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CHAOSKAMPF

ABIGAIL RINE

The road to Camp On High was a two-lane highway that snaked uneasily up the side of Cedar Mountain. Quinn sat in the back of the van, next to a window that looked out into empty space. Somehow, the other kids were sleeping through this, three neat rows of lolling heads, ear buds dangling. Earlier in the ride, sturdy evergreens had covered the mountain-side, jutting upward and waiting to catch the van that would, any second—Quinn was convinced—careen over the edge. But by now the trees had grown fragile and sparse, exposing gashes of red-orange rock and promising nothing.

Twice now, Tamara's head had rolled onto his shoulder. Quinn barely noticed, staring hypnotically out the window at the world falling away, but then he would feel Pastor Ben's glare through the ricochet of the rearview, prompting him to nudge Tamara's bushy head until it loomed away from him and toward the girl on her other side.

This gaze terrified Quinn—not because he was afraid of breaking the rules. No, he was terrified that Pastor Ben seemed more concerned about what was happening in the

backseat than with keeping the van centered in its narrow, winding lane. Quinn was sure that any lapse in the driver's attention would send them over the guardrail and into slow-motion disaster—a guardrail, he noted, that looked like it had already been pummeled by the death throes of ill-fated church vans. So he edged as far away from Tamara as possible.

It was a silly rule, Pastor Ben's interdict on boy/girl touching in practically any form, considering that Quinn and Tamara had spent the previous week camped out together in her backyard, sleeping bags side by side. Last night, Tamara had roiled out of her bag in the night, and Quinn woke up to find her arm slung across his neck. The idea that Tamara's touch was dangerous, something to be monitored and avoided at all costs, was new and strange—almost as strange as the view from his window. Quinn had grown up in the shadow of this mountain, but he'd never been on it, never scaled its bulk. And now, looking down at where his house would be, one speck among many, the speck from which he was used to looking up, the world felt wrong, upside down.

Tamara was Quinn's best friend, and had been since the third grade, where they met shortly after she moved to town. One day, midway through that school year, Quinn heard whispers about a new girl in the other classroom, and when he first saw her running around at recess, he was instantly relieved to see that he would no longer be the student with the darkest skin.

He was also surprised, and a little hurt, that everyone

seemed to instantly accept her. The whole grade—and even some fourth graders!—were over in the soccer field, playing tag and running in circles with the new girl, laughing. Quinn had been at the school since the beginning of the year and was still treated with polite suspicion, always the last to be picked for any game. He'd hoped the presence of a new kid would bump him up the totem pole a bit, but he found himself bouncing a basketball against the brick wall by himself, like always, watching the other kids from afar.

But after awhile, Quinn realized that they weren't playing tag at all; it was some other game he didn't recognize. The boys were milling around on the edges of the crowd, shouting something, while Tamara chased the girls, who ran away from her and clustered together, screaming. Quinn decided to walk closer, wanting to be included, but by the time he reached the field, the group had dissipated. The kids were running toward him, past him, laughing and chanting, "Tam-er-uh's gay! Tam-er-uh's gay!"

Soon he and the new girl were the only ones left on the field, staring silently at one another. Quinn recognized himself in her face; he knew that pained confusion, the sensation of being suddenly stung by a strange animal, an animal that had at first seemed docile and kind.

Quinn hadn't learned the unwritten rules of the playground yet, either. He couldn't figure out how to be on the inside. But at least he was no longer the only one.

"Want to race to the flagpole?" He let his ball roll into the grass and reached out his hand.

Tamara took it and they ran together, forgetting that someone was supposed to win.

“We’re here!” Pastor Ben honked twice as the van pulled into the main gate. He seemed to perk up now that all those sleeping, pubescent bodies had snapped awake and retreated from one another.

Camp On High wasn’t what Quinn expected. When their moms had announced they were going to summer camp, Quinn and Tamara were elated. There were no brochures, so they made do with their imaginations—there would be a lake, canoes, a zip-line, rows of compact cabins with hot showers, a dark forest that promised danger. Archery.

