute until a safety check is done! If you don’t screw up the takes, we’ll not have a delayed schedule.”

Clark looked at the director and shrugged. “I’m sorry, but I tried.”

Jake frowned. “We’ll take a break and come back. We’ll return with fresh eyes and do the safety check then.” When he thought no one was listening, he said to himself, “I need a drink.”

The siblings stayed in their hidden spot until they were sure that everyone was gone. Haley let out a loud breath of air. “That was really something!”

“Let’s go. We can’t go to the park now, but we can at least ride our bikes instead.”

Clay looked at Lily, bewildered. “Don’t you want to look for yourself?”

“Look at what? We’re not even supposed to be here, Clay!”

He strode onto the set, wondering where Paul was. When he didn’t see the security guard, he moved closer to the trash that contained the broken light. He fished his hand around inside, careful to not cut himself on broken glass, and withdrew the wire that held the light. “Hey, that’s weird,” he said.

“What’s weird?” Haley asked.

“This cord didn’t just break. It was cut, but not all the way,” Clay answered.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that someone cut it on purpose but wanted it to fall at some point. After they moved this thing around today, the stress on the rest of the wire was too much to bear and it finally snapped. But see how only part of it looks frayed like it just wore thin? There’s this little part right here that’s too clean. It’s been cut for sure.”

Lily rolled her eyes. "This isn't a crime scene investigation. You're no detective."

"Look at it!" her brother insisted.

Lily snatched the wire out of Clay's hand and looked at it, finally seeing what he had seen. "Oh!" she said, surprised.

"That's right."

"Are you going to tell someone?" she asked.

At that moment, Paul appeared. "Hello, again. I see you three couldn't stay away from the excitement. But you really shouldn't be here. You're trespassing."

"We were just leaving. We won't be back," Lily said, tugging on her sister's arm and backing away slowly.

"We saw what happened!" Clay said excitedly. He showed the wire to the security guard. "See that? Someone did that on purpose!"

"That's a keen eye you have! I'll show this to the director. You kids better go. They won't be gone for too long."

As they left, Haley could have sworn she heard Paul talking to himself.

"Too bad it didn't hit Clark instead."

## Chapter Five

After their parents left the next morning, Clay insisted that they return to Crow Island.

“No!” Lily said crossly. “The park.”

“We did what you wanted to do yesterday,” Haley said. “It’s our turn today to do what we want.”

Clay sighed, defeated. “Fine,” he replied.

They hopped onto their bikes and rode for what felt like ages until, finally, they reached the girls’ favorite park. There was a large structure in the middle of the park that was filled with ladders leading to different platforms. The lower platforms had both slides and sliding poles that Clay had liked to play on as a child when he pretended to be a firefighter. The higher platforms had slides that curled round and round; Lily favored those the most.

While the girls chased each other around the playground, Clay spread out a towel that he had brought with him in his backpack and read a book underneath the shade of a large oak tree. He didn’t realize how much time had passed when the twins approached him, their bellies growling.

“I brought lunch,” he said, reaching into the backpack. He retrieved a mini-cooler and passed out the sandwiches he had made while his sisters had gotten dressed that morning. They ate quietly, enjoying watching squirrels running about and the birds squawking overhead.

When they finished eating, Haley looked longingly at the adjacent café. Sometimes their parents took them there for lunch, but they were known for their delicious pies.

“How about dessert?” she asked.

“We have pudding cups back home,” Clay said.

“But I’m not ready to leave yet.” Haley pouted.

“Please?” the twins pleaded in unison. “You can use the money you earned from mowing Mr. Treeburg’s yard.”

Clay scoffed but checked his wallet anyway. “I only have enough for pie. No sodas.”

“Yay!” Haley said excitedly.

“You both owe me. You can do all of the kitchen chores tonight after dinner.”

“Deal,” Lily answered for her and her sister.

Clay repacked the cooler and his towel, shoving his book on the top before zipping his backpack. They walked across the length of the park and were surprised to see some of the crew seated. “What are they doing out here?”

“It’s ten minutes from the house if you have a car, Clay,” Lily said. She rolled her eyes. “Geez, and you’re going to be in high school in the fall.”

They sat in a booth behind some of the crewmembers and ordered pie, chocolate for Lily and banana macadamia nut for Clay and Haley. They thirstily drank their water and the server, to save herself from several trips to refill their glasses, left a pitcher on the edge of their table.

“I can’t believe some of the equipment was missing this morning,” one of the crewmen said.

“I think Paul took it.”

