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Strange Encounters

Claire Belle scouted the woods, binoculars hanging from a strap around her neck. Trotting in front was Sammy, a black and white sheepdog. Soon they were to the yellow birch or as Claire called it, the Golden Tree. Its satin trunk glistened gold in the late afternoon sun.

“Sammy, look!” she pointed to a sugar maple with blazing red and orange leaves. “I found you under that tree when you were just a puppy, lost and hungry.”

Sammy didn’t listen, intent on grazing the ground with his big black nose, searching for a fresh scent. He found one, an invisible trail that crossed the low-running creek, and headed up the mountain ridge within the Allegheny Front of Pennsylvania.

“Sammy!” Claire called, but it was too late. The sheepdog charged over the creek, through the trees, and up the ridge. She could never catch up and so sat beneath the Golden Tree to wait.

Claire was different from other 11-year-old girls. She stood a head taller than most, with white hair cropped

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close to her head. Snow-white lashes, thick and long, trimmed the lids of her yellow-gold eyes, the color of a Great Horned Owl's. In fact, many different animals shared her eye color but no people. And Claire preferred the company of animals—most particularly Sammy—but more generally, birds. In fact, Claire was obsessed with birds. She listened for the songs of chickadees outside her bedroom windows. She searched the sky for hawks and trees for owls. She studied the stripes of sparrows in field guides, listened to recordings of warblers' songs, and kept a daily log of every bird she saw or heard.

Claire's mother explained her daughter's interest as a trait inherited from the child's father, someone Claire knew only from photographs. He died in a trucking accident when she was three. A truck driver by occupation, Frank Belle had been at heart a naturalist, using his cross-country hauls to examine and record roadside flora and fauna, especially birds. Everything he learned, Frank shared with his wife Louise, and she in turn taught to her daughter.

In an open area among the birch and hemlock trees, Claire saw a green garter snake, as thick as a fat pencil, glistening like a gem. Studying it with binoculars, she heard a muffled thumping and felt a warm pulse of air against her cheek. She didn't see the Red-tailed Hawk

swooping down from the sky until its talons plucked the snake from the ground. The hawk was huge, like a prehistoric bird. Its dark brown eyes stared from beneath protruding brows directly into her own. She dropped the binoculars, watching its massive, thrashing wings. A splash of cinnamon formed a cross on its creamy chest. Lifting skyward with its struggling prey, the hawk rose above the treetops, its red tail aglow in the sun.

Moments passed before she could break the spell cast by the hawk. Only then did she remember Sammy. Where was he? Beyond the ridge over which he had vanished stood the home of the property owner, an old woman who did not like trespassers. The old woman might hear if she hollered for him. So instead she called as a Barred Owl, a call the dog knew well since the girl made it so often. The call of the Barred Owl was the first she learned because it was easy to remember—*Who cooks for you; who cooks for you all.*

“Hoo hoo ho-ho, hoo hoo ho-hooooaw,” she hooted toward the ridge.

Louise taught Claire this call the year Frank died. And when it was time for Claire to go to school, Louise kept the little girl home, telling herself that home schooling would protect her from the taunts of cruel children. Louise wouldn't admit that without her daughter beside

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her, the days would stretch too long.

From deep in the woods, a stocky, round-headed Barred Owl answered the girl's call.

Hoo hoo ho-ho, hoo hoo ho-hoooooaw . . .

Printed on Claire's sweatshirt was the owl's image, but the girl longed to actually see one. In a daily log she had entered many calls of the Barred Owl but not one sighting. Yet she was determined.

From behind came the sound of panting. There stood Sammy, dripping with water, his tail dragging a branch complete with twigs and leaves. Claire struggled to untangle the branch from his wet fur, curled into spirals and smelling like creek mud.

A sudden wind gust blew a shower of yellow leaves through the air and the sweet, musky scent of autumn. Some floated to the ground. Others nestled as golden ornaments within the feathery branches of the evergreens.

Beneath one such hemlock someone sat, partly hidden behind a low skirting of branches. The man awaited discovery, if not by the strangely pale girl, then by the dog, who certainly would smell him: a 70-year-old man, five days without a bath. But neither girl nor dog knew they were being watched. The man waited, stroking a long gray and white beard.

Then the sound of a clucking bird filled the afternoon air. Sammy bounded toward the sound, away from the creek and up the hill. Claire hurried behind, huffing with effort, until she reached Sammy's side. The dog barked at something perched in the hemlock tree—a reddish-brown hen! Whatever was a chicken doing in the middle of the woods wondered Claire. Sammy began to growl.

"He don't like me, I guess," said a gruff voice. The girl gasped to see a man sitting beneath the tree. Sammy snarled.

"Tell him it's okay. Else I'll have to climb the tree with my chicken."

Confused, Claire looked from the man to Sammy to the perched chicken.

"That's your chicken?" she asked.

"Her name's Becky. She's a Rhode Island Red."

A tumble of gray and white hair, coarse and somewhat kinky, hung about his face. Through strands of it she could barely see the old man's eyes. He wore faded denim overalls and a dingy shirt of long underwear.

"Now tell your dog to stop snarling at me."

Claire had been told never—*ever*—talk to strangers. And yet she found herself saying, "I'm Claire. This is Sammy."

"Hello, Claire," Jerry said, standing.

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The young girl was surprised to see he stood no taller than she.

“Can you leash that dog?” he said in a voice as crusty as his appearance. “I don’t want him to tear into Becky. A hawk did that once already.”