But the camp was much smaller in reality—Quinn could see all of it from the front gate: a big green army tent flanked by a volleyball court and a snack shack, already open and serving a crowd of jostling kids. There were only six small cabins, facing off in two lines, a gulf of empty space between them. No lake, no canoes, no zip-line. But there was a forest; there was a hint of danger.

The first thing that happened upon arrival at On High was the splitting of the sexes: girls to the left, boys to the right. Before he really knew what was going on, Quinn found himself being funneled toward one of the cabins. He looked over at Tamara, easy to spot in the cluster of girls; she stood a full head taller than any of them. For a second she glanced back at him, looking bewildered amidst a sea of small females.

At least he thought she was looking at him, but maybe not. She probably couldn't even see him. As soon as he'd joined the line of boys, he did a quick inventory and was briefly relieved to see that he was not the shortest kid there—until he realized that the smallest boy wasn't a camper at all, but the child of one of the staff members, and probably only seven or eight at most.

And who are you, the Jolly Green Giant? He whispered these words to himself, readying them for the moment when he would be called "shrimp" or "shawty" by one of the taller boys. Tamara had thought of this comeback, and it usually worked, usually made the other boy laugh, and then Quinn might be welcomed into the tribe—not as a hero, but as side-kick material. A worthy minion. *And who are you . . . ?*

The moment didn't come until an hour or so later, when one of the boys, the tallest one, a boy named Marcus, accidentally backed over him while spreading out his sleeping bag on a top bunk. "Sorry, little dude, I didn't see you there."

Little dude. The words burned him and he froze, panicked. The comeback didn't fit. It didn't work. His mind scrambled for some witty rejoinder to make the other boy laugh. He had to prove that the words didn't matter, that he didn't care.

"I'm not . . ." Quinn started. "You're just . . ."

But it didn't matter; Marcus wasn't listening anymore.

"What's the Spanish word for toilet?"

"Ask him. He's Mexican."

It took Quinn a moment to realize the boys were talking about him. The cabin mates were all together now, tucked in their bunks, moments away from Lights Out. Apparently they were supposed to be having “quiet time”—which Quinn had just learned meant reading the Bible and praying silently—but he was the only one with his Bible open. He’d been reading about leprous diseases.

“I’m not Mexican,” Quinn said. “I’m Indian.”

“Whoa, no shit? That’s awesome.”

Quinn was surprised at this reaction. The boys seemed impressed; they gathered around him, faces lifted in new-found curiosity and respect.

“Can you shoot a bow and arrow? Can you teach us?”

“I totally thought you were just Mexican or something.”

“What’s your Indian name?”

Clearly, there was a misunderstanding. Quinn’s birth mother had been born in India. But he only hesitated for a moment before deciding to embrace their mistake.

“I can’t tell you. I can’t tell my real name to white people.”

“Oh, come on.” Marcus had shouldered his way through the other boys to stand next to Quinn. “We’re all brothers here.” He paused, as if struck by insight. “Dude, we should all have Indian names.” He looked at the others and let out a whoop, a high-pitched cry, *ei ei ei ei ei ei!*

The cry was electric; the cabin erupted into chaos as boys leapt around on imaginary horses, swinging pillows like hatchets, holding invisible scalps aloft and flinging themselves from bunk to bunk.

"I am Mighty Horse!"

"Wolf King!"

"Biting Dog!"

"Fart Warrior!"

The yelps began to dissolve into giggles.

"He Who Eats His Own Poo."

"Diarrhea Donkey."

"Dude, you're gross."

"Your mom is gross."

Marcus stopped mid-cry and held out his arms as if to quell the herd. "Guys, guys. This is serious. This isn't a joke. Don't disrespect our Indian brother."

The wild laughter cut off abruptly. Marcus waited until there was a moment of complete silence, and then announced. "I am Bull King." He pointed a finger at Fart Warrior. "You are Buffalo Boy. Evan, you're Crazy Fox. You—you're Wild Bear."

Quick-fire, moving in a circle, Marcus named all the boys in the cabin, all except Quinn.

"Tell us your name, man. We're all Indian now."

Quinn could feel his heart racing, all eyes on him. Who am I? What is my name?