“No way. That stuff was in a lockbox. He doesn’t have keys for that,” the crewman protested.

“At least you still have your lockbox. Mine’s missing. The big one.”

They were quiet for a moment before continuing. “We’re only a couple of days in, but there are some odd things going on out there on the island.”

“Do you ever notice that, at night, there’s someone talking? It sounds like a young girl.”

“Maybe it’s just Sara trying to get a rise out of you.”

The first crewman snickered. “Sara’s like most actresses. She’s a self-centered drama queen. But Clark is all right. I’ve heard he’s decent to work with. He treats the crew like actual people.”

“Wow, people treating others like people. How nice of him,” a crewman said sarcastically.

“Any of you ever work with Paul?” said an older crewman. “I did. Once upon a time. He was such a brat.”

“He’s been knocked down a few notches, hasn’t he?” the first crewman replied smugly.

Clay and his sisters paid their bill after they were finished and didn’t speak until they were outside.

“That was a little weird,” Haley said.

“They were just blowing off steam,” Clay said dismissively. Inside, he wasn’t so sure.

“I’m ready to go home,” Lily said softly.

“You’ve been the one bugging me to come out here. Are you sure that you want to leave already?”

Lily nodded.

As they unlocked their bicycles and began to peddle home, Clay watched his sister carefully. He hoped that she wasn’t spooked by Uncle Charles’ story and then the freak accident that happened on Crow Island. It was just a coincidence.

Wasn’t it?

Days went by without any other incidents at Crow Island. He had wanted to return, but his sisters had out-voted him and they explored other islands around the lake instead. They were small without any trees, but they had fun looking at them and naming them. Haley had lost a shoe as they paddled closer to one particular island and, through her giggles, Lily had dubbed it “One Shoe Island”.

Haley had pouted the rest of the day, though Clay had warned her not to wear flip-flops on the paddleboat because they slid off her feet too easily. He and Lily had both ignored her as she glowered the rest of the way back to their dock.

At dinner, Melissa asked her daughter why she was so quiet and Lily answered for her. “She’s mad because she lost her flip-flop today.”

“How did you do that?” Melissa questioned.

Lily explained and Melissa frowned. “I think you guys are spending an awful lot of time on that lake unsupervised.”

“They’re not little kids,” Bruce said. “Clay’s a teenager and the girls are pre-teens. Girls mature faster than boys, so they’re practically teenagers themselves. They wear their life jackets and sunscreen. They don’t stray too far from the house.”

The siblings exchanged guilty glances, though their parents didn’t notice. They had gone

all of the way up to the dam at one point and that was definitely not in the perimeter their parents had laid out for them.

Melissa flashed a tight smile. "I guess I forget what it's like to be your age sometimes," she said apologetically.

"It's okay, Mom," Haley said cheerfully. She took a large bite of her pot roast, chewing loudly.

There was a knock on the back door and Melissa asked, "Is Charles supposed to be here?"

"No," Bruce murmured as he went to answer the door.

A man wearing dark clothes and a red ball cap was standing there, a few others milling around him. "Hello, I'm Jake Caldwell. I'm directing the movie that's being filmed near here." He jerked his thumb back towards Crow Island.

Bruce shook his hand and introduced himself. "How can I help you, Mr. Caldwell?"

"Please, call me Jake. I know this is an odd question, but do you happen to have any spare gas? We've been running our equipment off of our generators and they all seem to have run out of gas." He shook his head. "I don't know how. I check them myself to make sure they're filled at the beginning of each day."

"I don't think I have enough for all of your generators, but you're welcome to what I do have."

Jake grinned broadly, relieved. "We're just trying to finish up the shot for today, so whatever you have will be enough. Thank you so much!" He motioned for some of his crew to follow Bruce to the garage where they retrieved the plastic gallon jugs of gasoline.

"You have another problem on set?" Clay asked suspiciously.

"This is just a minor setback," the director said quickly. His brow furrowed. "How did you know about the set issues?"

"You hear things around town," Clay said carefully.

"We heard some of the crew talking at lunch the other day," Haley quipped.

"It's probably just the ghost," Lily said quietly.

Haley elbowed her sister gently in the ribs. "She's being silly."

"What ghost?" Jake asked, intrigued.

Haley shared the story that Charles had told them. When she was finished, Jake had removed his ball cap and was twirling it absently around his finger.