“A hawk?” Claire looked with interest at the hen, bobbing its head as if to say, ‘Yes, indeed.’

“What kind of hawk?” She snapped a leash to Sammy’s collar.

Jerry patted his shoulder and the hen flew from a hemlock branch to a padded patch of suede, like a saddle, slung over it. Sammy sprang toward the hen but was yanked back. He strained hard toward the bird but Claire held firm. Whimpering, the dog sat again.

“Walk a bit with me, and I’ll tell you the story.”

Claire paused. Her mother’s warnings filled her mind, but this man was old. She could easily outrun him. Besides, Sammy would protect her. Claire and Sammy followed Jerry through the trees.

“Becky wasn’t much more than a yearling when it happened,” he began. “She was outside the cabin scratching, and I was inside.” He stopped to look Claire straight in the eyes. Startled, she looked downward, a lifelong habit to conceal their color, though they were now concealed behind blue-tinted contacts.

“Now some hawks will eat a chicken—”

“Cooper’s Hawks like chickens,” she chirped, looking up again. “And I just saw a Red-tail—” she turned to point to the spot below but then stopped. “Wait, you must have seen it, too!”

“That I did,” Jerry squinted hard at Claire, straining her image through the slits of his eyes. The girl’s white hair and thick, long lashes were startling, yet beautiful, like some snow princess in a fairytale. “And would you believe it? That hawk we just saw was the very *same* that grabbed my Becky a few years back.”

“No!”

“Yes, indeed! The very same one.”

But Claire was suspicious. “You were too far away to see him up close.”

“See *her*.” The old man raised a bushy eyebrow. “She’s no common Red-tail, or didn’t you notice?” He stroked the hen’s downy chest. “That day I heard squawking, and out the window saw a huge hawk wrestling her.” Becky bobbed her head excitably while Sammy sifted the air for her scent, his large wet nose rising higher and higher, as if pulled by a string.

“I threw a pillow at them and knocked that hawk senseless.” Here Jerry halted, pointing in the distance, as if the scene he described were etched in the air.

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“When that hawk come to, she stuck her talons into that pillow and dragged it along the ground till getting ‘nough lift. Then her and that pillow sailed into the sky.”

Claire giggled.

“It *was* funny, but don’t laugh yet. You forget about Becky.” The path they followed connected to an old logging road, scattered with freshly fallen green acorns. Girl and dog trotted to the man’s side and again he studied her face, now deeply flushed with excitement.

“When I got her, poor thing, she was sliced from chest to belly.” The hen pecked at Jerry’s beard. “I kept some whiskey at the cabin. You know it disinfects, right? So I poured it right along that cut. Becky should’ve howled in pain but she didn’t, being that close to death. Then I got out my needle and thread and stitched her up just like I was sewing a quilt.”

Girl and man gazed at Becky, the hen who survived a hawk attack and a sewing kit. But neither noticed Sammy’s keen interest in the hen. The dog walked behind Jerry, still loosely held by Claire’s leash. When Becky ruffled her feathers, Sammy sprung but then collided with Jerry’s outstretched arm. The dog dropped to the ground, winded. Jerry stared hard at the dog, with not a sign of regret. “Girl, you should train your dog better,” he said.

Crouching over her hurt dog, Claire suddenly felt scared. The man towering over him seemed less old and more threatening. “I think you hurt him.”

“He’s winded is all,” he said and then spit on the ground. “But I’ll tell you one thing. That dog won’t soon again try for my Becky.” At this point, Becky fluttered to the ground, proving Jerry correct. Head now propped on Claire’s lap, Sammy simply stared at the strutting hen through woeful eyes.

“I never seen two such sorrowful pups,” Jerry said. “Now get up and get back home.” Both bounced off the ground and watched the man march off, his hen scampering after.

At supper, Claire didn’t dare tell her mother about Jerry. In bed that night, the mystery of the bearded old man kept her awake. She gazed endlessly at the full moon suspended in her window, flooding her room with white light. On a bedside rug, Sammy lay on his back, his shaggy legs suspended. Claire stroked his white chest as he peddled the air, running somewhere in his sleep.

A few months earlier, Claire and her mother had moved from a tidy brick cottage at the edge of town into this old rambling house, with many small rooms, low ceilings, and crooked floors. It was said to be more than 150 years old, with a long, large room that had been a

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country store, which her mother planned to reopen. Claire liked this lopsided house but *loved* the world outside it—a world of pastures, woodlands, and even a very large pond in her own back yard!

And for the first time, Claire was attending a public school, Tipple Middle School. Having been home-schooled, she didn't know what to expect on her first day of sixth grade, though knew enough to wear blue-tinted contact lenses to conceal her golden eyes. Quickly she learned that everyone was put into a category that included jocks, geeks, nerds, loners, and the cool kids. She was the “weird new kid with white hair.”

Claire stuffed the pillow under her chin and gazed at the moon's silver trail across the still pond. A ripple ran across the water's smooth black surface; the light trail sparkled and flashed. At the pond's far edge, a small dog was lapping a large drink. Claire grabbed her bedside binoculars. It was a beagle! Then her eye caught the glint of something white hanging in the air above the beagle. The white object shone in the moonlight, and Claire strained to make sense of its form. Then at once she knew. A pair of white arms, a bearded face, and overalls—it was Jerry!

What was the bearded man doing in her backyard? Why was he with a beagle? And where was Becky?

❧ *Strange Encounters* ❧

Claire watched as Jerry urged the dog from the water, and the two disappeared down a steep bank behind the pond and into the surrounding woods.

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