"Oh, wait, I've got one!" Marcus interjected. He laid a hand on Quinn's shoulder ceremonially. "Crouching Dog."

The next morning, the newfound tribe trekked to the obstacle course at the far western edge of camp. There was going to be a camp-wide competition on the course later that day, and they wanted to practice. Marcus gave Quinn the stopwatch

with the tacit assumption that, as the smallest of the boys, he wouldn't even bother to compete. Quinn found himself accepting it without question, even though he knew that his size and agility made him better suited to scale the smooth wooden wall and the ropes, as well as scurry underneath the low wire. He might not be as fast at high-stepping through the tires as Marcus, with those long legs that already had the bulk of a man's. But still, he could do it.

"Wow, I didn't know this was here." A familiar voice at his elbow, Tamara. Quinn suddenly felt stupid, standing there with his clipboard, watching the other boys, instead of waiting in line to run.

"Way better than tetherball." She gestured back to where she'd come from, toward a group of girls gathered around a pole, idly pushing the ball back and forth, talking loudly and laughing.

The other boys had no doubt noticed Tamara. She was impossible to overlook, her long body in green sweats clashing brilliantly with a lime-colored tee that was dotted with musical instruments. Quinn had a yellow one just like it back at the cabin—YMCA music camp, two summers ago—and briefly paused to thank God, or whoever, that he had not decided to wear it this morning.

No one spoke for several minutes. Other sounds surfaced: the creak of the rope wall, the heave-and-grunt of bodies in motion, the distant laughter of the tetherball girls. Somehow, even in the silence, the boys had all reached an agreement to ignore Tamara's presence. Of course, the boys' bodies belied their ignorance. Chests puffed, eyes darted toward her, ran-

dom bouts of shoving broke out in the line.

Quinn felt anger surging in his chest. *Go away. Just go away.*

"Why aren't you doing it?" Tamara whispered. Quinn pretended not to hear, even though she had leaned in close to him and he could feel her breath on his neck. He was grateful to see Marcus waving him over as the last two boys pulled themselves over the wooden wall.

"Yo, who's winning?"

Quinn handed him the clipboard and watched as Marcus concluded that his time was the best; this gave Quinn a sense of satisfaction, as if he had contributed to Marcus' victory somehow.

"Hey, Q! Time me." Tamara was at the starting line, swinging her arms wide, warming her muscles. "I bet I can beat all of you."

The boys glanced at Marcus to see his reaction. He hesitated for a moment, then shrugged.

"Alright. Whatever."

He joined Tamara at the starting line. They faced forward, cocked their limbs. Quinn held up the stopwatch.

"GO."

Tamara won. Not by an inch, or a foot—by a long stride. She didn't even pitch her body forward at the finish line. There was no need. She sailed over it like a ballet dancer, then spun in a tight circle, fist in the air. "Yeah!" She looked at Quinn triumphantly, expectantly, her wide smile fading as she saw the blank look on his face.

Quinn and the other boys turned away from her toward Marcus, who was panting heavily and glaring at Tamara in dumbfounded anger. They stirred, as if feeling the heat of his shame.

“Well, men, apparently we have the Jolly Green Giantess among us.”

Quinn heard himself say this, heard his words crack the air like a slap. He watched as Tamara seemed to shrink in size, as if her body was trying to curl in on itself. She looked at him, confused, and Quinn hated himself, hated her for winning, for wearing those stupid green pants and that goddamn shirt, for knocking things off balance. Then, seeing Marcus smirk, seeing him stand up a little straighter—this gave him a thrill. He allowed himself to laugh with the other boys, to feel the return of order.

Distantly, a bell clanged, signaling the end of free time. Quinn was vaguely aware of Tamara turning toward the mess tent to walk back alone. After a minute or so, the boys followed.

On High had several traditions that it had held sacred in its twenty-year lifespan. Cowtongue volleyball, the sunrise summit hike, the fireside testimony circle—but nothing so celebrated as the camp-wide game of Capture the Word. On Thursday, the last full day, the camp was bisected by a long, mostly straight line of unlit Tiki torches, and the campers themselves were split as well, into competing teams. At some point—no one was sure exactly who made the change—the

two teams defaulted to Boys vs. Girls, although the boys were required to play with one hand tied to the back belt loop on their jeans. "Just to make things fair," explained a female counselor.