"Having a mischievous ghost around sure would explain some of the issues we've been having. We have a security guard, but Paul says he doesn't see anything. He's been in the business for a long time, so he would know what to look for." He shook his head. "I just don't get it. I've got a crew member getting frightened and unwilling to return because she thinks that she saw a ghost. I've got lights crashing and injuring my employees. I've got stuff going missing from locked boxes and now I've got generators running out of fuel. It's like someone doesn't want me to film this movie."

"Or someone wants you off of the island because it's her island and not yours," Lily offered.

"Shut up, Lily. You don't honestly believe that, do you?" Haley asked, incredulous. "You're supposed to be the logical sister."

Bruce and the crewmembers returned with the gasoline. Jake thanked him enthusiastically, promising that the studio would send a check to reimburse him.

Their father returned to the table and the Jensions finished their dinner in peace. They chatted idly about other topics, but Clay wasn't listening. He had an idea forming in his head. He was going to sneak out to Crow Island and investigate it himself.

## Chapter Six

That night, Clay snuck out of his room. He was at the back door when he heard shuffling behind him and he turned, already thinking of an excuse to explain why he wasn't sleeping.

"What are you doing?" Lily asked. She saw that he was fully dressed. "You're going out to Crow Island!"

"What's going on?" Haley asked sleepily. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Lily, you're so loud. You woke me up," she complained.

"Clay's going out to Crow Island!"

"At night?"

"Yes, at night!"

"He's not going without us!"

"Yes, I am," Clay said firmly.

"The canoe is quieter than the paddleboat. You and I will paddle while Haley holds the flashlight."

Clay opened his mouth to argue, but Lily's expression stopped him.

"There might be a ghost out there and, if there is, I want to know," she said simply. When Clay raised a brow quizzically, she added, "You investigate the real stuff. I will investigate the paranormal."

"So we're just playing pretend?" Haley asked. "That's stupid. I want to go back to bed."

"No, we're not playing pretend. Don't you want to know what's going on over there?" Lily asked her sister.

Haley floundered, unable to decide if sleep was more important or sneaking out at night to see if the ghost was real.

"Okay, fine," she finally said.

The three siblings slipped on their life jackets and Clay quietly closed the door behind them as they left. They were careful to walk lightly on the wooden dock, not wanting their footsteps to wake up their parents. Haley held the flashlight while Clay and Lily got into the canoe, then Lily held it so that Haley could see as she joined them.

In no time, they were on the island and tying it to a tree. When they got closer to the clearing, Clay told Haley to turn off the light so that they wouldn't be seen.

Near the edge of the set, Lily found a small, black leather-bound book. She picked it up and thumbed through it, trying to read the words in the dim moonlight. "Haley, turn on the light so that I can see this," she whispered.

Clay wrapped his hands around the flashlight so that it was only focused on the book. "What does it say?" he asked, looking around to ensure that they were still alone.

"It looks like a scheduling book."

"For what?" Haley asked.

"Auditions. There are a lot of auditions here and they're all crossed out."

"So whoever this belongs to is crossing them off as they go to them?" Haley questioned further.

"Or maybe they crossed them out because they didn't get the part," Lily mused. She

inhaled sharply when she saw the name *Going off the Grid* crossed out. “What’s the name of this movie?”

Clay thought back to the clapperboard that they saw before the film crew had started shooting. “I think it’s called *Going off the Grid*.” He frowned. “I hope that’s just a working title.”

“That’s on here! So someone *did* audition for the movie and didn’t get the part!”

“Lily, you missed the other section,” Haley said.

“That just looks like scribble to me. I can’t make out what it says.”

Haley squinted as she stuck her face almost into the book. “It’s a list of names. See that one circled? It’s Clark Muraz’s name. He got the lead role.” She traded the flashlight for the book and flipped through the rest of it. “There are all kinds of names listed next to the auditions with the names circled. I guess they got the parts, too, instead of the owner of this schedule book.”

A breeze began to pick up, carrying the strong, pungent scent of gasoline with it. “I thought that they used all of the gas that Dad gave them for their generators,” Lily said, wrinkling her nose.

Clay took the flashlight and, keeping the light low to the ground, shone it around until he saw it bounce off of something metal. It was tucked away between two trees, well-hidden from the set. “Is that the missing lockbox that crewman mentioned the other day?” They approached it and he grimaced. “I think there’s gas in there. But why would they have gas in a metal box? That’s why Mom and Dad have those red plastic jugs.”

Haley shrugged. “I don’t know, but it’s getting late and we need to go.”

Lily nodded in agreement.

“Hang on a second. Where’s Paul? He’s never around.”

“He can’t be a security guard twenty-four hours a day.”

“Yeah, but he seems to be around here all of the time.”

“Maybe he sleeps out here,” Lily offered helpfully.

“There’s no way they’d leave everything alone. That equipment is too expensive to leave unguarded,” Clay argued. “We should at least tell someone that we know where the lockbox is.”

“What? Do you know what time it is? We’ll get grounded until we’re thirty if Mom and Dad find out that we snuck out! You heard Mom. She was already hesitant about us being alone on the lake and we don’t even have an engine on our canoe or paddleboat!” Lily snapped. “We can come back tomorrow and tell them, but we’ll say we found it during the day. No one needs to know that we were out here at night!”

“Is someone out there?”

Lily’s face paled and she fell silent. The three huddled together, unmoving.

A faint light began to dance amongst the trees and Lily began to quiver. It looked like a little girl.

“Be still,” Clay whispered, clutching his sister’s hand. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Can you help me?” The voice was soft, barely audible. “I want to go home.”

Without thinking, Lily took off running through the trees. Haley, worried about her sister, followed her, shining her flashlight without thinking about being seen. Clay followed and they dashed back to the beach, quickly united the rope, and shoved the canoe back into the water.

Cruel laughter echoed across the water as they frantically paddled back to their dock.

“Oh, no,” Haley groaned.

“What now?” Lily asked.

“That’s Mom and Dad. They’re waiting on the dock.”

No one spoke the next morning. The kids ate their breakfast, the sound of toast being chewed almost deafening. Their parents had scolded them harshly and, as predicted, grounded them for the rest of the summer. Their mother had promised to find a daycare to send them to during the day to ensure that they wouldn’t disobey their rules and, when they began to argue, decided that she’d enroll them in the remaining summer school session instead.

They had looked desperately to their father, hoping that he would be the voice of reason, but he had only agreed with their mother. Today she would go down to the school and sign them up and that would be it. Their entire summer was gone, stuck inside in a classroom while it was beautiful outside and beckoned them to come out and play.

“You’re not to leave this house and you certainly aren’t allowed to watch television,” Bruce ordered. He even removed the cable boxes to ensure that they wouldn’t be able to see any programs.

After their parents departed, the three siblings sat miserably in their living room, staring at the ceiling.

“This is all your fault, Clay,” Haley said angrily. “You and your stupid island.”

“It’s not his fault. We went with him voluntarily.”

“No way! You dragged me along!” Haley argued.

“Shut up!” Clay finally yelled. “I’m going back there today. I have a bad feeling that something really awful is going to happen.”

“What? Are you nuts? We’re lucky that they didn’t take away our video game privileges for the rest of the summer. They’ll do that if they find out we went back!” Lily said, incredulous.

“You don’t have to go.”

Haley and Lily exchanged glances. Finally, Lily grimaced and shook her head. “Fine. We’ll do it.”

Haley brightened. “Think of it as our last adventure for a long time.”

“I’ll think of it as the last stupid thing I did before I finally learned to stop listening to both of you.”

Half an hour later, they were back on Crow Island. They had placed their paddleboat next to the other small fishing boats that the crew used to transfer themselves and equipment to and from the island.

Clay sniffed the air. “Smells like gas.”

“Wow, Sherlock, really? There are all sorts of engines out here,” Lily muttered sarcastically.

“No, I mean it’s like something is soaked in them.” Clay walked over to a fishing boat that looked flashier than the others. It was maroon with sparkles and had leather white and maroon striped seat covers. “This one must belong to the actors,” he said.

“How can you be sure?” Haley asked.

“It’s the nicest one. Don’t actors get the nicest things on a movie set?”

“Or it could belong to the director.”

Clay shook his head. "I doubt it. Remember the director showed up at our house with the crew just to get the gas. I think he's a humble person."

Lily tilted her head thoughtfully. "I bet Sara Kelly picked this out. It's got too much glitter for her not to. She and Clark share it, I bet."

"Either way, it's soaked in gas."

"That just looks like water to me."

"Water doesn't smell like gas. And that's a lot of gas." Clay began walking along the edge of the beach so that they could be unseen as they rounded the set.

"Action!" Jake called and the clapperboard was snapped.

They could hear Sara and Clark exchange lines. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Paul standing across the clearing. What was he doing? Was he *sulking*?

Clark grabbed Sara and kissed her. Lily and Haley smiled and murmured, "Aww!"

Clay never took his eyes off of Paul. The security guard looked furious! He whispered something to himself and disappeared into the trees.

"Did you see that?" Lily asked.

"Let's follow him," Clay said.