Quinn hadn't spoken to Tamara since the obstacle course days earlier, but he didn't even have to look at her to know that she was incensed by this rule, just as she was incensed any time they played sex-war kickball in P.E., and the boys had to throw left-handed. "Don't they get it?"

She'd say. "We can never win now, either way. Why even try?" And most of the girls didn't. But Tamara would race back and forth, leaping high to avoid being hit, whipping the red rubber balls back at the boys, while the rest of the girls huddled back against the wall, getting pelted and squealing. Quinn hated kickball, but he liked watching Tamara play, as if her honor, and the honor of her entire sex, was at stake.

The boys, he knew, had been looking forward to this ultimate contest all week long; most of them were On High veterans and knew what to expect. He could see, though, as all the campers gathered to hear the rules, that the girls—aside from Tamara and a few others huddled near her, arms crossed defiantly—weren't as into it. They fidgeted while Pastor Ben explained the game, breaking into whispers and glancing at the counselor who was moving from boy to boy, tying one hand back.

The rules were simple—just like Capture the Flag, but instead of a flag, each team was given a hollow cardboard box that was spray-painted gold with HOLY BIBLE written in black block letters on one side. (Apparently they had once

used real Bibles, but after repeated accidental desecrations, they resorted to these glittering replicas.) The goal was to run through the other side's territory, steal their Word, and bring it safely back across the Tiki torch line—without getting tagged. Those who were tagged would be walked in shame to a circle drawn in the dust, a makeshift jail, where they would languish under guard until a teammate tagged them free.

Marcus had been talking strategy all week, and after the obstacle course, his strategy condensed into one phrase: *Take Down the Giantess*. This would be no small feat. Quinn quickly realized how difficult it was to run with one hand tied back. The faster he pushed himself, the more his upper body flailed from side to side. They all looked ridiculous, like legged eels.

"I know it's weird," Marcus jogged out in front of the boys as they headed toward their side, testing their modified bodies. "But just pretend you're a zombie. A bloodthirsty zombie." He turned suddenly, surprisingly adept, and came at Quinn with a frenzied cry. Quinn yelped and fell back, and without an arm to catch him, his face skidded against the gravel.

"Oh, sorry, dude!" said Marcus, laughing, as the boys *cum* zombies around him turned on one another, lunging for jugulars. "I didn't mean to scare you, man, but the zombie thing works every time."

Marcus was right, Quinn had to admit, even as his face burned. The boys seemed energized, ravenous. But Quinn didn't feel very monstrous, just lopsided. He'd been looking forward to this contest, a game made for the small and swift;

all week long, he'd been fantasizing that he would be the one to sneak through the girls' side, steal their Word, and win the game. He had imagined several different versions of Marcus' reaction, ranging from envy to delight, but in all versions Marcus greeted him with newfound respect, calling him by his Indian name: "Well done, Crouching Dog."

But none of that would happen now, not like this. When Marcus assigned him to guard the jail, Quinn didn't even think about protesting. He felt relieved.

An hour later, it was clear that the strategy wasn't working. Even Quinn, orbiting the jail, could see that their numbers were quietly dwindling. He found himself edging toward the girls' side, curious what was happening. There was no one to guard, anyway; none of the girls had made any serious advances into their territory.

"Hey, Fox," Quinn called out to Evan, who appeared to be in the middle of a one-armed karate match with a tree. He liked Evan, but was never quite sure how to interact with him. He suspected Evan might be "on the spectrum," as his mom called it.

"What's the deal? Where's Marcus?"

Evan shrugged. "Probably over in the woods. That's where *she's* been hiding out, anyway.

The Giantess. It's hard to tell where the line is over there, and a bunch of us have been captured already." He high-kicked toward the tree, almost losing his balance. "I'm supposed to be on a mission to rescue them."

"Hey, can you watch the jail for me?" Quinn was already

jogging toward the trees, pumping his free arm to keep his upper body from swaying so wildly.