The kids returned to the beach using the same path that they had taken to the set. Paul was standing in front of the maroon boat, his back to them. He held a match high into the air and laughed manically before arching his arm back.

Without thinking, Clay burst into a sprint and tackled a very shocked Paul to the ground.

"What do you think you're doing?" Paul shouted. He dropped the match into the sand and it was immediately extinguished.

"What's going on here?" Jake stood at the edge of the beach, his hands in the air. "Wait. I know you kids. You're the Jenson kids."

Clay kept Paul pinned to the ground. "He was going to blow up the boat!"

The director yanked off his hat. "Let him up."

With all of the commotion, the crew and actors, including new stand-ins, had joined them.

Paul rose shakily to his feet, unable to look anyone in the eye.

Jake shoved his face into Paul's. "You were going to set fire to Clark and Sara's boat?"

Paul said nothing.

"It's covered in gasoline. He stole the gas from the generators and stored it in a stolen lockbox that he hid in the woods," Lily explained.

"How do you know that? The stolen lockbox and where it was hidden?" Jake asked.

"We told you that we heard things," Haley said shyly.

"We're already busted." Clay took a deep breath. "Paul's the one who's been causing the trouble you've been having." He quickly explained the wire that they had found in the trash.

"Last night we came here and saw the lockbox hidden. There was gas that we could smell stored inside of it. He must have used that to cover the actors' boat. He also was using a projector and a sound system to mimic a ghost on the island." He looked at Lily. "I saw that last night before you took off running and I didn't get a chance to explain it to you. Then I was afraid that if I told you what I had seen, you wouldn't come back today." Clay looked back to the director. "We found a schedule book filled with auditions. There were other names of the actors who were his

competition, with the names circled of the ones who got the part. That's when I figured that it was Paul."

"You were trespassing," Paul said bitterly. "You wouldn't have seen anything if you hadn't been here."

"Don't be a fool, Paul. I knew something was causing all of our problems. I just didn't want to believe it was you."

"I'm a good actor! I would have been perfect for this film!" He spat angrily onto the ground.

"You were mad that you didn't get your way, so you caused an accident that hurt someone, stole things that didn't belong to you, and almost blew up a boat that wasn't yours. You pretended to blame these things based on a ghost story that you heard. Isn't that kind of dumb?" Lily asked.

"Stinking kids!" Paul shouted.

"Paul, the truth is that you're not that good anymore. You're too entitled. You're still the spoiled brat that you were when you were a kid yourself. I was doing you a favor by letting you be near the set."

"As a lowly security guard," Paul said darkly.

"There's nothing wrong with being a security guard. The problem is that you're too proud to have a normal job." The director turned to the kids. "While you shouldn't have been trespassing, I am indebted to you for stopping him. And for realizing that it was him. You three would make great super sleuths."

"Thank you," Clay said, reddening from the praise.

The twins smiled in response.

"We'll take it from here. I think you all should be going back home now," Jake said.

Before Clay could protest that he wanted to see what happened to Paul, his sisters were dragging him away to their canoe.

## Chapter Seven

One week later, the Jenson family was on Crow Island enjoying a barbecue hosted by the studio. Long tables had been set up for the buffet and seating areas. The kids heaped barbecued ribs, baked beans and, at their mother's insistence, a small bit of salad onto their plates. She didn't have to encourage them to eat their fruit; their plates were already full of watermelon and kiwi.

"We should wrap up in a couple of weeks provided we have no more setbacks," Jake said happily.

"I'm sure you won't," Bruce said. "Especially with your new security team." He looked at his children. "And *especially* without nightly visitors."

The three siblings looked guiltily at their plates.

"If they hadn't been out here when they weren't supposed to be, it would have taken us longer to find out that it was Paul. With the way he was escalating, someone could have gotten really hurt beyond a broken leg." Jake smiled. "So I thank you all for being adventurous and solving the problem."

Melissa groaned. "Don't encourage them."

"Oh, there's no encouragement, Mom," Haley said hastily. To the director, she said, "We're still being punished for coming out here at night."

"She did give us leeway and didn't take away our video games after we were caught coming out here when she and Dad specifically told us not to."

Haley and Clay scowled at Lily. "Suck up," Haley said.

After they were finished with their meals, they left their parents with the other adults and ventured off to where the boats were lined up and waited to transport them all back to the shore.

"It was quite a weird experience, wasn't it?" Lily asked.

Haley bit her lip. "I guess it was."

"We'll have to live off of our memories for the rest of the summer. No more adventures for a while," Lily replied sadly.

Clay smiled mischievously. "There's always winter break!"