“Whatever.”

Evan was right. The boundary was all but lost in the woods, which deflected much of the late afternoon sun; the torches blended into the trees. Quinn decided to ignore the torches altogether, instead orienting himself around larger landmarks, like the cross on the chapel tent, which was just visible.

He crouched down, more or less on the dividing line, and paused, searching for movement in his periphery. After a moment he saw someone to his far right: Marcus, peering out from cover cautiously and darting from tree to tree like a cartoon spy.

And there! To Quinn’s left: Tamara. She moved slowly, continuously, and in complete silence, flowing through the trees like water.

They were oblivious to his presence, and to each other, each on a trajectory deep into enemy territory. Quinn quickly realized that if he could signal one without alerting the other, that would all but guarantee capture. He and Marcus, working in tandem, could easily cut off Tamara and corner her. And if Tamara knew where Marcus was, she could take him down, no sweat. With or without Quinn.

Or, he could do nothing. He could watch this contest between hunter and prey (who was which?) silently, without interfering at all. He settled into this option, weighing the power he held—a power, perhaps, that could determine

the game's outcome. Where would the boys be without Marcus? And the girls without Tamara? Leaderless armies, bodies without heads.

But the window of his influence was closing. Soon, both Marcus and Tamara would be within striking distance of the cardboard Bibles, and Tamara would no doubt win the sprint back across the line. If he was going to act, he needed to act now.

Quinn grabbed a twig from the ground and snapped it, loudly. Both Marcus and Tamara turned sharply to look at him, and Quinn pointed his stick toward the cluster of trees where Tamara hid. She immediately understood what was happening. She yelled out his name—not so much in anger, more like astonishment—and sprinted hard toward the boundary, away from him, leaping over obstacles in the underbrush. But Marcus' split-second head start was enough. He reached the boundary first, crossed it, let his body crash into hers.

"Yeah!" Marcus shouted, gripping her arm with his free one. "I knew this would work! I got her! I got her!"

This cry was a turning point, a reset button. Even the weather had shifted, windier now, clouds gathering. All the free children on both sides ventured out of cover and began to assemble in the open area at the center of camp, safe on their sides of the line. Marcus paraded Tamara toward the jail, the boys-turned-braves dancing around them, chanting and whooping and waving sticks in the air. The girls watched in silence.

Quinn observed this celebration from a distance, from the edge of the woods, still kneeling in the underbrush. He con-

sidered staying hidden until the game was over—it couldn't be long now, surely—but then heard Marcus calling his name. He found himself answering, running over, not looking at Tamara, playing it cool. *It's just a game, a stupid game.* He would share in the victory, he would accept Marcus' praise, and then the game would end, and things could go back to normal.

"I have a prisoner for you," Marcus said as Quinn ran up, and there was an awkward pause while Quinn waited for him to continue, to share with the other boys how he had aided Marcus, how Marcus would have been captured, if it weren't for him.

But there was nothing more. "Here," was all Marcus said, before relinquishing his trophy and leading the crowd of warriors away to plan the final onslaught. By now the girls had vanished, retreating deep into their territory. Quinn found himself alone with Tamara, for the first time since coming to On High.

And, also for the first time, there was deep silence between them, a silence that grew more monstrous by the moment; he could feel its tentacles extending down his throat and coiling in the pit of his stomach. He had done this. He had willed this beast into being.

Even though he was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, hood pulled up against the wind, Quinn felt naked. He was afraid to turn and face Tamara, afraid to look at her in the dimming light. The sky had noticeably darkened, and in the uncertain vision of his periphery, Tamara looked like an otherworldly creature, something more-than-human, a forest nymph, a wood sprite.

When had she grown so tall? Once, their bodies had mirrored each other; they could stand face-to-face and have a staring contest without having to looking up or down. In the summer, under the sun, Quinn's skin blackened to become almost the same shade as Tamara's. They used to press their arms together and monitor the transition. "Almost there," they'd say in June and July. And in August: "Twins! Twins!" He wanted to be back there, in the before—before the game, before On High, before the rebellion of their bodies, before each had become something strange.

"Is it over yet?" Suddenly Evan was there, sprung from a nearby tree, swinging both arms freely.

"No," said Quinn.

"Yes," said Tamara.

"Well, it doesn't matter. It's about to begin. Feel the buzz?" Evan stuck an arm out. "Look at my arm hair. See?"

Quinn glanced at Tamara out of habit, forgetting his shame for a moment. She met his eyes and he thought he saw the possibility of a smile, but then she looked away, back down at her feet.

"Why are you in there?" Evan asked, and Quinn assumed he was talking to Tamara—it was hard to tell, since Evan's gaze roved, never fully landing on a human face. But then Quinn realized that he, too, was standing inside the jail.

"You realize there's nothing here, right?" Evan waved his right arm over the line in the dirt.

"See, *Crouching Dog?* Nothing."

"*Crouching Dog?*" Tamara broke in, her voice full of scorn. "Who's *Crouching Dog?*"

Evan pointed silently to Quinn, and Tamara laughed—a hard, staccato *HA HA HA*.

“*That’s* what you chose to call yourself?”

“He didn’t choose it,” Evan said. “Marcus did. I’m Crazy Fox. He’s Crouching Dog. And you’re the Jolly Green Giantess, don’t you remember?”

Tamara drew herself to her full height and took a step toward Evan. Even though he was several feet away from her, on the other side of the jail boundary, he stepped back and glanced at Quinn in confusion.

“That’s what we all call her. You know that. You came up with that name. Tell her.”

Tamara looked at Quinn. It was the same look she’d given him in the forest, and at the obstacle course—the same look she’d been wearing the first time he saw her, years ago, standing alone on the playground.

He had done it, Quinn realized. He had made it to the inside; he had learned the unwritten rules. And now he was alone.

“That’s not her name,” Quinn said, quiet at first, then forcefully. “That’s not her name. And that’s not my name, either.”

That was when the sky split open. There was a loud crack overhead, and the three looked up to see towering black clouds unfurling in fast-motion. The dwindling light was abruptly shut off, as if someone flipped a switch. Thrusts of wind, warm and violent, rushed down at them, and the twilight was swallowed whole.

“Three! Two! One . . . !” Evan’s voice broke off as ten-

tacles of lightning exploded above them, purpling the sky. Close, so close! Quinn could feel his hair stand on end, his heart race.

Tamara seemed transfixed by the drama above them, but when the rain came, she let her eyes land on Quinn. "Come here," she commanded, waving him toward her, and he walked over slowly, unsure what she was going to do. Whatever it was, he deserved it.

"Gimme that thing." She yanked hard on the cord tying his hand back, pulling loose his belt loop in the process, and his arm was suddenly, magically free. The severed cord slipped from his wrist and disappeared into the muddying ground, as if it had only ever been imaginary.

Tamara's face—Quinn wasn't afraid to look now—was no longer blank and hard; something else entirely. Enlivened. Her limbs looked taut, ready to spring. Quinn knew this posture well. Their eyes met and understanding passed between them. The circle around them was no longer a jail but a starting line, and when the next roll of thunder boomed, this was the signal, the sky-pistol telling them: *GO*.

And then they were running, both bodies answering a question that neither had known how to ask.

Running.

They ran in no particular direction, in every direction, as the rain was unleashed and the ground behind them washed clean. Screams punctuated the gaps between thunder, screams backlit by flashes of purple light. The Tiki torches, upstaged now by the torches of the gods, were forgotten,

freely trampled by children running in circles, wild with terror and glee, ignorant now of lines and sides and teams.

And there was Marcus, a lone unmoving form in the frenzy, arm still twisted back, the other clutching a disintegrating cardboard box. Gold paint melted over his arm, running down his jeans, pooling around his feet as he stood by a last remaining torch on what had once been the boys' side. "We won." He was saying, looking around anxiously for someone who would listen.

"We won."

As they passed him, mud splashing upward, Tamara reached out to Quinn and their fingers touched, electric. They pushed on, twinned forms in flight, heads thrown back in laughter, breathless. Their feet grazed the earth and they ran, faster than time, faster than the rain, one furious motion under the chaos of heaven, bodies a blur.